**Monochrome**

by *stayseated*

**Summary**

Snapshots from the life and times of Grey Worm and Missandei. (OG Slice-of-life Mod AU that will never end)
The thing is, later, when Drogo explains to other people how they met — careful to distance them from one another to prove that not all brown kids know each other — the story will still take on a sweeping, epic quality. Things will sound inevitable. What is happenstance — just a brush up, an accidental bump — becomes fated in subsequent retellings.

There’s something about predestination that rubs Grey the wrong way, rubs him raw.

It’s a meet-cute. Drogo splays his thick palm flat against Grey’s chest and against his shoulders, sandwiching and compressing him, stopping him from tripping backwards. Drogo says, “Whoa, man, steady there. Sorry I smacked into you. I wasn’t watching. Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Grey says, getting his balance back.

“I’m Drogo, man.”

Grey takes the proffered hand and slides the flat of his fingers against Drogo’s palm before they curl their hands together and bump fists, before blowin’ it up. “Grey.”

“Like the color?”

“Yeah.”

Drogo smiles at him before turning his attention back to their group leader. “Okay, cool,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest, peering at Grey out of the side of his eye.

Freshman orientation takes place outside in the rain, underneath darkening skies. Grey’s body temperature tends to run a little cold — he’s been called cold-blooded before. It’s an insult and a nickname he sardonically accepts. He forgot to pull on a jacket when he ran out of the house. He crosses his arms over his chest, thinking about the incongruity of where he currently stands on the old bumpy brickwork of Crownlands University versus where he used to be.

His life has been a revolving door of exiting people. His aunt died when he was nine years old. Then the very thing they told him he was protected from happened again, with great frequency. The deal with commoditization is that its application is vast and diverse and far-reaching.

He touches a bead of rainwater on the tip of his cold nose.
His friendship with Drogo starts swiftly and is very simple and easy. It mostly circles around sports. When they get bored, they jog together. They join a few pick-up games from time to time. Sometimes they lift at the gym, a membership that’s a mandatory cost in the tuition that Drogo pays, the tuition that the state fronts for Grey due to his circumstances. They dabble in disc golf because there’s a nice course at school, but that quickly became a what-the-fuck-is-this sort of revelation.

He supposes he and Drogo latched onto each other because neither of them are from this place. Grey was trying to get as far away from where he once had lived, tried to find an inoffensive middle ground in it all. Drogo left behind his mother and younger sisters, yet still is beholden to them — sometimes struck by a kind of pre-emptive survivor’s guilt. In a way — this something unspoken they understand about one another. This is something Grey generally can pick out in people — the depth of trauma.

Coming out of the diner’s men’s restroom at 1 a.m., Drogo gets caught up in a conversation with a trio of white guys who look like they could be in a boyband. Grey watches from across the room, sitting with his back against the wall, under a waft of fryer grease, the stickiness of imitation maple syrup underneath his fingertips catching against the paper placemat. On the other side, Drogo twists his head around, glances at Grey with just dark eyes — kind of beckoning, kind of questioning, a glance that Grey knows well.

Grey slowly shakes his head, a whisper of a smile crawling across his face, taut at points, like a rubber band. No thanks. He will not come over. He doesn’t dabble in that other life. He doesn’t bother with those kinds of people. He has taught himself that his time is more valuable than that.

Drogo’s shoulders are squared — the interaction moves a bit, warps a bit. The smaller blond is tense. The larger blond is drunk. The redhead is like — so far beyond drunk. At the time of this meeting, Grey writes them off in all the various ways one can write people off. He believes that he already knows their collective life story — he can read them like they are remedial, overly simplistic words on paper, punched down in a first draft. He feels the bitter edge of disdain over all the things they willfully refuse to know.

It’s one of those oddities where the reality, according to the masses, doesn’t match how he feels inside. Because how he feels inside is superior. They are beneath him.

When Drogo comes back to their table, there’s an air of bewilderment to him. Drogo says that white people are fucking weird. He recounts the odd conversation to Grey, telling him that the white fratty bros are trying to recruit them onto their rowing team. Grey suggests that the bros are like, on something. Drogo’s brown eyes cast downward, as he reads over the plastic menu. He tells Grey that football once was his thing — way back when. The statement kind of lingers, leaving Grey to fill in the blanks.

“I used to run in high school. Was a sprinter,” Grey later admits to Drogo, cutting decisively into his really tough piece of steak. He has no fucking clue why he ordered steak at a diner. He refuses to stretch out the metaphor, refuses to admit that he was always running away from something — somebody.

“Well, aren’t we just a fucking pair of deferred dreams,” Drogo mutters into his scramble.

“Defunct dreams,” Grey corrects.

Drogo says there’s something about one of the dudes — the smaller blond — that Justin Bieber
knock-off — there’s something about that guy that he can’t put his finger on, that he can’t quite ascertain.

Grey resists pulling out the speech in his head — about the us-versus-them mentality — inflammatory words about how they start things on the tip of his tongue.

But of course, at this point, he and Drogo don’t really know each other well enough.

The water is smooth and quiet and moldable underneath him. This, he can deal with — just the sound of his own pounding heart over his breathing. The water reminds him all too much of where he came from — a push-pull emotion that is simultaneously unsettling and nostalgic.

He closes his eyes against the bright sun and lets it beat his body down.

They are half a year into their friendship — at a point where there’s a predictability and a certain permanence in it that he might actually start banking on Drogo’s presence at certain intervals.

They eat lunch on a bench in front of the lake right after crew practice — after Bieber — that silly racist — and his crazy face-hickey — skitter off in a self-aware kind of anxiety that never really ceases to just barely amuse Grey. Drogo turns to him and casually tells him, “Look, man, it’s no big deal to me if you’re on the DL.”

Grey doesn’t say anything at first.

Upon his blank look, Drogo pauses before saying, “My mom’s gay.”

“Oh,” Grey says. His voice sounds dull to his own ears. “I’m not gay.”

“I didn’t say you were,” Drogo says. “But if you DL, then —”

“Then what?”

Drogo shrugs. “I dunno, man. I’m just saying, it ain’t a thing. For me, it ain’t.”

This is something that feels entirely too intimate and personal to correct. This is a common misconception about him from people. He sometimes has trouble differentiating it from what is well meaning to what is sinister. The truth lies somewhere much more ambiguous — an abstract ground that is hard to define in terms of feelings — or the absence of feelings, as the case may be.

To prove a point to himself, maybe to Drogo, maybe foolishly — Grey introduces himself to a really pretty, really skinny white girl with slightly sunken-in eyes at a party. Her skin is tacky to the touch. They make agonizing small talk — she’s lit up, gone, loaded. Alcohol burns in his chest as he tells her he works in a women’s shoe department. She mumbles something that’s half a joke, about his employee discount. He smiles at her even though his smile doesn’t really touch anything inside of him. He pushes away thoughts as he binge drinks and sucks up a cloud of smoke from a pipe before
he hands it to her — it’s better not to remember. He asks her if she wants to go somewhere else.

He brings her back to his place, a single room in the basement of a house owned by an old lady who conducts language classes out of her kitchen. He finds that girls usually like his reticence — his quietness. They assume he’s deep, that he has depth. They assume that he has benign secrets that they can fix in him. There are certain assumptions they make that are dead wrong. Girls also like his face and his body.

He lays her naked on his bed — her clothes are a bundle on the floor. He kisses her with intention, his tongue in her mouth, running past her teeth. Then his mouth on her breasts, on her pert nipples — kind of dark for a white girl, kind of oblong. He listens for her responses — he tells himself that this is enough — he pries open her legs. She waxes. He shoves the flat of his tongue over the opening of her cunt, runs it hard over her clit. Too hard because she yelps and convulses and reaches for him with her long arms.

She tells him to come up. She tells him she wants to feel him. She says the line with a neediness that must sound romantic to her own ears.

He shakes his head slowly, tells her to lie still and try to relax. He holds her down, his arm over her pelvis. He resumes. Her taste is numbing his tongue. His pace is slow and deliberate. She’s suffocating her face with one of his pillows. He shoves two fingers into her, presses a thumb softly into her ass. She bucks up — not expecting it. And then she moans his name. He’s been told before that really pretty girls like it dirty because really pretty girls are at least a little bit broken inside. This is still something he is evaluating the veracity of.

Addam’s bro-voice calls out to them as they depart the lake, after they all put equipment away. “Hey, guys! Where are you going? Wait up!”

Grey is pretty intent on pretending he doesn’t hear Addam, but Drogo has a significantly higher tolerance threshold for this bullshit than Grey does. Their steps slow. Drogo turns around. Grey twists his head to see Addam waving at them enthusiastically like he’s sitting on a parade float or something. The guy is unreal.

Addam lightly jogs up to them as Jaime and Daven linger behind a bit. Bieber’s been wary of Drogo beating his ass ever since they had their little tiff. Turns out they two guys go way back. They are historical, and not in a way that surprises Grey at all. After all, people will do what they do when they are children. Drogo had been removed and casual when he pushed the story out over books, telling Grey that Jaime Lannister might be a bit of a dickhole, shedding some quick words about a football game at Jaime’s rich-bitch high school, about Blackface and Drogo being told by his coach to turn the other cheek and to rise above, lest his football scholarship becomes compromised.

The irony, Drogo told him, was that the football scholarship fell through anyway. In the end.

“Hey,” Addam says, breathlessly, grinning. “You dudes wanna go to Finnegan’s? Celebrate being fucking winners?”

Grey crosses his arms, expands his chest a bit even though most of the other guys on the crew team — with the exception of Pod — outweigh him — beat him in girth. Jaime is closest to his build. Grey and Drogo and these guys generally don’t intersect much outside of crew, for reasons that are
obvious to him, for reasons that should be obvious to Drogo.

He raises his brows and casts a look to Drogo. Drogo likes to liken himself to some militant-ass motherfucker when it comes to shit like this, when it comes to people like them, but Grey finds that sometimes talk is just talk. Drogo is more soft-hearted than he lets on.

“Nah, man,” Drogo drawls. “We already have a thing to go to with some cousins.”

“Oh, cool!” Addam says. “Where at?”

“Off campus, man.”

“When?”

“We’re swinging by in an hour or so. Have to go grab some ice first though.”

“Can we come?” Addam’s face is open and uninhibited. “Would be cool to meet some of your family members, bro.”

Grey swings his head slightly back, glances at Drogo again, sees him looking at Addam with an indecipherable look before D’s face breaks into a smile. Grey’s trying to pick out what game D’s playing at. The both of them already know that this party ain’t the kind of beer pong, keg stand bullshit that these bros are used to.

Drogo laughs, the reverberations low and dark. “Sure, okay. You really wanna come? Meet my cousins?” He says it like it’s a joke.

Much like all the well-meaning social workers who have come in and out of his adolescence, telling him that people care about him, of course they do, feeding comforting words to him like they are not lies — Grey finds that some cultural barriers are too immense to surmount. He finds himself doing the bulk of the heavy lifting — in terms of assimilating and adjusting to the cadence of their manner of speaking — around the frat-bros. That is what he and Drogo have taken to calling the white boys behind their backs, sometimes to their faces the few times Drogo has had the endurance to put up with the defensiveness.

“We actually don’t belong to a frat,” Daven says, coughing lightly around a billow of smoke that hovers around his head. The fragrance of weed hangs thick in the air and Grey’s head is full, his brain tingling.

“Man, it’s not about whether or not you actually belong in a frat,” Drogo says. “It’s just how you sound when you talk.”

“Dude, we — you and I — sound the same?”

“Man, we really don’t though,” Drogo says.

For Grey, tension also hangs in the air at this party. He can’t help but feel that the frat-bros are interlopers. He can’t help but think that they already have everything. He can’t help but resent the imposition on his space, his friends, his life. He tells himself that crew and joking around a little bit after practice here and there ain’t no thing — ain’t no big deal. It don’t mean nothing.
But this infringement kind of aggravates him. The way the this party melds around them, focuses on them, and puts up with their otherness bothers him.

“Did you grow up speaking another language?” Bieber — Jaime — asks.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” Drogo says, before passing the bong over to Addam, skipping over Bieber.

“You have an accent. Very slight.”

“Yeah?” Drogo mutters. “Funny how I have an accent and you — how do we describe how you talk? Is it just normal?”

“No, man,” Bieber says. “I have an accent, too. I just mean you — both you guys — talk like people who grew up speaking another language, is all.”

The observation surprises Grey. Because it is correct. He stares at Bieber as Drogo chuckles. “And where did you get this linguistic insight?” Drogo says. “From the cleaning lady in your King’s Landing McMansion?”

“Actually, yeah,” Bieber says, rolling his eyes. “Her name is Connie, and she’s actually our housekeeper and cook.”

“She wipe your ass too?”

Bieber straightens. “No. My mom did. Sometimes my ethnic nanny.” He says it with bitterness lacing his voice — the tone pricks at something in Grey’s brain.

It was a pain in the ass to get time off of work, particularly during the summer break. It was also hard to walk away from work, considering it’s retail, and he gets a commission hawking women’s shoes and touching women’s feet all day. It’s actually not appropriate and not how they are trained, but he finds there’s not really a hard and fast line. The target is always moving. And it’s complicated when someone’s bored mom comes in with a trail of perfume wafting behind her. It’s complicated as he kneels in front of her like a dark-skinned fucking servant. And it’s hard to say no elegantly when she asks that he puts shoes on her feet. Sometimes she laughs — pretends that he has tickled her. He generally wades through these moments and hopes that his amenability will inspire her to keep the shoes — not return them.

Grey’s manager balks that he wants to take a whole month off, tells him that there might not be a job for him to return to. He takes the gamble, and he leaves anyway.

His folding bike is maybe fifty pounds at most. He stuffs clothes, a jacket, a butane stove, a water bladder, matches, a small headlamp, toiletries, and a lightweight hammock into a internal frame backpack — 50 modest liters of space.

He flies to Braavos without a plan — without a destination in mind or an itinerary. His phone doesn’t get service either, so he leaves it at home. The first time he took this kind of trip — indulged in this kind of aimlessness — was when he aged out of foster care last year. He had very little money — and he was burdened — or unburdened — with aloneness. He had nowhere to be. No one to answer to. So he just started walking and found that it was painfully easy to be alone.
Though, if he were more honest with himself, he’d admit that the other times he took this trip happened before last year. Those other times were when he ran away from home.

A week of biking later, eighty miles south of Pentos, in small town, just an hour from the sunrise, he stumbles into a 24/7 internet cafe that is lined up like a sentinel against the street, wedged in between a cellphone store and a smoke shop. He remembers Drogo telling him to check in once in a while — let people know he’s not dead.

After he hits send, he shakes his head. He smells so fucking bad, most of the odor concentrated around his crotchal area. He thinks back to the last time he showered — and honestly, it was not that long ago.

He’s so tired and allows himself to doze a little bit. The aggressive sound of a language-less shout makes Grey jump in his seat, startling awake. He looks over to a spindly man with a dark mustache and leather skin, staring back with such open hostility. The cafe owner spits out a phrase — Grey is familiar — he’s being called a mongrel dog.

He slowly stands up and pulls up his backpack, hooking it over his shoulder. He is starving as he rolls his bike past the man. And as he passes by, he apologizes in Low Valyrian, speaking deeply and quietly enough to muddy up his Astapori accent.

He waits for the sun to rise, lying on his back on a bench, with his backpack on his stomach, a folding knife in his pocket, and his foot hooked around the metal of his bike. He stares straight up at the lightening purple sky.

A pattern of his life is that he is really no one’s first choice — not in the minor things, especially not in important things. It’s with an old and ongoing sense of familiarity that he detects Drogo’s broadening tolerance for Bieber’s ridiculousness and Bieber’s general ongoing and weirdass interest in Drogo. The first week Grey is back in Westeros after returning from his backpacking trip, he shows up at the beach in a t-shirt, shorts, and his sockless feet in slip-ons that he takes off before stepping on the beach.

He’s somewhat surprised to see Bieber there, but not really. Grey’s more preoccupied with whether his landlord is gonna dick him over on utilities for the month he’s been gone, with just how pointlessly difficult it will be to get his old shifts back at work.

He sits in the sand, slightly damp and grittier than the stretches he’s walked on, on the coast of Essos.

“Do you want a chair?” Jaime asks.

“Nah, man,” Drogo says, answering for him, cracking open a brown beer bottle with his key chain. “Kid likes being low to the ground.” He hands the bottle to Jaime.

There are other more practical languages he can learn to fulfill his language requirement. He’s not literate in and doesn’t really speak High Valyrian with any proficiency that matters though, so he
can’t really test out of the language requirement completely — which would’ve been nice. He could’ve shaved off maybe an entire year of college had it been possible.

He cannot even say it’s sentimentality that makes him sign up for an accelerated Summer Tongue course his sophomore year. He just knows he really doesn’t want to take the accelerated High Valyrian course even though he may be better-suited for it — more practiced.

He just has these frustratingly vague memories of his parents’ voices — in his head.

He realizes really fast that he’s entirely out of his depth during the first week of language class. It’s a year-long course that is supposed to meet the two-year requirement for languages. It’s for fluent or native speakers who cannot read or write. The course focuses on building vocabulary and literacy. He has a working knowledge of the mechanics of how the language is set up, but his memory has a hard time recalling words. His pronunciation is sloppy and sometimes sounds are just approximated, rather than accurate.

He speaks to his instructor. Instead of telling him to drop the class, which is what Grey predicted, his teacher tells him to go to the language center and sign up with a tutor, maybe get some practice in with a language exchange.

He’s in a bit of a shitty mood when he shows up because his landlord is trying to pin the cost of a cracked window on him. He’s pretty sure it’s the fluctuating temperature and the fact that the window is single-pane. He’s trying to stop her senile ass from deducting the cost of a replacement from his rent check. He finds that rationalizing with people seldom works. People tend to come from a place of emotional volatility — they are unpredictable and illogical.

“Hi, I’m Missandei.”

He pushes his hand out. “Grey.”

“That’s an interesting name.”

“Is it?”

She looks taken aback. “I didn’t mean anything by that.”

He sits down and starts unloading his books — a textbook, an exercise book, a notebook, and a quiz that he kind of barely flunked. He was points away from C-minusing that shit.

“Can we go over this?” he says, holding his exam up, displaying his score without much embarrassment. It’s hard to make him feel embarrassed over things, given his experiences.

For her — he can tell — it is not the same. She’s still standing at the other side of the small table, looking a bit shellshocked. She blinks and her eyelashes flutter nervously as she pulls her chair out. She takes his exam from him. “Sure, okay,” she says, reading over the paper. After a pause — one in which he can feel her eyes on him, and it makes him grit his teeth a little — she says, “I like that bracelet.”

It’s just a red bracelet woven out of hemp that he bought from a tiny kid on the side of the road in Pentos.

Her fingers fall down on his wrist, touches his skin.

He gets it. He generally can differentiate between what is a good touch and what is a bad touch — he has learned this painfully simplistic and intuitive lesson from counselors and social workers. He
generally understands Missandei’s intentions, relatively uninhibited for reasons that are plain to him, perhaps for other reasons he is not privy, too. Not that it matters much. He understands by her gaze that he wasn’t what she was expecting when he showed up. He is a point of curiosity for a lot of people.

He pulls his wrist out from underneath her fingers. He stares at her straight in the face. Her eyes, feminine and pretty and clear, widen a little bit. Her mouth parts slightly — an apology maybe on her tongue.

“What’s the best way to pick up vocabulary fast when I’m studying on my own?” he says. “Flashcards?”
Missy has a crush

Missandei bends over slightly to examine her cleavage in the mirror, slipping her hand in between her boob and her push-up bra, lifting it up a little in the cup. She purses her apple red lips and makes a funny face to herself before she drops the liquid lipstick into her clutch for a refresh later. A smear of vanilla lotion goes on her exposed legs. Dabs of musky perfume goes on her neck and over her wrists. She fluffs up her curly hair with her hands as she steps into her shoes, teeters on the three-and-a-half inch strappy heels. She likes these because they stay on her feet when she’s moving around a lot. And they are as comfortable as these kind of shoes get.

Jhiqui and Doreah are waiting for her in the living room, pre-funking with tequila, holding up small shot glasses and making smoochie faces into their phones as they take selfies. They brighten when she exits the bathroom, makes her come over on the couch to take a few photos.

Later, she uses her fake ID to get into the club without a hitch. Usually, how these things work is that the bouncer is well-aware she’s not Donatella Singha. They are not even the same ethnicity. But it’s also good for clubs to have pretty girls there, to draw in young men with deep pockets, so authority figures often look the other way when it comes to her.

Jhiqui gets progressively drunker and drunker from free drinks, to the point where she gets messy and Missy is holding her friend up and glancing furtively around the flashing pulsating lights, trying to spot bouncers — to avoid them so they don’t get kicked out. The bass rattles the walls and Doreah urges them to jump. Missandei raises her sweaty arms up, screams, “Shots!” along to the song, remixed — until her voice is hoarse and her feet are sore.

She sneaks out to get away with the damp sweltering heat of the club. The ground is wet from recent rain, and she pulls her leather-look jacket tighter around her body. A guy with huge muscles and a trail of cologne asks her if she’d like a smoke. She declines. He asks her name — and she delicately tells him no offense, but she didn’t come out to make new friends. She’s just there to get some fresh air.

He snorts and mutters, “Uptight bitch,” under his breath before he leaves her and pushes himself back into his crowd of friends, casting her occasional dirty looks. Then she hears their snide laughter.

She almost spins around to say something like: Sorry, do I owe you something because you offered me a fucking cigarette?

Instead she shoots a text to Jhiqui and Doreah, tells them she’s tired and she’s bouncing outta here. She’s going over to Neal’s. Don’t wait up.

Her phone glows against her face in the cab as she gives the driver the address. She’s been texting Neal all night. He told her he’s out with his boys at a casino. She worked hard not to inundate him with questions about who’s there and which casino they are at.

He’s home when she arrives. She boldly pushes him into his bedroom and shuts the door behind them. She’s already sticky with sweat. His mouth tastes salty. She peels off her clothes and drops them on the floor before she attacks the closure on his slacks. She smells the faint floral scent of another girl’s perfume on his shirt. She squelches down everything that comes naturally to her. She
just ignores it. She straddles him nakedly on the bed and drops her face down to his.

Even though it’s autumn, the leaves haven’t started changing colors. The temperature still manages to inch up bright and sunny on some days. He walks into the language center in a well-loved, earth-tone, graphic-less t-shirt. His biceps flex underneath the cold LED lights of the overhead lights as he swings his heavy backpack off his shoulders, onto the table, before he unzips and starts unloading his books and language notebook.

She’s staring, she knows. “How’s it going?” she asks him, feeling her lips stick a little bit from the shiny lip gloss she had applied right before he walked into the room.

“Fine.” His answer is curt and precise.

He always insists on sitting across from her, even though most other tutors sit on the same side of the table as their tutees. It’s easy to both read the text that way. She leans over and flips open his exercise book to third chapter, feeling the neckline of her loose tank top fall down a bit, curving over the very edge of her bra. Her hand reaches up to sorta self-consciously correct it, pulling her shirt up higher on her neck. With other guys, she might not hide her cleavage, but he inspires this action from her, with his steadfast and unwavering focus on his studies.

His eyes instinctively follow her movement this time though. She catches him glancing at her fist at her boobs before he snaps his eyes off, right back down to his book.

He pulls out a loose page from his notebook. He slams it down on the table and says nothing.

He got 100 percent on his latest quiz. That is, he got all ten questions right. She reaches out and pulls the sheet closer. Even his handwriting is great, fantastic. It’s impressionistic and parts of his elongated loops are barely legible as letters.

“Oh my gosh,” she gushes, mostly because she can’t help but be proud of him. “Good job, Grey! Oh my gosh! You learn so fast! Pretty soon, you won’t even need a tutor anymore.”

She’s already tried to get personal with him. Not in a sexy kind of way — though there was a moment toward the beginning when she entertained that sort of daydream. But he made it clear he’s not interested. She figures he has a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend. Or she’s just so far outside of his type or whatever. Lessons pass by faster and are a little bit more fun when they chat in-language about other stuff — good practice that way. But he is hyper-focused and isn’t much for small-talk.

But she’s asked him about his accent in Summer Tongue. She has asked him if he’s originally from Omburu. He was defensive about it the day of. She tried to lessen the stakes of such a thing by revealing to him that she was born in Naath.

He came back a lesson later. In a sort of hidden apology for his behavior, he confirmed to her that he was from Omburu. He asks her if they can learn that dialect, that accent — on the side — given her familiarity with it.

She remembers how her beating heart throbbed in her chest, in a dawning realization. She remembers staring at his face — his eyes, his lashes, the slope of his nose, his lips — how she lingered there because she couldn’t help it — before she silently told herself that he’s not really her
Grey’s really stoned and hanging around his place of employment — in the fucking mall — on his
day off because Drogo wanted to use Grey’s employee discount to buy fucking a pack of socks and
a pack of boxers. They had taken hits from a joint that Grey had rolled before stepping onto the bus.
Drogo had held up the off-white piece up to the sky, letting the sun reflect off of it. He had told Grey
that it is a thing of beauty. Grey rolled a filter and everything, for ease of smoking, for that nice lip-
feel, to maximize the weed.

Naturally, to him, there’s no point in doing things if he doesn’t do them well.

He drums his fingers absently on the countertop as he watches Drogo a ways off, flirting with one of
Grey’s coworkers. Amanda. Amanda with the blond hair and and the blue eyes and the vacant look
of a lack of comprehension behind them.

Drogo doesn’t need Grey’s employee discount after all. He actually plies it off Amanda. She puts his
socks and boxers on her account as he forces cash on her, telling her that she will not buy his
underwear for him. Grey watches Drogo lean forward toward her — little movements in body
language like that, he understands, of course he understands — and he watches as she coyly snatches
Drogo’s phone from out of his hand to input her number into it.

Later, as they wander toward the food court, Grey asks if Drogo will call her. A plastic bag swings
lightly in Drogo’s hand and he tells Grey probably not. She’s his coworker after all. Drogo ain’t in
the business of making shit awkward for his bud.

They sit at a wobbly aluminum table with big slices of pepperoni pizza on their plates because it was
the best deal of the day. Drogo tells Grey he doesn’t really like pizza crust, as he tears up the bread
into smaller bite-sized pieces, as he systematically pops them into his mouth, chewing reflectively, an
arm swung across an empty chair. Drogo’s eyes scan the food court, eyeing a kebab chain.

He tells Grey that Dothraki food is becoming really trendy. It’s real fucking irritating because now
it’s a talking point with some people. He tells Grey that the other day, Addam went out of his way to
tell Drogo that he ate a kebab, and it was delicious. And it took monumental effort for Drogo not to
tell Addam to go fuck himself. He tells Grey that the other day, Bieber made a huge stink at a fancy
exclusive club restaurant because Drogo’s water didn’t get refilled, like Jaime’s his fucking white
hero, like Jaime expected to be congratulated for his minimal-ass shit. Drogo did tell Jaime to go fuck
himself for that. It’s so simple for them. It’s so after-school-special to them. It’s so one-month-outta-
the-year for them. It’s so something they don’t think about fucking constantly because this fucking
life isn’t their fucking life.

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authenticity and elevating the cuisine. Drogo snorts, noting that there is nothing basic about the food
that his mom makes. He tells Grey he misses his mom’s cooking.

Grey’s still a little bit stoned as he laughs hollowly, as a secret sneaks out. He says, “My mom is
probably dead by now. But I don’t know for sure. I remember she used to make really good soup,
though.” His memory — the best and worst of it — is far-reaching. He actually remembers being
three years old and sitting on warm tile floor as he played with a caramel-colored dog, as his mom
and grandma prepared food in the next room, over a hearth. He remembers a watery soup, made up

型。她喜欢外向、健谈的男孩。他有什么太熟悉的地方。这就是为什么她的心有时
会被他影响，当他在她身边的时候。

Grey’s really stoned and hanging around his place of employment — in the fucking mall — on his
day off because Drogo wanted to use Grey’s employee discount to buy fucking a pack of socks and
a pack of boxers. They had taken hits from a joint that Grey had rolled before stepping onto the bus.
Drogo had held up the off-white piece up to the sky, letting the sun reflect off of it. He had told Grey
that it is a thing of beauty. Grey rolled a filter and everything, for ease of smoking, for that nice lip-
feel, to maximize the weed.

Naturally, to him, there’s no point in doing things if he doesn’t do them well.

He drums his fingers absently on the countertop as he watches Drogo a ways off, flirting with one of
Grey’s coworkers. Amanda. Amanda with the blond hair and and the blue eyes and the vacant look
of a lack of comprehension behind them.

Drogo doesn’t need Grey’s employee discount after all. He actually plies it off Amanda. She puts his
socks and boxers on her account as he forces cash on her, telling her that she will not buy his
underwear for him. Grey watches Drogo lean forward toward her — little movements in body
language like that, he understands, of course he understands — and he watches as she coyly snatches
Drogo’s phone from out of his hand to input her number into it.

Later, as they wander toward the food court, Grey asks if Drogo will call her. A plastic bag swings
lightly in Drogo’s hand and he tells Grey probably not. She’s his coworker after all. Drogo ain’t in
the business of making shit awkward for his bud.

They sit at a wobbly aluminum table with big slices of pepperoni pizza on their plates because it was
the best deal of the day. Drogo tells Grey he doesn’t really like pizza crust, as he tears up the bread
into smaller bite-sized pieces, as he systematically pops them into his mouth, chewing reflectively, an
arm swung across an empty chair. Drogo’s eyes scan the food court, eyeing a kebab chain.

He tells Grey that Dothraki food is becoming really trendy. It’s real fucking irritating because now
it’s a talking point with some people. He tells Grey that the other day, Addam went out of his way to
tell Drogo that he ate a kebab, and it was delicious. And it took monumental effort for Drogo not to
tell Addam to go fuck himself. He tells Grey that the other day, Bieber made a huge stink at a fancy
exclusive club restaurant because Drogo’s water didn’t get refilled, like Jaime’s his fucking white
hero, like Jaime expected to be congratulated for his minimal-ass shit. Drogo did tell Jaime to go fuck
himself for that. It’s so simple for them. It’s so after-school-special to them. It’s so one-month-outta-
the-year for them. It’s so something they don’t think about fucking constantly because this fucking
life isn’t their fucking life.

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three years old and sitting on warm tile floor as he played with a caramel-colored dog, as his mom
and grandma prepared food in the next room, over a hearth. He remembers a watery soup, made up
of mostly vegetables — flavored with only a little bit of fat from animal skin.

Drogo’s glazed and faraway eyes assess Grey, sitting hunched over his empty plate. Drogo shoves another dry piece of crust into his mouth. Then he says, “I used to tell kids at my school that Bharbo was dead. When I wasn’t telling them he was some sort of mercenary world-traveling Robin Hood warrior hero.”

Bharbo is the name of Drogo’s dad. He just never refers to the man as such.

Drogo laughs. “My friends totally saw through the inconsistency. Called me out on my shit constantly. They all knew what was up — but I just couldn’t stop fucking lying to people about it for the longest time. Kids do weird stupid shit.”

“We tend to make the past worst or better in our heads,” Grey mutters. “We never remember it very accurately.”

“Hey, are you okay?” Missandei swings her shoulder bag around to her front, unzips it, and starts digging around for the bundle of tissues she always keeps in there. She peels off some and hands a wad to the really tall blond girl before she sits down on the cold bench, too, bumping their knees together a little bit. “You’re in my linguistics class, right? You’re Brienne?”

“Oh hi! It’s really good to see you. How are you doing?” Brienne tries to smile back, brushing tears from her face with the tissues. Instead, she kind of laughs over how ridiculous the situation is. She tightly holds the tissues in her hands. “Ah, I’m being dumb,” Brienne says. “I kind of just had a fight with my boyfriend.”

“Oh my God,” Missy says. “I am a pro, when it comes to boy problems!”

She’s not lying. She really is a pro when it comes to boy problems. Boy problems tend to follow her around, burdening her with such ambiguity. Neal is — was — her high school sweetheart. They’ve known each other since they were third-graders, actually, when she and her brothers first moved to Myr to live with their grandparents. Neal in third-grade was super cute, had a red lunchbox, and was really good at math problems. He’s actually still good at math. He’s a math major.

And she ended up being the kind of girl that followed some boy to college, even after he told her that he wanted to take a break because college is about new experiences and meeting new people.

She tells herself it’s casual — that she could be the first person in the world that can go casual after being in love with the love of her life. She kind of proves this to herself by going on lots of dates — too-old-for-her guys that she meets in clubs and bars using her fake ID, guys her age with a dating app she downloaded onto her phone. She spends her ten minutes of downtime in between classes swiping guys left and right on the app.

She tells herself it’s not sad and pathetic, as she drunkenly laughs into her pink grapefruit cocktail. The guy she’s with, Aaron, has a hungry gaze that she’s not altogether comfortable with. His hunger
isn’t sexual. It’s for affection. He drips off desperation for love. He tells her he just wants to be with somebody. He just wants to make plans with somebody. He just wants someone in his corner, forever and ever. He just wants to skip the whole bit where he sows his wild oats. He just want to love and be loved. What is wrong with him?

He may be drunk, too.

She might feel uncomfortable because there is something about him that reminds her of herself.

They kiss each other goodnight, even though she knows the chemistry is completely off. The kiss is cold and his lips are garlicky, and she feels stupid and silly inside. She thanks him for dinner. He asks her if she will call him. She smiles at him and tries to leave it teasing and cute. His face falls, and he tells her that she’s not going to call him, is she? He tells her that no one ever calls him back.

It makes her swallow the lump in her throat. And she just wants to get out. So she lies to him — she tells him that she will call. And then on shaky legs, she walks away from him. The world is spinning as she leans against a lamp post on the sidewalk, anchoring her heels against the ground, balancing, trying not to fall.

She pulls out her phone. There are — honestly — so many people she can text or call right now. She knows that as flighty as Jhiqui and Doreah are, they’d drop their stuff to come for her in her sad state. She knows that even though Brienne is a really new friend, Brienne would also come and get her and fuss over her a bit. She can call Sandor and he’d bust in like a white knight and stuff. Or he’d tell her to be a grown-up and suck it up and to call a cab.

God.

Of course, in the end. She texts Neal. She asks him where he is and if he’s busy.

What’s new is that she also sends out a text to a new . . . friend?

Bieber strips off his shirt. Bieber hasn’t been a big part of his life lately because Drogo and Jaime have been on the outs for some stupid reason that he’s not completely sure of. Drogo keeps playing it off like it’s no big deal and he doesn’t care — but it’s pretty fucking blatant that Drogo cares a lot. Bieber’s back to being skittish and weird and nervous all the time around them — which Grey honestly doesn’t mind too much. He likes it when white people are nervous around him — as he simultaneously hates it.

Drogo isn’t here — has a late shift at the restaurant. Grey doesn’t know why he’s here either. Just had nothing to do. And there’s free food and free-flowing booze — though he doesn’t really drink much. There’s just free food always — with these guys.

“You guys’ hair is so stupid!” Jaime screams, at Addam and Daven, his whole body turning red. “You think the fucking ladies love it but news flash. They don’t.” Jaime sways on his feet, bracing his hand against the kitchen counter so he doesn’t topple over.

Daven laughs with his arm clutching his stomach. “Dude, what is your fucking problem with our hair?”

“I hate looking at it! I hate looking at your faces! Fuck your faces!”
“You’re just jelly.”

Jaime reaches up, touches his snapback. “Fuck no!”

Grey’s phone vibrates in his hand. He unlocks it and squints at the screen. He’s mildly surprised to see a text from her. It sounds — honestly — way fucking crazy because it tries really hard to be casual. She’s asking him what he’s up to, if he’s busy.

He ignores Missandei’s message for a bit. There’s something about the message — and her — that is way too intense for him. He wanders into the kitchen, under its bright lights, picking at the mix of deluxe nuts that Addam had poured out into a bowl, feeling the music creep up a little bit louder. He slides in between the counter and a scantily clad sister with dreads, feels her stop him with her hand on his chest. He looks at her. She smiles at him. He crunches on some cashews, grinding them between his molars.

She leans in. Asks him how he’s doing. He leans in back, feeling her body heat. He whispers into her ear that he’s doing pretty good. She boldly presses the entire front of her body against his. She tells him he has a nice body. He repeats the same to her, touching her bare hip.

He knows this pattern. He understands girls. A misconception about him is that he is socially awkward on accident. The truth is that he’s socially awkward on purpose. He can turn it on — turn it off — because he understands people’s desires. He understands, all too well, what they ultimately want from him.

He looks into her gold-tinged eyes, through her thick lashes. He slowly skims his lips against her lips. He asks her if she has somewhere to be tonight. She smiles slowly, tells him no.

And then his phone buzzes again.

He is pissed when he steps out of the cab after his eyes rove over her body to assess any damages — finding none. No physical damage at least. She knows he’s pissed because it’s so dark and the whites of his eyes are the only clear thing she can see. His mouth is set in a hard line and his expression is inscrutable as he slowly crosses the street, as he slowly marches up to her.

Her legs are shaking and her clothes are itchy. She really understands why she reached out to him now. She really understands that she thinks he’s really hot and also so incredibly inaccessible and she really, really wants him in a certain kind of way. She wants to fuck him. And he must not have a girlfriend — or a boyfriend — if he showed up, like this.

She pushes down everything — everything honest and real about her. She pushes a bright smile onto her face as his looming figure nears. And she cheerfully greets him with a hello.

Grey cannot fucking believe he was tricked. He cannot fucking believe he let himself be tricked so easily. He also can’t believe that her legs don’t work that well — that she has to hang over him in order to walk.
He really can’t believe she’s too drunk to remember her own fucking address.

He just about leaves her there — right there on the street — to teach her a lesson about misleading him. He never allows people to lie to him, and he’s not about to start making exceptions. But he sees the dwindling crowds, remembers the late hour, and sees a number of guys up the street, far-off in the distance. Something — a memory — tugs at the edge of his brain before he wipes it out. Before he grunts and holds out his arm for her to latch onto.

She asks him where they are going. He almost says something really cruel and mean to her. He always has something ready to go on his tongue. But he swallows up his bitterness. He honestly tells her that they are not too far away from his place. She can sleep off her bullshit there.

She’s pressing the front of her body to his back as his cold hands stumble around in the dark for his keys. Her cold hand sneaks under his shirt and touches the bare skin on his stomach. He lowly tells her to give him some space, as he jams his keys into his lock, extricating himself from her grasp as he opens the door. He flips on the light and illuminates a small room with a mini fridge and a small two-burner electric stove in the corner. He tells her that the bathroom is down the hall — it’s communal. So don’t make a mess in there.

She tells him she doesn’t need to use the bathroom. He hands her a glass of water. He tells her she can sleep on the floor as he digs under his bed for some extra blankets.

It’s when she asks, “Can’t I sleep on your bed?” that he freezes. He breathes for a moment. In that moment, she says, “With you?”

He says, “No.” He says, “If you want to sleep on the bed, I’ll sleep on the floor.”

Tears hit her eyes. She’s quiet as she sits on his bed, as she leans down and struggles with the straps of her heels. And then her tears fall when she feels his hand gently push hers away, as his fingers nimbly unbuckles her tiny buckles, as he pulls her shoes off her feet.

Her face flushes so hot when she watches him walk into the language center. She’s pretty sure her skin is too dark to reveal much of her embarrassment. She has already apologized to him — profusely — when she woke up in his bed the day after with a pounding headache. She apologized to him as she stepped over him and ran barefoot to the toilet — out into the hallway. He followed idly behind her and watched her despondently as she puked. Then he handed her the glass of water from the previous night and walked back into his room to find a spare toothbrush for her.

He unpacks his books in front of her, just like usual.

“Hey,” she says. “God, I’m so sorry about this weekend. That was so bad. I’m so embarrassed.”

“It’s fine,” he says, flipping open his book. “Don’t worry about it.” He shoves the book toward her. “Conjugation today?”
He wakes up in his bed, damp because he’s been sweating as he slept. His skin tingles and he grits his teeth, clenching down so that it’s almost painful. He’s been dreaming of her — with this alarming sort of frequency that he’s really fucking uncomfortable with. Remnants of the dream still linger in his brain — her skin when he accidentally let himself touch her — her eyes in the dark — her disorienting desperation for him — and her soft voice pleading with him.

He sits up. He carefully adjusts the tenting underneath his sweatpants. He pulls off his damp t-shirt, balling it up in his hands. He sinks his face into his shirt and he pulls in deep, muffled breaths, trying to calm his body down. He doesn’t touch himself. He doesn’t let himself think of her consciously for the rest of the day.
Grey has a substance problem

He trades Deek cash for a plastic baggie. Deek is scattered and twitchy, asks if Grey is doing anything later. Wanna hang in Deek’s mom’s garage? Grey sometimes chills with Deek to curry some favors, but today, he tells Deek he’s busy. He pockets the plastic bag and daps Deek bye before he ducks into a bus.

The sun is setting — golden rays hitting through his replaced double-paned window that he ended up paying for half of — as he folds an index card over 10 milligrams of morphine. He crushes it under a big dowel that he had gotten from the hardware store — it’s also his makeshift rolling pin. It’s with a sense of purpose — and he supposes like many, many other men, he’s got something to prove to himself — that he pours the powder into a syringe filled in a few millimeters of water. He caps it with the plunger, shakes the solution, getting most of it to dissolve.

The inner door to his small studio is locked. The room is cold because he doesn’t turn on the heat — just wears layers. The cold bites his ass and his soft dick as he loosens his belt and drops his pants, his briefs, to his knees. A bit of lube from a squeeze bottle gets smoothed over the syringe. He winces slightly as it slides into his ass.

Plugging morphine, he finds, is much more cost efficient for him than eating it. The high is stronger, longer-lasting, more pervasive.

He remembers sitting in health class in high school. He remembers all of the school assemblies. They all told him that drugs are bad. He knows that drugs are bad. But at the same time — drugs often solve all of his fucking problems, if only for a few hours. For him, the trade-off is worth it. He doesn’t necessarily plan to live a very long life, anyway. For him, given the trajectory of his life and the many, many times he has already cheated death, he expects that his number will be up sooner than later anyway. He imagines his death to be bright and painful and immediate.

He pulls his pants up and re-buckles his belt. He feels the seep of sedation, thick and sweet like honey, as he slowly meanders his way to Daven’s. And for the first time in a really long time — he is happy. He feels happy.

Daven is drunk and loopy when he opens the door. He reaches out and palms Grey’s cheek. He’s early. And Daven says, “Hey, brother,” as he steps out of the way for Grey to enter the high-rise condo. Grey refrains from correcting Dav — they are not brothers. Instead, he skims his hand against Dav’s massive one, then makes his way to the couch, collapses on it, reaching forward to grab at a water bong with wisps of smoke curls. The couch rattles as Daven lands down next to him.

Grey has a plan — a sense of duty — tonight. An hour and a half later, he slowly grins at a brunette with hazel eyes and he lets her lead him into one of Dav’s spare bedrooms. They move fast, his hands squeezing the curves of her body, discovering all of her tan lines. He strips off her thong, pulls it down her legs, leaving her stilettos on. She presses forward, presses her warm breasts to his bare chest, and she laughs as she pulls his pants down, as her warm hand closes over his erection.

“You’re not circumcised.”

“Is that a problem?” he says, voice low and raspy.
She detects something in his tone — and she wants him, so she stutters, says, “Of course it’s not a problem!”

He closes his eyes. He pushes away memories. He sneaks his hand in between her legs, spreads her apart, and gently presses his fingers to the center of her. She throws her head back — he feels it hit the bed — she says his name.

He opens his eyes, keeping his breathing calm and even as he snaps a condom, stretches it before he rolls it onto his dick. She’s drunk and smiling up at him, a sheen of sweat making her face shiny. He’s sweating, too, and he thinks that he’s going to be okay. For once, he’s going to be okay.

It’s okay when he pushes into her. It’s okay when he withdraws and re-enters. And it’s okay when she starts being vocal, when she calls him baby and tell him to hit her harder and faster. He closes his eyes, inhales deeply, smells the scent of whatever detergent Dav uses on his sheets, smells sex. He closes his eyes, when he catches her staring up at him with such open need and such want.

Which is a mistake. He closes his eyes, and he’s confronted with an image of another really beautiful girl with brown eyes, dark skin, and riotous curls that bounce when she’s excited about something ordinary he has done. Then, his hands tingle into numbness. His dick feels numb, too.

He feels himself softening — and he willed himself not to panic. That only makes it worse. He pushes through. He just believes. He just believes in himself.

When he finishes — as she comes — as she doesn’t — he feels this sense of loss. He feels like shit. An image comes to him — unbidden — of blood on his hands. And then the euphoria of the morphine just crashes.

His body seizes. It shudders. She thinks it means something else. Instead, he wants to scream. Instead, he pulls out of her quickly, and then curls himself into the mattress, sinking down. His face is hot, and he almost jumps out of his skin when her hand grazes his back, as her nails rake down his spine.

She calls him baby, asks him if it was good for him because it was good for her.

He leaves her there to get dressed again, after he silently pulls on his clothes and tells her he’ll call her. He’s drenched in sweat as he bursts out of the room, as he quickly makes his way down the hall.

He sees Jaime. Pressing himself against the bathroom door, a yellow swatch of light leaks out from underneath the door gap at the bottom. A thin blond in a white crop top has her hand on him. They are talking quietly — she’s out of her depth and Jaime is coiled tight in anxiety — this is something Grey can read in people well. Grey stumbles a little bit, his steps uncoordinated and heavy from the morphine. He watches silently — like an interloper — as Jaime’s hand snaps up and closes over the blond’s forearm. They exchange more words — this time they are contentious. She’s trying to take her arm back. His face is red and angry.

And then he throws her arm back at her.

Balon bumps into Jaime exiting out of the bathroom. More words are lost. And then Jaime slams the door shut behind him.

The blond is bewildered, disappears behind the corner, following Balon.

Grey is waiting for the bathroom — is confronted with Jaime’s amped-up red face when the door opens again. When Jaime sees that it’s only him — not a clinging blond — he visibly relaxes. He plays it all off like it’s nothing. He smiles at Grey. He says, “Dude — I didn’t know you’re here, too. Is
Grey slowly shakes his head. “Nope,” he says.

“Ah.”

She’s sometimes stupid. Because she asks him what they are, as she snuggles into the side of his chest, as she feel her lashes swat lightly against his skin. He smells vaguely smoky, like charcoal briquettes. He tells her he was at a beach party — there was a bonfire. She holds onto Neal tightly.

He says, “You mean so much to me.”

She says, “We’ve been through so much together.” Really, she means school dances, puberty, inside jokes, long meandering drives all over town at two in the morning.

But he freezes against her. And she realizes that he thinks that she’s referring to her brother’s death.

It’s something too grave and too tragic to really put a name to — to voice at this moment. So she plays it off and tries to act casual. She brightly ignores the dark tugging at the center of her chest. She chirps into Neal’s ear. She tells him that he looks good — he really looks good to her. He is quiet and reflective, as he palms her breast, as his thumb smooths over the nipple. She pulls the blanket tightly around them. She resists telling him that she wants this — she really wants this to continue on. She resists telling him that she really misses him. She misses them. She resists asking him why they can’t go back.

But of course, as with anything else — they both know that they can’t undo what has already been done. They can only revisit. They can’t replicate. She pushes the truth down — way, way down — as she rolls over on top of him and presses her mouth over his clavicle.

His shirt is blotchy with damp spots that stick to his body when he shows up to his lesson. The blobs look like scattered islands on a map, morphing around the ridges and planes of his flesh — his abs.

He catches her staring. He says, “Sorry I’m late. Practice ran a little over.” He pauses, eyes roaming the room. “I row,” he says, typically reluctant about giving up the information. He touches a wet spot on his shirt, over his stomach. And then he swings his heavy bag onto the table and starts unloading his stuff without looking at her.

“You row?” she asks.

“Boats,” he says, snapping his notebook into the table.

She grins. “No, I get that part. I know what rowing means,” she says teasingly. “I’m just surprised because you don’t seem like the type. I usually picture those guys as like — you know —”

“White?”
She laughs. “And rich?”

His mouth twitches. “I am neither of those things.” And Missandei mostly sees the smile in his eyes. Her pulse is hitting her neck hotly. She thinks about Neal. She thinks about dissimilarities. She thinks about what is familiar and what is not. She thinks about how she’s a sucker and how she has a pattern, always chasing guys that don’t want her — then losing interest when she has them. Then regaining interest when they leave her.

She makes a resolution in that moment, staring back into this face.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out a crisp piece of paper, slides it over to him. On the unlined paper, she has drawn a t-chart and has made two lists. They’ve already talked about how his dialect is mostly an accent — that is, it’s mutually intelligible with what he’s learning in class — except for a number of terms or sounds that are different. His accent is flatter and more muddled — she finds it pleasant — it’s not as high up the nose and nasal as the official accent and dialect. He doesn’t have to tell her — she already knows he’s afraid of losing his accent as he becomes more proficient in Summer Tongue.

The t-chart is of common words in official Summer Tongue — the version of the language used on television newscasts and in official documents — juxtaposed with words in his dialect. The official version of Summer Tongue is a way of speaking that developed in the forty years or so after reunification. Grey was born into war, too young to have lived anything else. But his accent is a relic from a time and place that no longer exists. She knows that his accent has to be a legacy from his parents.

He looks over her list.

“I hope it’s not too confusing to learn two words for the same things,” she says. “I hope it doesn’t mess you up in class?”

“No, this is great,” he says, looking up at her. “Thank you.”

The cold war between Bieber and D continues when they meet Addam and Daven at a burger joint for dinner. They were gonna bow out when Addam asked, but then he offered to pay for dinner. And Drogo has fewer scruples when there’s free shit to be had. He muttered that he’s gaming the system. Grey refrained from asking him if he’s just actually playing right into their hands.

Drogo was careful and clever, when he casually asked Addam if Jaime was coming with, too. Addam was blithely unaware, when he said that fucking Jaime has to work — he’s been working a shit-ton ever since he dropped all his classes and withdrew from the quarter.

Dinner is a little bit awkward. Because Bieber or alcohol or weed are really the glues that hold their precarious dynamic together — to Grey at least. Addam and Daven are fairly unaware of the tension, or they are choosing to ignore it. Not for the first time, it makes Grey wonder if that’s how these people work — that they make things work out for them through sheer conviction and sheer blind hope.

Drogo nudges him in the arm, making the plastic menu wink against the lights overhead. “Whatcha getting, Dovoeddi?”

Drogo chuckles.

“Why do you call him that?” Daven asks, eyes scanning his own menu. “Dovo-Eddy?”

The truth is that his real name is Dovoghedhy. Except no one could pronounce it correctly when he came to Westeros and started school. His aunt suggested that he change his name, like she did. She tells him it’s just easier for white people, saves him the trouble of constantly correcting and explaining, calls less attention to the fact that he’s different.

He has no attachment to his names — any of them. He answers to whatever. But it was one of the first questions Drogo asked when they met — what his real name is. No fucking way it’s actually Grey.

His real name is a hard word to say for people who don’t speak the language. It’s tonal and accented. It swoops and it’s guttural. He and Drogo spent long seconds going back and forth on pronunciation before Drogo got fed up and said that in Dothraki, there’s a word that sounds really similar, that ironically means purity. Dovoeddi.

Then they flipped and he spent a few seconds trying to say D’s name correctly in Dothraki. He stumbled on an accurate pronunciation accidentally, but had trouble consistently replicating it.

“No real interesting reason,” Drogo tells Daven, deflecting. “It’s just what I like to call this nigga because he so OG.”

“Ah,” Daven says, grinning a little uncomfortably. “Well, it sounds cool. But I’m just gonna keep calling you Grey.”

“Yeah?” Drogo says. “Now that’s an idea.”

Addam clears his throat and changes the subject, gripes that it’s annoying that they can’t order drinks.

The conversation meanders — Addam, like a lot of white boys, talks a lot about himself and about dullass things. He talks about aimless mundane things like the napkins and the light fixtures in between his ramblings about how his dad is so annoying because his dad is always on his ass about his grades and taking the right classes so that Addam can be ready to jump into his dad’s company after graduation. Daven can relate to this, says something broad about how sometimes the ideas that parents have for their kids’ future is different from what the kid wants.

Grey’s aware that he and Drogo have been suspiciously quiet during this part of the conversation. So he dips a fry into ketchup, shoves it in his mouth, says, “Yeah.”

Drogo randomly asks, “What’s going on with Jaime?” Except it’s not random at all. “He withdrew?”

“Christ,” Addam says, glancing real quick at Daven. “I don’t even know what the fuck is going on with him. He’s gone off the fucking deep end. You should’ve seen him freak the fuck out over his girlfriend the other night. I was afraid he was like, beating her or something, because he was just losing his shit and screaming at her so badly.” Addam shakes his head. “So I listened at the door for a bit.” He pauses, sucking up some of his thick chocolate milkshake through a clear straw.

“They were having sex,” Daven supplies in a deadpan.

Addam rolls his eyes. “That doesn’t mean he’s not hitting her.”
“Come on, do you really think Jaime is capable of hitting a girl?” Daven says. It’s clear to Grey that Addam and Daven have discussed this at length.

Next to him, Grey hears Drogo say, “Yes.”

“High school relationships, man,” Addam says. “So much fucking drama.” He sighs. “I dunno what to do, guys. Do you think I should like, try to talk to him or something?”

She feels Neal’s frustration with her through his texts. She sent him four over the course of the day, upbeat and asking him what he was up to. He didn’t respond to her until the fourth one, the one in which she asked if he was mad at her or something?

He wrote back, told her he’s not mad at her. He’s just busy. He also tells her that he had to step away from what he was doing in order to respond to her message.

The text messages stare her straight in the face. The glowing screen makes her wince. She really, really hates that this has happened. It all feels foreign to her because she has these memories of other texts. When they were fifteen, they had three classes a day together, but they were exchanging like, forty text messages a day, from the moment they woke up to the moment they fell asleep at night. She remembers when he loved her.

She feels the prickles of anger — at herself — and humiliation — as she taps a message to Jhiqui and Doreah. There are a lot of exclamation points and emojis of martini glasses as she asks them if they wanna go out and get crazy tonight. The response is quick — which is something Neal sucks at — and Doreah tells Missandei that she’s down.

Her skirt is extra short and her top is extra low. Her hoop earrings are gold and shiny. Her hair is loose and bouncy. And her lips are maroon — almost purple — as she presses her mouth against some blondie named Asher, as she lets him grind against her ass as the dark walls throb around them. He kisses her open-mouthed and wetly, and he straight up tells her that he wants to fuck her. She asks him where he lives. He tells her off-campus. She briefly wonders if he’s going to murder her and drain her blood before leaving her in a ditch. She squelches down the thought, and leaves it up to chance. She waves bye to Jhiqui and Doreah, grasps Asher’s hand as he pulls her out of the club.

He’s almost too drunk to have sex with her, but they make it work. She’s vocal and loud. He calls her wild. It sounds kind of racial, and she’s like, whatever. It’s fine. She bites down on his lip, hard, to punish him. He calls her a bitch — in a sexy way — but she’s not crazy about that, either. When she comes, it’s unexpected and body-shaking. And she’s crying.

His first thought about her when he walks into the language center and finds her in a long-sleeved loose shirt and jeans — which is very different from her usual girly get-up — is that she looks nice. Normal. He clenches his jaw and squelches it down. When he nears, he sees that she’s not wearing make-up either. She smiles up at him tiredly, eyes bright and upbeat.

He can’t help but smile back. He consoles himself with the fact that it’s a very small smile.
Grey gets into a bar fight

She walks into Brienne’s arms and hugs her tightly, says, “Hey, babe!”

Brienne is one of those dinner-friends. That is, Brienne’s not really into dressing up and going out, not really into engaging in light banter and one-liners. Brie’s not super great in a group dynamic — tends to be too shy and too quiet. Brienne is the sort where Missandei has to ask for her schedule at least a week in advance, see which weekday she is free — because weekends, if Brienne has them off, typically are reserved for the boyfriend. And then, once Brienne and Missy nail down a day, they go to dinner together, sometimes with Sandor, sometimes by themselves, and they just talk about all sorts of stuff for hours.

Tonight, it’s a one-on-one, on a rare Friday night. Brienne tells her that the boyfriend is busy, at a nameday party or something. Missandei smiles, kind of remembering how she used to say these things to her friends. Nights Neal was busy, nights that she was free to hang with her friends were ‘ladies night,’ but now she just calls these nights ‘a day in the life.’

She and Brienne are poor college students, so really, the Cheesecake Factory is as nice as it gets. It’s their splurge. They split a plate of pasta and a huge salad. They also lightly debate over whether to go chocolate or fruity, when it comes to dessert. Brie is chocolate all the way. Missy wants a lemon curd or a raspberry drizzle or something sour and white. She makes an innocuous comment — that it’s kinda funny and ironic. And upon Brienne’s blank look, Missy clarifies. Says that it’s funny because of their skin colors. Their cheesecake choices are the opposite of their skin colors.

Brienne flushes. Then she smiles widely. Then she presses her large palms to her heated face and tells Missandei that she’s really nowhere near cool enough to laugh at those kind of comments, let alone make the jokes.

“Oh, I dunno,” Missandei says softly, grinning at Brienne over candlelight. “I think you’re the kind of person that can get away with it.”

“I don’t want to be the kind of person that gets away with it, though,” Brienne says softly.

Missy smiles. Because Brienne takes it all so seriously.

Brienne says, “We can get a tuxedo cheesecake? A marbled thing?”

Missy shakes her head. “No! I am not compromising! We’re not integrating! This isn’t a melting pot! Either-or, babe. Either-or.”

“White chocolate?”

“Oh my gosh.” Missandei makes a little puppy noise, a little whimper. “You’re so sweet.”

Brienne tilts her head, maybe trying to listen better with one ear, asks Missandei if people are not typically nice to her. Missandei turns up the wattage on her smile, tries to make it a joke, tells Brienne that sometimes people are jerks to her because she’s too nice to them. Brienne’s jaw drops comically.
— and then her blue eyes widen, bright behind the dim flickering light. She tells Missandei that’s totally a thing, totally a thing! Sometimes people hate it when other people are too nice! Brienne gleefully claps her hands together and says that’s actually an ongoing problem in her life. They have something sad in common! Yay!

Missandei’s smile slips off her face when Brienne starts to casually share things. Brienne talks about her upbringing, being really poor, having few changes of clothes. She talks about how her mother died when she was too young to remember, and how her dad raised her. She talks about how she was constantly bullied at school, her hand sweeping up and down her body — kind of trying to explain without explicitly having to explain.

Missandei quietly tells Brienne that she was born poor, too. Really poor. Her grandparents left Naath first and settled in Myr, to make their fortune, to try their luck elsewhere. The plan was to transfer the whole family. But after Missandei and her three brothers immigrated, their parents decided to stay behind. For reasons that have never been made clear. She was only eight years old. She hasn’t seen them since. The letters tapered off after the first few years. Her grandparents raised her. Her grandpa died two years ago — suddenly, from an aneurysm. Her youngest brother was killed almost five years ago. He was shot.

Brienne’s expression is very familiar to her. It’s one of pity.

“My two older brothers are very protective of me,” Missandei says, trying to steer the conversation back to happier things. “They are like, pretty crazy. They used to terrorize all of my dates in high school.”

He and D decide to get spectacularly stoned before Daven’s nameday party. D says they have to, if they’re going to stay at a party full of white people for more than an hour. He’s pulling a hot tray of shortbread cookies out of Grey’s tiny oven, a dirty green mitt over his hand. Drogo places the tray on a trivet and immediately nudges a cookie around with a bare finger from his other mitt-less hand. He growls when he discovers it’s still really hot.

Grey rolls his eyes, crosses his arms, grins easily. They’ve already smoked, and the valve on his anxiety has loosened. He tells D he worries they’re going to fall asleep because they’re gonna be so fucking chill. Drogo assures him that they won’t fall asleep — that he rarely falls asleep. Besides, this is a predominantly sativa blend.

He’s nauseous. The smell of Drogo’s weed cookies make him want to puke. He’s about twenty hours into his morphine withdrawal. He already shitted everything he’s eaten in a watery mess into the communal toilet. He stopped eating eight hours ago, to clear this system, to make sure he can get through Daven’s nameday without a hitch.

He often goes through withdrawals — he makes himself go through withdrawals. He’s come up with kids, run it with guys who burned too hotly and too brightly. They crash — hard. That is, they develop an immense addiction that take over their whole lives, ruins them. Grey’s determined not to be one of those guys. His foster mothers used to assume that he was just susceptible to the flu a lot, when he was in his teens.

Sometimes — often — all the time — he thinks about just quitting it. It’d save him a ton of money, for one.
All of this shit is shit he really doesn’t want to explain to Drogo though, so he catches the hot, golden baked good when it’s tossed to him. The cookie objectively tastes good enough, but it also just crumbles in his mouth. He chews around the dryness.

“Oh, man,” Drogo says. “Nailed it so hard. These are delicious!”

Grey laughs lightly around the bile in his throat. “Proud of you, man. They’re very good.” He thinks one cookie is an okay risk.

He feels pretty okay — just gone and blissfully blank. Nothing is amiss as he tucks his hand against her face and pulls it in close, as he kisses her in the dark corner next to an emergency exit. She purposely grinds her thigh against him. He feels his pulse jumping in his neck. She’s drunk and asking where he is, her palm feeling around the front of his pants, over the zipper. He sardonically looks to the ceiling for a brief moment.

The withdrawal, the weed, the one cookie on an empty stomach — all of it contributes to his uneasy blitzed-out state. It hits him forty-five minutes after they arrive at the restaurant. Grey has to keep a hand on some surface, a bar, Drogo’s arm, and now, the porcelain sink in the men’s room — to stay grounded and to keep his balance. He touches his fingers to his damp forehead, presses back his thoughts. He remembers this feeling — he’s felt like this before, when he was a kid.

It was a huge mistake for him to leave the house. He knows that now. He probably should go straight home, now. This is about to become a really bad trip.

He stumbles out the bathroom door. He stumbles right into Drogo, who looks at him in a really alert way. In a really concerned kind of way.

“What are you on?”

Grey shakes his head through the fog. He almost laughs. Because he’s actually not really on something. He’s coming off of something. That’s when it’s most apparent that he’s real fucked up — when he’s not on something. “I think I should go home, man,” he tells Drogo, tongue thick.

“I’ll take you home,” Drogo says, after a moment of thought. “Let’s get you some water first, though.”

Drogo’s hand is heavy on his shoulders as Drogo steers him through the thick crowd of people. Grey gets pushed into the smooth bar top. Drogo leans over and loudly asks for water from the bartender, trying to push his voice over the music. The place is illuminated in dim swirling red lights. It makes him dizzy.

Water is shoved into his hand. And when he moves too slowly for Drogo’s liking, water is shoved down his throat. He almost chokes on it, sputters instead, feeling it dribble down his chin. Drogo winces, apologizes, and then pats him on the back.
“You’re a fucking mess,” Drogo mutters.

Drogo’s telling him to check his pockets to make sure he has his house keys before they leave.

That’s when he is blindsided. He gets slammed backward into the bar. It almost knocks him down to the floor. Adrenaline immediately injects into his bloodstream and his cold sweat instantly throbs hot. This is familiar, too. He looks darkly at the white asshole who just shoved him, looks past the bitch and sees two other bitches flanking behind him. And he is not surprised. They are all the fucking same. They are all fucking aggressive and selfish. And they are takers.

“Hey, is there a problem here?” Drogo says, loosely holding out a hand in between Grey and the white douchebag.

“This motherfucker was creeping on my girl.”

Grey can see Drogo glance at him out of the corner of his eye, before he goes back to trying to de-escalate the situation with his words. But the white asshole has none of it. He keeps trying to bypass Drogo, keeps trying to spit in Grey’s face, keeps throwing these accusations, keeps painting this picture of him in a way that just so fucking typical. And him — well — sometimes he wants to prove them all right. Sometimes he wants to prove every shitty thing white people think of him true. He wants to show them that he is dangerous and predatory. That he is predisposed to violence. He can show them the abject depth of his fucking rage and his fucking violence and his fucking hatred.

The tight, taut string of tension snaps when that word gets dropped. Drogo goes from loose and calm to amped in no time at all, his fist whipping hard against the guy’s face. He falls to his knees, screaming — but the music is too loud. Grey’s fighting a bit of drug fog still, when he sees the glimmer of light reflecting off jagged glass. He closes his eyes. And the impact never comes. He’s not bleeding.

When he opens his eyes, he’s completely stunned when he sees Jaime, just repeatedly beating his bleeding fist into a guy who is lying on the ground. He has no idea when Jaime got here.

He shoves himself forward, hooks his elbows underneath Jaime’s armpits, yanks Jaime backwards, to a standing position. Blood gushing from the cut on Jaime’s hand seeps over the both of them, spreading into his shirt. Jaime is thrashing and yelling at him to let go. Grey shoves his hand underneath Jaime’s hat, knocking it off, gripping his hair tightly. He yanks Jaime’s head so that Grey has his ear.

He says, “Jaime. Jaime — you’re bleeding too much. You’re going to pass out.”

That has Jaime attention. He pauses, though his body is still rigid and Grey’s hand is still clenched in his hair. “I feel okay, though,” Jaime says. Grey can feel Jaime’s heart hammering against his chest.

A security guard escorts them all outside so they could all talk to the police. Addam and Daven are nervously standing in the restaurant, watching them through the window. Drogo keeps waving them off — trying to signal to them not to worry. Go back to the party. Everything’s under control.

Except it’s really not. He and Drogo would really fucking fail a drug test real hard right now. And then with that comes a whole host of fucking dire-ass consequences. Losing scholarships. Maybe jail. Getting kicked out of school. And Bieber would probably fail his own sobriety test, but he’s
fine. Nothing will happen to him. He will just go on to be a CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

Grey strips off his button-up and his undershirt at the same time, before separating them with a pull, as they wait for the cops to finish talking to those other assholes. Who will also probably be CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. His head is throbbing.

Drogo pulls out a knife and starts hacking at his shirt.

Jaime whoozily makes a comment — asks where the hell that knife came from and why Drogo didn’t like, take it out earlier. It’s a joke.

Drogo laughs under his breath. Mutters something about how they don’t wanna bring a knife to a fight. Unless someone brings a broken glass bottle. But by then, things had already gotten out of control.

The mention of the glass bottle sends Jaime into another anger spiral. He casts glances at the other guys and his words are almost indecipherable, as he bleeds through the bandage made of Grey’s t-shirt. His hand looks awful. He’s going to need to get stitches — at least. It’s hard to see through the blood.

Grey is still nauseous, but now, painfully sober. He gently reminds Jaime, again, to raise his arm up over his head, by pushing his elbow up.

Grey and D get to see white people shit go down for real, when the cops walk over and immediately start talking to Jaime. That part is predictable, in its own way. Jaime also invites some of the shit by being loud and abrasive at first, trying to explain the story, trying to explain how they were antagonized. The cops make it clear that their story isn’t matching up to the frat assholes.

And then Jaime gets quiet all of sudden. And then goes supernova white. He tells the cops that his name is Jaime Lannister. He tells them that his uncle is Kevan Lannister, County Executive. And then he pulls out his phone and awkwardly handles it with his left hand. He lifts the phone to his face, presumably to talk to his uncle — like Jaime is some Frankensteinian monster. But as the conversation continues, Drogo visibly relaxes.

They go to the emergency room in a cop car — and it’s actually not the first time he’s been in one of these — probably not Drogo’s first time, either. He’s still coming down. Drogo seems pretty alright — but extremely observant and alert, having to juggle the separate issues of his two friends, trying to keep focus on Jaime’s bleeding hand, focus off Grey’s sorry state. Grey keeps feeling Drogo’s eyes on him. They keep turning their attention back on Jaime and his alarming state — the drowsiness, the slurring.

Hospitals are weird and eerie. He doesn’t really get them. They feel too institutionalized. And even with both him and Drogo there — there are so many questions about Jaime that they can’t answer. They don’t even know who to call as his emergency contact — who he’d want there. His girlfriend, probably, but they don’t know her. They don’t have her number. Jaime is locked in a room somewhere, getting stitched up.

Jaime’s unnervingly blase about everything. He keeps telling them he’s gone through this before — with his hand.
They don’t even fucking know what that means.

They are told that Jaime’s hand is really fucked. The stitches are just a temporary fix — he’s actually going to need surgery because the glass sliced through tendons. At that, Drogo says, “Son of a bitch.”

At that, Jaime says, “That sounds about right. They should just take my stupid, worthless hand.”

After, they drop Jaime off in front of his apartment building. The guy is tired and looped up on pain meds. They don’t have the fucking heart to ask him for some cab money. Also, he really saved their asses by calling his uncle. They just try to help him to the door as he swats off their efforts. Drogo texts Addam, to tell Addam that Jaime is on his way up.

After the door closes behind Jaime, Drogo turns to Grey. He says, “You. You have so much explaining to do about what happened tonight.”

Turns out that in spite of appearances, Drogo is kind of pretty black and white about hard drugs. He gets upset and judgmental. Grey tells him the bare minimum, but he does tell him the truth. When Drogo asks why, all Grey can do is shrug. He says, “I don’t know.”

Drogo talks about loss — the way that people like them lose when shit like this, when poison like this, infects them. Grey tells Drogo that he can’t be a representative for everyone like them. He can’t bear that kind of responsibility. He’s just himself — he’s just some guy.

Drogo leaves his apartment with a bunch of things unsettled between them. Grey watches the door close. He didn’t have the ability to ask Drogo if that’s it, then. If he’s just a lost cause, then.

He emails her a few hours before they are slated to meet to tell her that he’s sick and he can’t make it to his lesson. She holds her phone in her hand, stares at it in her sociology lecture. Because she knows where he lives, she shows up at his door with chicken noodle soup that she bought at a grocery store. She shows up like a huge cliche. He’s in baggy mismatched sweats — top a faded gray-blue, bottom just heather gray — and looks totally surprised to see her. She smiles nervously — or bravely — she holds up the container of soup, trying to explain her presence with gestures.

He takes the soup and — seriously — is about to close the door on her because he must’ve assumed she is just here to drop it off. She raises her hand, presses it against his door to stop him, asks him if it’s okay if she visits with him for a little bit. She promises him she won’t stay long.

She can see his decision-making flicker over his face, as he thinks it over. In that time, she loses a lot of her confidence, a lot of her facade.

He moves out of her way, lets her enter. Her nose is hit with a medicinal smell. Her body feels warm from some memories, of the last time she was in his apartment. And there’s really nowhere to sit,
except for on his crumpled mess of a bed.

So she remains standing.

She looks down at her feet, sees a hot plate and a pot boiling away. She sees a bunch of brown herbs and spices underneath the steam. His own humidifier. This is familiar, too. Her family does this sort of thing when they get sick, too.

She doesn’t tell him that, though. She thinks it’d make him uncomfortable, all the things she already knows about him. After he puts the soup into his mini fridge, after he thanks her for it, he slowly eases himself back on his bed, in a sitting position, hunched over with his elbows on his knees, his hand smoothing over his face. He actually does look completely miserable and tired.

A bunch of stupid and girly feelings get pulled out of her. She wonders what it is about boys — physically strong boys who are momentarily rendered weak and helpless — that really just makes girls like her quiver.

She just wants to touch him.

She’s distracted as he quietly asks her how her day is going. She smiles and gives him a really short answer for his sake, which is, “It’s going good.” He asks her about her classes — are they all going well? Her smile widens, she laughs at him. He looks at her questioningly. She thinks that he is so hopelessly adorable. And really bad at small talk, at making conversation. It’s really funny how — without the structure of language to study, to talk around — he is really struggling to find things to say to her.

She keeps it superficial. “You keep a really clean house,” she says. And it’s true, everything is very, very neat and precise in his space. Spartan.

“Yeah,” he says, almost a little bit sheepishly. “I am a little obsessive about my stuff. Sometimes.”

She thinks about how he unloads his backpack before each lesson, with precision. She smiles to the floor, staring down at her black boots, in secret. “I’m kind of a slob,” she admits. “Just stuff like, everywhere.” She tries to keep communal areas like the kitchen and living room clean, but she mimes her bedroom for him. She kind of mimes explosions and a tornado, making sound effects and everything. Explosion of books. Explosion of clothes. Explosion of shoes, lots and lots of shoes. And then she pauses, kind of laughing. “I dunno where I was going with that. It got away from me.”

Her eyes meet his. She finds him watching her intently.
She and Neal met when they were children. Their first date was a school dance during freshman year of high school. They started having sex soon after the death of her brother. She had always called the timing coincidence, that one thing didn’t lead to the other. But, perhaps, the sequence of events led to a pattern between the two of them. She was so emotionally numb when they first started having sex — in the back seat of his mom’s Chrysler station wagon because his parents and her grandparents were conservative. They were so young that her orgasm wasn’t really a concept that either of them could apply a term to, for the longest time.

She actually had her very first orgasm when she was seventeen, two years after she started having sex with Neal. She achieved her first orgasm by herself, touching herself, at home in her bed after her grandparents had gone to sleep. She was the only one who was afforded her own bedroom, because she was the only girl.

The self-exploration came on the heels of salacious gossiping with Irina and Mollie in the lunchroom, with the boobs, who developed them in the sixth grade and had all the boys chasing her early on. Mollie said that Ahmed ate her out. Missy was a captive audience as naive Irina asked what that meant.

She tells him to stay inside of her for a little bit longer, but he’s already pulling out. He says, “Oops,” and carries on, getting off of her. Her skin tingles from the lack of warmth, from feeling a little bit bereft. Her arms automatically cross over her chest as he stands and pulls the condom off his softening penis, as he deposits it into his wastebin. He cleans himself up. He hands her a wad of bathroom tissue. And then he sits back down on the bed after pulling on his boxers.

He flicks the TV on and starts scanning for sports highlights.

They used to have one-sided fights about this, back when they were in love. She used to want for him to linger longer in the afterglow — she used to be unable to vocalize it to him. Certain explicitness revolving around sex made her uncomfortable. She wanted him to read her mind. She used to get pissed and start crying. He used to ask her what was wrong. She used to tell that he should know. It was years before his patience snapped, before he angrily told her that he really didn’t know.

She used to resent that he didn’t make her come. She used to get angry at him during sex. He used to ask her if he was bad at it. That was another thing she was never fully able to vocalize to him. Over time, after four years of being together, they just stopped having as much sex. She called it being in a rut. She tried to convince him it was normal. He said there was something wrong. He said he didn’t want to do it anymore.

Now — she doesn’t have the same claim on him. The old feelings still exist, still stir though. The sex is actually much better now that they are broken-up. She’s learned things from other guys. She sits up, naked, starts gathering her clothes.
He goes over to their place because his brain tells him to. He knows that if he wants to maintain his friendship with Jaime, this is one of the things he has to do, even though he doesn’t particularly want to deal with Jaime’s feelings, even though he doesn’t particularly understand what Jaime is going through. Grey’s never been broken up with before. He’s never really had a girlfriend before. Never had the inclination to. Never has been moved to. To be obligated to someone else is utterly pointless, a liability.

Addam opens the door and his whole body sags wearily. Grey enters the apartment and flips a chair around to sit in it backward, pressing his chin against the back. He casts a glance to Jaime’s close bedroom door. He says, “Can I go in there?”

Addam shrugs. “You can try. He could be sleeping. He’s been sleeping a lot.”

“It’s just a girl, man,” Grey says. “He needs to get over it.”

“Dude, spoken like someone who’s never had his heart destroyed by a girl,” Addam says. “It really sucks that she broke up with him after his hand got cut like that.”

Grey flicks his eyes to the ceiling. Addam tells him that Jaime is really taking the break-up super hard, and that Addam is worried about him. What if he never eats again? Grey mutters that he’ll eat. At some point, the body’s sense of self-preservation kicks in. Jaime’s body won’t let itself starve to death. Addam continues to verbally fuss over Jaime. Grey keeps thinking that it’s intrusive and that Addam would be hard for him to live with.

Then Grey tells Addam he’s going to see if Jaime is awake, because the prospect of dealing with an emotional Jaime seems better than dealing with an emotional Addam. He gets up off the chair and makes his way across the living room, down the hall, hoping really hard that Jaime is unconscious so that Grey can get credit for this shit, but have to bear none of the actual responsibility.

He lightly knocks on the door. He waits for a few seconds, hears nothing. And then he grasps the doorknob and pushes in.

Jaime’s blinds are drawn and his room is cast in shadows even though it is sunny outside. The room smells like someone has been hibernating in it, unshowered, for days.

He can tell Jaime is awake. He knows when people are fake-sleeping and when they are really asleep. He considers letting Jaime get away with it, but something stupid causes him to step into the room and close the door behind him.

One of his problems is that his lack of patience for other people’s problems is derived from his own experiences. His bar for shit is very low because of what he has known. He generally finds people to be weak when it comes to dealing with their emotions. He generally finds people to be fragile when it comes to hardship. He was made to slit the throat of his family pet, a dog named Momo that he loved, when he was eight years old. He was told it’d make him a man.

Yet, he inexplicably feels bad for Jaime.

“Bieber,” he says. “How long are you gonna hole up here?”

“Forever until I die,” Jaime mutters, rolling over, throwing his arm over his face. His bandaged hand hides his eyes from Grey’s gaze.

“Spoken like the champ you are,” Grey says. He sighs. “Is this the point when I tell you there are other fish in the sea?”
“God,” Jaime groans. “Shut up.”

He pauses. Then he says, “Jaime, you’ll be okay —”

“Seriously,” Jaime interjects. “You can go now.”

Grey takes steps forward, making his way to the bed. “Oh now, don’t be like that,” he says, sitting on the mattress, his back facing Jaime. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Do you want to be distracted?”

“No.”

Grey’s not good at this sort of thing — he wasn’t made to comfort people in this way. He is painfully out of touch with the sort of things that normal people care about. His numbness is sometimes an asset, sometimes a handicap.

“Can I just sit here for a while, then?”

Jaime hesitates. And then after a moment, he says, “Okay.”

Missandei had to take two buses and awkwardly introduce herself to Brienne’s stepmom and dad on their doorstep, assure them that she’s not there to tell them about religion or to sell them anything. It’s funny. She wonders when she became a person that doesn’t believe or listen to other people when they tell her no. Brienne said she didn’t need or want company. To Missandei’s ears, she heard: Oh, I definitely need for you to come over.

After Missandei lightly knocks and pushes the door open, she sees Brienne’s sitting on her bed, with her laptop in front of her, surrounded by used tissues, her nose bright red.

Brienne lower lip quivers, and she immediately starts crying when she sees Missy.

“Oh, babe,” Missandei says, crossing the distance quickly, holding her arms out. She squeezes Brienne, holding on tightly as Brienne’s shoulders shake. “It’s okay. It’s okay. Let it out.”

The sun is still rising. Drogo’s last to get to the docks. Grey’s loitering around with Addam and Daven, pulling off his track pants to get some air on his legs when Drogo walks up to them, a duffle bag slung over his shoulder. Grey can see his breath on every exhale. The perimeter of the lake is partially frozen over, but the middle is still slick — still and smooth as glass. The cold bites his skin.

He takes off his gloves and shoves them in his bag along with his pants, bending over. He sees and feels Drogo feet walk over, feels Drogo pat him on him on the back, over the center of his spine before Drogo palms his head, squeezing lightly.
He straightens. Walks over the the guys and deposits the bag right inside the door of the clubhouse. Then his feet hit the dock.

Missandei wakes up with a start, body tense because she immediately realizes she’s in a strange bed. Her neck and back are sore, and she blearily realizes all of her clothes are still on. She turns her head and sees Brienne beside her, sleeping, chest steadily rising and falling. It’s Sunday morning and she can hear people — Brienne’s parents — puttering around in the next room. She glances at the alarm clock on Brienne’s dresser. Six.

Missy notices that they fell asleep on top of the blankets. She gingerly eases her body into a sitting position and grabs the light knitted throw at the foot of Brienne’s bed. She unfolds it and arranges it on top of both of them, careful to cover Brienne’s feet.

Missandei lies back down, next to Brienne on the small bed. She closes her eyes, pulls at the edge of the blanket a bit, and then evens her breathing.

He exhales, sitting on Addam’s and Jaime’s couch with Drogo, letting the smoke cloud envelope his head, holding up the lighter to the ceiling, bopping it along to the steady beat of old-school jams, bouncing his body along, swaying in unison with Drogo, singing along to Slim, passing verses back and forth.

“God, you guys are so cool. Do you guys like, practice this shit with each other? Or this is natural?” Addam slurs sloppily. “God, you guys can sing and dance, I can tell. I bet you can rap, too.”

Grey points to Addam with the lighter “Vaguely racist,” he says. “But it’s complimentary — and true — so I’ll allow it. Oh shit, it’s the bridge.” He points to the ceiling before throwing it to Drogo, who picks it up, smoothly belting it out as Addam taps his phone and temporarily increases the volume.

It’s been weeks and Jaime’s still holed up in his room, post-surgery on his hand. Jaime’s still a sad-sack of a human being, bent on sleeping away his depression. Daven has remarked that it seems callous, that they are all sitting a few feet away in the living room smoking weed and bouncing along to break-up songs to get inspiration on how to help cheer Jaime up.

Grey slouches further in his seat on the couch, props a leg against the edge of the coffee table. He tips his head back and says, “What if we all go on a trip somewhere? Get him out of the house?”

“Nah, man,” Drogo says. “With our work schedules, we’d have to plan like, a month in advance to both get the same weekend off. By then, who knows what state he’ll be in.”

“Ugh, I dunno why you guys work,” Daven says.

“To eat. To pay rent. To live,” Grey says. He lolls his head over and looks to Addam, winks at him through the throbbing weed-induced cloud in his head. “White people, amirite?”

Addam kind of shrugs it off, which is disappointing. It makes Grey think that if Jaime wasn’t
rendered completely useless by his emotions, he’d be out here right now, and they’d all be cracking these stupid jokes together.

Addam brings up Jaime’s dad — said that his dad came and visited a couple days ago. Dude was like, a scary and austere motherfucker. Addam says that Jaime and his dad talked in his room for a while and then his dad left. Jaime wouldn’t tell Addam much of what he and his dad talked about, but Addam does know that there was an ultimatum having to do with money — Addam grins wryly, says that ultimatums are the best. Addam says Jaime is cut off, no more money, if he doesn’t do what his dad says and move back home to King’s Landing for the rest of the quarter.

“I think Jaime’s gonna be stubborn about it,” Addam says.

Drogo snorts. “No shit he’s going to be stubborn about it, that dumbass.”

Daven suddenly slaps his knee. “Guys!” he says. “Guys! Guys! Guys! I have the best idea!”

Her heart becomes swollen the moment she looks at the caller ID on her ringing, vibrating phone. Her heart just clenches up tightly, pulling all the strings in her chest into its vortex.

“Hey! What’s up!”

There’s a pause on the other end. The time allows her to get a little bit anxious, a little bit nervous. It allows her to anticipate a little bit.

His voice is low and quiet — she has to press the phone even closer to her ear to hear him — he asks her if he caught her at a good time. He has a quick question for her.

A really stupid, stupid, stupid girly subconscious part of her automatically jumps to romantic gestures. In a microsecond, she allows herself to imagine that he’s calling to ask her to dinner. And she also immediately knows that this is completely not the reason why he’s calling.

“I have time! What do you need?”

He tells her that he needs to buy left-handed scissors right away — where would he find them?

She blinks, walking down the sidewalk, carefully stepping over tree roots. She realizes that he has noticed that she’s left-handed, from their lessons. She asks him what he needs these scissors for? Crafts? Because if he needs them for crafts, she has a few pairs that he can actually borrow. He kind of chuckles in her ear. The sound kind of zips right up her spine. He tells her that it’s not for crafts. He tells her it’s for hair, which is actually not any stranger than crafts.

She tells him that he’d have to go to a beauty supply store. She tells him the cross streets. They have an assortment of scissors there and one of them is bound to be left-handed. She asks him where he is — because she’s actually like, maybe five blocks away from the beauty supply store. She can get them for him and meet him somewhere?

He tells her he’s not too far away, either. He can go grab the scissors.

“I can meet you there?” she says.
She trails behind him, her heeled boots clicking against the ground as they navigate in between the shelves to where the scissors are hung. She examines a display of nail polish as he stoops down slightly to read the packaging on the all of the scissors.

“What do you need lefty hairdressing scissors for, anyway?” she says, pulling out a lime green polish bottle, holding it up to the light.

“For cutting hair.”

She bites down on a smile, putting the polish back into its place, picking out an opaque pink one instead. She tries not to stare too much at him. But he looks good. He looks really good. He’s all bundled up in winterwear, the hood of his zip-up still over his head, his gloves sticking out of the pockets of his black nylon jacket. His sneakers, loosely tied, squeak against the linoleum floor.

“Oh my God,” he says, sliding out a metal pair of scissors that reflect light. “Why the hell are these double the price of all the other scissors?”

“Welcome to my world,” she says. “Where you get seated at the end of the table at dinner parties.”

His laugh is really just a short huff. But she’s taking it as a win. The pink bottle of nail polish is clutched tightly in her fist as she follows him to the cash register. She’s staring at the back of his head, kind of lost in thought — those thoughts are mostly that she is such an idiot, such a dummy — and he is so cute it’s unreal — that she doesn’t notice right away, when he swivels his head around and holds out his hand.

She stares at it blankly.

“Can I get that for you?” he repeats, eyeing the nail polish in her fist.

“Oh no!” she says quickly, aware that the cashier is waiting for them to decide. “You don’t have to! It’s pricey for nail polish.”

The corner of his mouth tilts up into just the barest of smiles. And then he reaches out and snatches the tiny pink bottle from her hand. He pulls his wallet out of his back pocket, turns back to the cashier. Missandei’s face immediately tingles, it’s immediately aflame.

And to his back, she grins to herself. She says, “Thank you.”

They all stop talking when they hear Jaime’s bedroom door open, when they hear his footsteps pad out to the living room, when they see him staring at them, blinking through his medicated haze. He looks physically weak and also a little pale. “Hi,” he says to them, looking confused. “What’s with the razors? And the scissors?”

“Dude, we have a surprise for you,” Daven says. “It is going to make your day.”
“Nah, dude,” Addam says. “It’s gonna make his life!”

Honestly, when Daven came up with this shit, Grey thought it was really brilliant. It’s brilliant because Drogo, Addam, and Daven are so hairy. And he’s comparatively hairless. His head is shaved, his face is shaved. He likes his relative lack of investment in this, relative to the other guys. “I’m just here for moral support,” he tells Jaime, who still looks confused. “And to also give you tips. Some guidance.”

“How? What’s going on?”

Addam points to Daven’s long beard. “You know how he’s been growing this shit out since forever? And you know how you always make fun of him for looking like fucking Billy Gibbons?”

“Yeah?”

“He’s letting you shave it all off.”

Daven nods. “Yep.”

“And you know how you make fun of our hair and call it too try-hard?” Addam gestures between him and Drogo. “I mean, I still completely fucking disagree, but do you remember saying these things to us, man?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, let’s fucking take it all off, man.”

Jaime looks stunned. “Guys —”

Grey picks up the lefty metal scissors from the table, and he walks forward with it, reaching for Jaime’s uninjured hand, pressing the scissors into his palm. “I bought left-handed scissors for you,” Grey says. “They were more expensive than regular scissors. What the fuck is up with that? Racist.” Jaime still looks so shell-shocked that it makes Grey want to laugh. He lifts his hand and lightly pats Jaime’s face a couple of times before his hand curls up, palms Jaime’s warm head. He shakes it, half-encased in his arm tightly. He leans forward, touching their foreheads together.

Jaime’s face drops into a shaky frown, as Grey watches. Jaime says, “Guys, you don’t have to. It’s — I’m like —”

“Oh God,” Drogo says from the table. “Just do it! I want a haircut, man.”

When Jaime finally relents, he lets out a high-pitched squeal, like he personally feels the impending death of each and every individual hair on their heads. Jaime takes the scissors and awkwardly makes the first cut across Daven’s beard as Addam holds it taut for him.

Afterward, Addam, Daven, and Drogo look like three stoned variations on the same theme. Grey makes them sit on the couch together, makes them model for him as he snaps photos on his phone. Addam wonders out loud if there’s something in his closet — something they can change into so that they are matchy-matchy in the photos — that would be hilarious.

Without all of the hair on Daven’s face, he is virtually unrecognizable. He looks likes a mix between a clean-cut stockbroker, Mr. Clean, and a skinhead. It’s not a look any of them are particularly comfortable with. Daven grumbles that his face feels cold. He grumbles that he feels naked and exposed.
Drogo looks fine. He wears the look the most naturally, of the three of them. He declares that he looks fucking amazing, always. Addam slams a throw pillow into his face. Jaime is curled up in an armchair, loopy from his pain meds, face red from cracking up.
End of the school year

His lungs burn with his screams. His small little boy hands clutch onto the fabric of his mother’s clothing in a vice grip. His entire body shakes, trembles with his fear. He’s shouting at all of them that he doesn’t want to go. He’s screaming no. He’s tries to hold onto her. Her hands come down his wrists. He loosens his grip in reflex, in relief, maybe. He believes that the outcome will be different.

She wrenches his hands off of her. He’s pulled backward — yanked away from her. And the shout is stuck in his throat as he stares at her in her eyes. The betrayal is stuck in him, arrested in his neck.

Grey’s eyes snap open, to pitch black. He’s an adult, and he’s lying in bed in his apartment. His heart is pounding. He’s unbearably hot. His sheets are damp with sweat. His limbs are shaky. His throat is parched. And the sides of his face are wet. He rarely cries — and never when he is conscious and awake. Much like a lot of things about him — crying is involuntary. He touches his temple with his right hand. He breathes through his hammering pulse.

He pushes himself into sitting position, then shoves his palms against his eye sockets, pushing back the burn.

He strips off his wet shirt, balls it up in vibrating hands. He stands up to get a glass of water for his parched throat. It’s just about impossible for him to get back to sleep again after that. He just lies down on his damp bed and stares into darkness for hours as his anxiety thrums in his veins.

She watches him laugh into his fist. His head is angled back a little bit, his throat exposed to her eyes, and his body bounces up and down. His laugh is deep and rumbly — manly. Tiny pricks of sweat break out against her skin. A rotary fan whirs on in the background. The sunlight pours in between the slats on the blinds. Her own mouth curves into a smile as she watches him struggle to regain his composure.

Then, finally, in Summer Tongue, in his dialect and accent, he haltingly breaks it down into punchy short phrases. He tells her that over the weekend. He sat in a boat. It moved. Fast. Other people were there. There was a contest — a race. He won. His teacher was happy.

She grins. With greater fluency, she congratulates him. She tells him she’s glad the regatta went well. She says she noted that it was sunny over the weekend. Did that help?

He says yes, it helped.

At the end of the lesson, their last lesson together, he gathers up his books and stacks them before he slides them into his backpack. She watches him, with her chin cupped in her hand. She doesn’t know what she expects, really, because all she did was tutor him for two hours every week for nine months.

She wants his undying adoration and devotion. Obviously.
Instead of making things awkward by blurting this out — he usually doesn’t give her much indication that he gets her sarcasm — she smoothly tells him the school year has kind of flown by. It felt like just yesterday that they were just sitting down for their first lesson.

He takes a moment to think about it. Then in Summer Tongue, he tells her that the school year went by just about as fast as he thought it would.

The things she knows about him are sparse and fragmented because he is stingy with information about himself. The things he knows about her are minimal, also. Because he never asks. She realizes that such a dynamic should turn her off, should make her realize the extent of his apathy and disinterest.

Instead, she already feels a sense of loss. She hasn’t had much time to analyze it — she kind of doesn’t want to because she’s afraid of what she might realize about herself — that she’s so attracted to someone so emotionally unavailable.

She’s already asked him about his summer plans. He told her he’s going to work. Maybe take a trip somewhere. Maybe not. He shrugged. And then he didn’t reciprocate and ask the same of her. So she volunteered the information, told him she will be going home to Myr, maybe pick up a seasonal retail job somewhere there to make a little money in the summer.

She’s already asked if he’s going to continue Summer Tongue next year, because he’s getting good at it. She tries not to sound too over-eager about it because she’s pretty sure that the more excited she feels about things, the less likely the very things she’s excited about will come to pass.

He said he might study another year of language, but his requirements for graduation are already fulfilled so he doesn’t have to. She was already needy, already told him that, well, if he takes it again, he should feel free to continue to hit her up for help, or just to get some practice in.

After all the topics she can think of have been exhausted, all that is left is to say goodbye. She stands up. He swings his backpack over his shoulders, adjusts his straps. She’s debating whether or not to walk around the table and try to hug him when he makes the decision for both of them by pushing his hand out toward her.

He says, “Well, thanks. I learned a lot. You’re a good teacher.”

She takes his warm hand, squeezes it before she shakes it. “You’re welcome. It was a lot of fun. And it was great getting to know you.”

He gives her a quick smile before he takes his hand back, before he turns and walks out of the room.

She watches him leave. Then she tells herself to mentally kiss that hottie goodbye.

When Jaime tells them all he can do is make sandwiches, boil pasta, and open a jar of sauce — Drogo becomes very invested in giving the guy a crash-course in being poor and in food preparation. Drogo makes Grey tag along to the cooking lessons when he’s not working because — well, Drogo didn’t have a good reason. He just told Grey to show up at Jaime’s place. That heavy-handed blunt kind of leadership is quintessentially very Drogo. Grey has learned that if there is something he’s uncomfortable with, it’s up to him to speak up. Otherwise, Drogo will just steamroll over him.

Grey’s mostly quiet during the lessons, sitting on the counter or leaning against the fridge, out of the
way. Drogo leans over to catch Jaime’s attention, tells him that he’s holding the knife all wrong — and dangerously. He tells Jaime to choke up on the handle and shift the weight forward. Drogo is an impatient and demanding teacher. It happens to work for Jaime, who is stubbornly motivated by negative reinforcement.

Jaime sniffs, his eyes weeping from the onion, his hand slightly steadier with the knife as he continues dicing. He mutters that it burns. These days, Jaime is really quiet and unfun. He’s also very busy, either at school for summer quarter or at work at the pharmacy. He shuns parties. Heartbreak is something he doesn’t talk about with them. Jaime allows himself a beer — a single beer on occasion. The constant self-denial is something that Drogo doesn’t quite understand. He said so himself, when he and Grey are by themselves.

After dinner, after half of the lentil soup is gone, Drogo rolls a few apples and a paring knife across the kitchen table, toward Grey. He smirks to Jaime, tells the guy that Grey has some serious knife skills. Grey mutely picks up a tart green apple and pulls off the sticker with his fingertips before tucking the knife in the heel of his hand. He quickly peels the apple in one long, thin spiral.

“How did you get so good at that?” Jaime asks.

Grey says, “Repetition.”

She’s home in Myr for the summer. It’s not a trip she gets to make often — maybe once a year if they are lucky, if they have enough money saved up. When it was decided that she’d go to college across the sea, they planned for her to visit more often — home during summers, home during holidays, home during breaks. But then her grandpa died, and his pension became something that was very difficult for her grandma to navigate due to language barrier.

Missandei tries to pack in a lot of productivity during her home visits. She cleans the house, makes her grandma go to the doctor, makes various calls, checks finances, checks maintenance on the house, chastises her brothers for not checking in on grandma more often.

Missy ties a scarf around her head to keep her hair off her face and away from flames. She runs up to the stove, beating her grandma to the heavy pot. Her grandma fusses over her, but Missandei ignores all the words of caution and grunts under the hot weight of the metal vessel. Her bare feet grip the smooth tile floor underneath as she heaves the pot into the sink. Steam hits her face, obscures her vision, as she carefully tips the hot water down the drain.

Her grandma’s strong hands reach in to retrieve the hot gourds, clawing them into a colander. Her grandfather ate meat when he was alive, but he dictated that he would be a vegetarian in the afterlife. Nowadays, they put vegetable and grain food offerings at his altar.

There’s a bang of activity when her brother Mossador and his children burst through the front door. She’s nearly tipped over by a running eight year old. She grabs onto her nephew’s back to keep upright as he squeezes her middle tightly.

She laughs. She says, “Heyo, kiddo. Look how big you are!”

Hassan flashes her a dimpled smile, suddenly gets a little bashful, and says, “Dad says I’m gonna be taller than him.”
“I said probably,” Mossador interjects.

Mossador touches her shoulder, calls her little sister, asks her how school is going. He married young, at 17, as is fairly normal in their culture. It was through his advocacy and support with their grandparents that Missy wasn’t married off at that age, too.

Predictably, his smile brightens when she tells him that school is going very well. He touches her head, pats it, as she stoops to lay down a vinyl sheet, as bowls of porridge and a plate of a chopped up chewy old hen is placed in the center. They eat dinner on the floor.

Grey doesn’t see the slap over the noise of the party so much as he hears Addam’s loud reaction, his “Oh, snap!” followed by an evil drunken cackle. The couch jiggles and rattles and Addam’s heavy body slams down onto it, seated next to Grey. Drogo walks up to them, the front of his purple tank dripping wet, smelling of beer.

“Let’s go,” Drogo says angrily, touching his face where he had been slapped. It’s too dark to see any marks. He pulls his wet shirt off his body, frowning as he looks down at it.

“Bro,” Addam says, giggling. “What did you do to piss off that girl?”

“Not important.” Drogo waves his hand, which means it could be one of a variety of things with the same theme — Drogo forgot her name, her face, didn’t call her, ghosted her. “Let’s go,” Drogo repeats.

“But I’m not ready to go yet,” Addam says, his eyes drifting around the room before glancing at the imaginary watch on his wrist. “It’s still early,” he says.

“Dovoeddi,” Drogo says patiently, staring down at Grey. “You coming?”

Grey touches his mouth to the lip of the brown beer bottle. A few thoughts flit through his brain — nothing huge or notable. But he takes his time. He casts his eyes up to his friend. And after a moment of consideration, he says, “I’m good. I’m gonna stay.”

Drogo snorts and rolls his eyes before he turns and quietly leaves the house.

Next to him, Addam lets out a low whistle. He thumps Grey on the shoulder with his sweaty palm. He says, “He is maaad at us.”

She clamps her mouth shut and stifles her yawn as Kiki and the rest of them continue to chat some more about the people they all know — some names are familiar to Missandei, some are new. The conversation spins around in circles, sometimes about what someone said the other weekend, sometimes about what someone did the other night. Missy leans back and props her bare arm against the slick back of the plastic chair. She looks up, checks the score. She wonders if she can get away with leaving after this game is done.
When she first arrived at the bowling alley, teetering on her white wedges — she took them out for nostalgia’s sake — the girls squealed. They ordered nachos, diet sodas, and then spent a few minutes complimenting each other’s clothes before they went to the counter to rent shoes. Then the DJ came out and the lights turned off and the strobe lights started spinning. Cosmic bowling. She and the girls used to go all the time on weekends.

Once settled, conversation generally dwelled on old times, on the stuff that happened in high school. Nearly all of her friends in high school ended up in trade schools — mostly beauty stuff, some massage therapy. Missy has withheld stuff about her college experience because it sounds stupidly elitist and snobby. As a consequence, she’s been ridiculously serious and her ability to make conversation is completely dead.

“Your turn, boo!” Sonya shouts over the music.

Missandei stands up. “Okay, get ready to be decimated. By my bowling skills.” Even her trash-talk is really lackluster. And it doesn’t really matter. She’s in last place and she’s thirty points behind.

She picks up ten-pound ball. Then she awkwardly shuffles up to the edge of the lane. And just about throws the ball overhand. It lands on the ground with a loud, audible thump. She cringes.

“Baby, you don’t have to leave,” she says as he laces up his shoes. He thinks her name is Kat. She leans forward in her bed — still naked and unashamed — touches his bare back with her hand. She tells him, “It happens to everybody. You’ve had a lot to drink tonight. We didn’t have to stop.”

Grey snatches up his shirt from the floor, pulls it on over his head. Then he stands up — her bed creaks — and he quickly buttons and zips up his pants. “I’ll call you later?” he says. And that’s a lie. He never calls later.

This one knows though. There’s a look in her eyes as she brings her knees up to her face, as she props up her chin. She says, “Later.”

She’s back at university two weeks before the new school year starts. The first person she seeks out — and she’s not proud of this — is Neal. He didn’t go home for the summer. He asked her to give his mother a hug for him, and she did when she visited his parents. She texts him, tells him she’s back, asks him if he’d be interested in meeting up. He suggests coffee. His response is fast, almost immediate. She already knows it’s not — but the girly part of her thinks it’s some sort of sign.

When she sees him again after two months of absence, her heart throbs in her chest. She’s a little shy as she offers to buy him his coffee. He grins — he has stubble now — tells her sure.

And then, over a macchiato and a mocha, he says, “I have something to tell you.”

She is immediately tense.

For good reason, because he says, “I’ve been seeing somebody. It’s getting serious. So I wanted to
tell you because — because we can’t keep doing what we’ve been doing.”

She’s numb — utterly numb. Her face feels thick and blank as she asks him how long. She asks him because she can’t fathom that a two-month relationship is that serious. Neal hesitates. And then he tells her six months.

Every part of her wants to scream at him — because she’s been operating under a certain belief about him and her. She doesn’t though. She just wades through the rest of coffee as he obliviously tells her about his girlfriend. She just sits there with disbelief heavy in her gut.

Brienne stares pensively at the ocean wearing a utilitarian one-piece swimsuit, her arms crossed over her chest. And then she turns to Missy, in a black bikini, and Brienne says, “Did you know that every humiliating moment of my life contains at least a little bit of nudity?”


Brienne’s laugh is hollow. “Yeah right.”

The water is warm splashing around her thighs. The beach is crammed full of people because everyone knows the weather is about to turn cold, so everyone is taking advantage of the very last bits of summer.

Brienne didn’t particularly want to do a beach day, said she didn’t feel like getting sunburnt, but Missy insisted that Brienne take a short break from her depressed boy-induced funk for a bit.

They wade further. Missandei has to start treading water a lot sooner than Brienne does.

They alternate between floating on their backs silently and treading water facing each other, chatting about TV shows, upcoming courses, and sometimes — relationships and boys. Brienne has a lot of stuff to get off her chest, stuff saved up over the summer. She says Sandor is not very good at girl-talk. Missandei mostly keeps it casual, says she’s playing the field.

Brienne is an excellent swimmer. Missandei feels secure that if she were to suddenly start drowning, Brienne can save her.

She already expected him because his name is on her list.

Nonetheless, when he walks into the language center, her wide smile nearly breaks her face.


He cuts eye contact and mostly smiles to the table. “I am back,” he says.
Missy's nameday party

She doesn’t really get much of an opportunity to verbally work out her feelings about Neal with her friends. Her silent resilience is something shaped and practiced, first by the sudden death of her brother, then the sudden death of her grandfather — and now, by her preoccupation over the rate in which her grandmother is aging. She often tells herself that the things that cause her stress are petty and stupid. She finds it’s fairly easy to plaster a smile on her face and project a bright and positive disposition. She’s a firm believer in faking it ‘til she makes it.

Also, ever since Jhiqui gave up on her long-distance relationship with her high school boyfriend and ever since Doreah became drunk on the power of being a pretty girl with a Tinder profile — both have been on this girl-power train pretty fiercely. Their concept of this is fairly rigid and fairly informed by the stack of self-help books next to Jhiqui’s nightstand. It’s about once a week that an email or tweet or text comes in on Missandei’s phone from her roommate, telling her to “read this!” The articles are usually about how to build and hone independence and a sense of empowerment through self-love.

It’s not that Missandei is against any of that. It all sounds like good stuff. It’s just that Jhiqui and Doreah have become militant. The subject of Neal has long been something that they merely put up with. They’ve expressed that they think that he’s not worth the thought that Missandei gives him, finding the concept of a girl so needy for a boy so distasteful and unfeminist. Missy is long past defending him because she’s tired of defending her choices and her feelings.

When Missandei gets home, Jhiqui is studying on the couch, twirling a highlighter in her hand, a thick art history book splayed open on her lap. Missy asks Jhiqui if she wants to take a break and grab a pizza or something. Jhiqui snaps her book shut and says she’s down, just give her time to shower and get ready. Missandei’s stomach rumbles in response, because it knows that Jhiqui refuses to leave the apartment without full makeup on. It’ll be at least an hour before they leave.

She says sure, she can wait. She flops down on the couch with her shoes still on, turning on her phone to scroll through her Facebook feed.

She kind of laughs uneasily to cover up the awkwardness she feels when she slides Grey the homemade invitation after their language lesson. She’s been passing out these cards left and right to all sorts of friends and acquaintances, without discrimination. But the thing is, she and Grey have never really seen each other socially before. The only other times they’ve communicated or seen each other outside of tutoring sessions were associated with some sort of mission. There was the time he needed help navigating a beauty supply store. There was the other time she got insanely plastered and made the really stupid decision to try and hook up with him — and then fell flat on her face and stuff.

She supposes that moment — or, more specifically, the mortifying morning after — is the reason why her heart is pounding in her throat.
The invitation is this pink and black monstrosity that Jhiqui painstakingly glued glitter onto by the fistfull. Missandei supposes that this is what she gets, for shrugging and saying that she’s up for whatever, when her friends asked her what she wanted to do for her 21st nameday. She supposes that her problem is that she’s soft-hearted and overly sentimental, because when presented with a gruesomely girly prototype of the invitations and an explanation on the theme — old-timey speakeasy — maybe just another excuse for Jhiqui and Doreah to glue more dyed feathers to cardstock.

She didn’t have the balls to tell the girls that the making the party themed and enforcing it seems a tad overdone. So Missandei just sort of went with it, a smile on her face. It wasn’t too hard — she was very touched.

She actually gulps when she sees his eyes roving over all of the little details on the card, his soft breathing fluttering the feathers a little bit. She feels her cheeks heating up. And it’s like watching a slow-motion wreck, with pieces of debris flying out and hitting her in the face, forcing her to partially close her eyes, guard herself from the carnage.

She’s sure that the person that the invitation projects isn’t really her. She’s aware that she seems to care about what he thinks — enough that she spent long minutes in front of the full-length mirror that hangs from her closet door, trying to figure out what to wear to the lesson.

He lets out a soft sigh, and then his eyes swoop up. She sees the muscles in his jaw twitch, and his eyes are amused. “Did you make this?” he asks delicately, turning the card over in his hands to look at the back.

Upon her expression — which is maybe a grimace — he bursts out laughing.

“Someone worked hard on that!” she says, careful to not rag on the invitation too hard. “It’s rude to laugh.”

“I know! I’m sorry!” His laughter winds down as he flips the card over again, rereading it. Then he sets it face up next to his language exercise book.

Since she’s one of the first of her friend-group to turn 21, Jhiqui and Doreah decided to hold the party in the bottom floor of Doreah’s rich friend’s older brother’s townhome. The brother is apparently out of town for work that week — that is why they picked the date they did — and he said that they could use his pad as long as they don’t mess anything up, and they clean up after themselves and stuff.

Doreah is so cute and friendly and such a flirt that she has this extensive network of guys who will do stuff for her. A lot of the times, Doreah takes advantage of older sorta-dorky guys with a disposable income. She goes to clubs with them. They pay for bottle service, probably hoping she’ll bring some pretty friends and they’ll get laid.

Missy honestly feels awkward inviting a bunch of people to some guy’s house. She honestly just wanted something a little more low-key because for her, this isn’t really a rite of passage. She’s been using a fake ID for a couple of years without incident.

She clears her throat. “So, can you come?”

“I don’t know,” Grey says, looking straight at her. “I might be scheduled to work that night. I won’t know until the week before.”

“Can you request the day off?”
He lightly shrugs. “I like to save requests for when I really need them.”

“What’s more important than my nameday?” She lowers her voice and bats her lashes — and it’s supposed to be sarcastic and sound a little bit coy, really to hide that she’s kind of wounded at his quick, succinct responses and general disinterest.

“Race days,” he says. “Sometimes I need to switch with someone because of crew.”

She realizes that her mouth is hanging open, and she promptly shuts it, pulling her lips between her teeth, spreading around remnants of her minty chapstick. “Okay. Well, come if you can, if you feel like it. But no pressure.” She shrugs. “It’s no big deal.”

He mirrors her, also shrugging before he abruptly stands up and starts packing his books and notebook away. She watches him as he mutely picks up his phone and holds it landscape style, over the invitation. She hears the light snap as he takes a picture of it, as he pockets his phone and slides the invitation back to her across the table.

He notices her questioning look. He says, “I don’t need to keep it. I have the information. You can give that to someone else.”

“O-kay,” she says slowly. “Thanks?”

He gives her a small wave. “Later.”

Drogo and Jaime start piggybacking on Grey’s planned trip to the Summer Isles. He’s not entirely sure they’re serious about it, but the conversation first happens at practice — on land. They’re doing laps on the track, the air cold enough that they are constantly running into the white clouds of their breathing. The conversation actually starts because Drogo starts bitching about how cold it’s been. He says he’s not made for such coldness — an allusion to his skin color.

The idea of taking a trip together originally came about in the thick of Jaime’s depression, when they were brainstorming ways to cheer that guy the hell up. That trip never materialized — getting all of their schedules to sync up proved to be difficult, what with Jaime’s ridiculous life of studying and working and Daven’s general flightiness and inability to commit to events that go past a month out.

Grey had told Drogo about his trip casually — but he kind of assumed that it was in confidence. He will cop to the fact that he wasn’t very explicit about it. It’s not like he told Drogo it was a secret trip. He just didn’t think that Drogo would run to Jaime and tell him about it. Grey didn’t think that Jaime would care — at least not beyond just a few polite inquiries. He didn’t think that they’d want to come along — that they’d end up kind of inviting themselves.

“When are flights the cheapest?” Drogo asks.

“I can look during class later and email you guys about noon?” Jaime says.


Jaime grins. “You betcha.”

Grey reaches up, pulls the wool cap off of his head because it’s getting too hot actually. He stuffs the
hat into his jacket pocket and resists doing something passive-aggressive, like picking up the pace and breaking off — like rolling his eyes and telling them to just go get a room already.

There’s something about Brienne that compels her to act like an adult. She likes to think of it as Brienne being an inspiration to her, rather than what Jhiqui sometimes lamely snarks about, which is Brienne is boring. Missandei doesn’t really agree there. She can talk to Brienne for hours in ways that she can’t with Jhiqui and Doreah. Sometimes the nature of friendship is different for different people.

Brienne can’t make it to Missandei’s nameday party — because she has a prior family engagement, also probably because it’s not really her kind of scene. Instead, Missandei and Brienne are doing their own separate celebration. Brienne told her to block off a date and to dress up a little fancy — and that it’s a surprise.

Brienne is also picking her up, like a gentleman — knocks on her door and everything. When Missandei opens the door and sees Brienne in a gray wool sweater and dark slacks, she looks down at her sequined back sheath dress, bare legs, and white pumps.

“Is this too much? Should I change?”

“No!” Brienne says, flashing her dimples and a toothy smile. “You look great!”

Missandei shrugs into her overcoat. “You look really cute, too!”

Brienne blushes. “Not really.”

Missandei rolls her eyes, lightly pushing Brienne out the door. “We really have to teach you how to graciously accept compliments.”

Missy generally can guess what the surprise is — especially since they are heading downtown. When Brienne drives past the theater, into the parking garage underneath, Missandei is already grinning ear-to-ear, words of gratitude on the tip of her tongue, stuff about how Brienne is one of the most thoughtful people she knows and how she’s really touched that Brienne took time out of her busy life to plan this. Missandei holds the words back for a bit though, letting Brienne concentrate on navigating her car in the tight space.

Missandei casually loops her arm around Brienne’s elbow as they walk to the entrance of the theater, an action that throws Brienne off for a moment. Brienne’s already shared that she didn’t have many friends growing up.

“This is so great,” Missandei gushes, looking up at the lights, looking up at the signage. The Taming of the Shrew. “Thank you!”

“Totally!” Brienne says, interjecting excitedly. “It’s an original pronunciation performance!”

Missandei looks up at Brienne in surprise.

“You know, how the text would have sounded in the time period. Apparently a lot of rhymes and puns don’t really translate when the play is performed —”
“— with modern English accents,” Missandei finishes.

Brienne nods, smiling so broadly. “Yeah! I figured you might be interested in this! Because, you know, linguistics and all.”

“Yeah,” Missandei says, swallowing.

Brienne’s face suddenly drops into seriousness, her large eyes blinking rapidly, turning a little to take in Missandei’s expression fully. “Is everything okay? Did I say something wrong?”

Missandei self-consciously chuckles as she reaches up to carefully wipe her wet eyes, trying to minimize the smearing of her makeup. Brienne automatically digs into her purse and pulls out a wad of tissues, nudging Missy’s hand with them. Missy laughs, because of course Brienne carries tissues in her purse. Missandei dabs her eyes, sniffling a bit.

She feels the warm weight of Brienne’s hand on her shoulder.

She really doesn’t know what to say. She kind of buys some time with some deep breaths to cool down her flushed, damp face. She really doesn’t know why this epic gesture — and that’s how she thinks of it — as something epic and almost incomprehensible — she doesn’t know why it hit her so hard.

Her eyes water again.

“Missy,” Brienne says softly. “Are you okay? Was this the wrong thing to do?”

Missandei blinks back the fresh tears, waving her fist of tissue paper at Brienne. “Oh no, this is perfect. It’s just — it’s just for your nameday, we went to Applebee’s! And I just bought you a green apple martini and nachos! You’re clearly a better friend than I am!”

“Well, you don’t have to like, cry over it.” There’s a glint in Brienne’s eyes, and there’s a softness in her expression — an empathy, perhaps. “Come on,” she says, tugging on Missandei’s arm. “Let’s go grab our seats. Do you need to pee before the show starts?” She pauses, gently pushing against the slow-moving, thick crowd in front of them. “Actually, I think I need to.”

Grey’s working relationship with Amanda never really rebounded after Drogo never called her. Grey doesn’t think it’s a huge deal. People neglect to call other people all the time. But she is kind of emotional and batshit. She seems to hold onto really small slights and grudges.

There was a three-week period after meeting Drogo where she was extra cheerful and nice to Grey, plying him for information, still optimistic about her chances for a date. And then when shit didn’t work out, she started being super erratic, alternating between talking really loudly about some mysterious new boyfriend that is probably not a real person and making snide comments about the company that people ought to keep, comments about being a person of her word.

Standard white girl bullshit.

He generally avoids her. Because the sound of her voice annoys him.

He catches her sitting down in the back room, scrolling through her phone at the tail-end of her dinner break. He’s about to go on his.
He clears his throat. “Hey, Amanda. I see that you have next Friday and Sunday off. I have next Saturday off. Do you want switch your Friday for my Saturday? So you have a two-day weekend for real?”

She slowly drops her phone before looking up at him suspiciously. “Why?”

“Your boobs look amazing,” Jhiqui says, reaching over Missandei’s shoulder to lightly pat her chest, looking at their reflections in the full-length mirror.

It’s a cream-colored tiered fringe flapper dress that she borrowed from Doreah’s closet. Honestly, Missandei is a slave to trends, so most of her clothes don’t last more than two years in her closet. Vintage isn’t really her thing. But the girls worked really hard on planning her party.

The low-hanging neckline of the dress is due to the fact that Doreah’s boobs are ginormous and hold up the dress like a shelf. It dips and hangs on Missandei, who is slighter.

Missandei bends over, staring at her chest in the mirror, feeling her fake lashes brush up against her brows. “You don’t think it’s too much?”

Jhiqui laughs. “Are you self-conscious all of a sudden?”

He wasn’t planning on bringing Drogo, but when the party was casually brought up at the gym, Drogo was keenly interested in the fact that Grey apparently has a social circle that Drogo was unaware of. Grey corrected D, saying that he really only knows one person — and that is the nameday girl. His status as a perpetual loner is still pretty intact — don’t worry.

Drogo’s inclusion changed a few things. For one, Drogo’s tolerance for drugs is nil — that’s been made pretty clear to Grey. As such, he is painfully sober, very tense, and hyperaware of everything. There’s a twenty-four-pack of beer double-bagged in plastic hanging between them.

They can hear the music through the door. They can feel the vibration. Drogo glances at Grey, arching a brow, letting a smile slowly creep out. “Who is this girl, anyway?” he asks.

Grey ignores the question. Instead, he rings the doorbell, wondering if they can even hear the chime over the loud music. He’s about to reach out and press the button again when they hear the deadbolt flick, before the door is pulled opened.

A tan girl in a black dress with loads of shiny necklaces around her neck scrunches her eyes at them and frowns. She says, “You guys are not dressed. The invitation says the dress code will be strictly enforced.”

Grey peers past her, into the house. Everyone’s dressed up. Honestly, he had forgotten.

“He saw,” Drogo says. “I didn’t know this was a costume party.” He nudges Grey. “Way to say something, man.”
“It’s fine,” says Grey dismissively, gently pushing past the door-girl, the plastic bags of beer lightly
knocking against the side of his leg. Drogo follows him.

“Wait!” the girl sputters, trailing behind them. “Who are you guys!”

Grey silently ignores all of the bodies loitering between them and the kitchen. Instead, he looks up at
the tall ceiling, at the stainless steel appliances, the nice cabinets, at the bottles of alcohol on the
kitchen island. He opens the fridge door and finds that there’s no space for beer.

“You can actually just set that down next to the cooler over there,” a feminine voice says from
behind him. He swivels his head around. It’s a pretty Dothraki girl with lots of makeup on. She
smiles at him and Drogo. “We have so much beer already. Definitely help yourselves to as much as
you want.” She pauses, assessing their clothes — their jeans and t-shirts. She doesn’t comment on
their attire, though. Instead, she says, “I haven’t seen you guys before. How do you know
Missandei?”

She spots him after she walks downstairs after going to the bathroom to pee for the billionth time.
She actually does a double-take because she didn’t think he was going to show up.

Her legs shake and tremble clumsily when his attention shifts over to the stairs, when his eyes spot
her. She immediately sends him a dopey smile — she’s pretty wasted already — stupid friends —
and he also looks a little bit surprised to see her. Who knows why.

She’s barefoot, but it’s still labor-intensive to cross the distance to get to him. She grabs onto people’s
arms and elbows as she pushes through the sea of her friends.

She doesn’t really get a chance to say hello to him because when she’s within speaking range, Jhiqui
immediately pounces and obnoxiously says, “Missy! Why have you been hiding these gorgeous men
from me!”

She sees Grey pointedly ignore the comment. Instead, he gestures to his friend — tall, dark,
handsome — they hang out in pairs apparently — and says, “Drogo, Missandei. Missandei, Drogo.”
Then he takes a sip from his glass.

She doesn’t expect Drogo to actually like, hug her. But he does. Her eyes go wide, and she’s frozen
for a second before she relaxes and her arms go around him. Friendly.

“Great to meet you,” he says after they part, still holding onto her hand. He casts a glance at Grey,
who downs the rest of his drink quickly.

She’s being really juvenile and chickenshit. Usually being drunk makes her loose and more fun-
loving. Tonight, being drunk makes her scared and freaked out. After the initial greeting, she
excused herself and melted back into the crowd of people. She’s doing a great imitation of someone
who is enjoying her nameday. She making herself laugh at all sorts of jokes. She’s trying to always
sit in a flattering way. She’s trying not to be too messy and slutty, so she keeps adjusting her dress.
She keeps thinking back to the last time she was crazy drunk around him. And it’s all giving her a complex. It’s like she wants to prove to him that she is totally in control of her faculties.

She tried to dance for a little bit, but she’s uncharacteristically struck by self-consciousness. She remembers Doreah’s piece of advice the very first time they used their fake IDs. Dance like no one is watching.

Missandei can’t seem to make herself get there.

Her chest keeps throbbing hotly, almost painfully — but in a deeply pleasant way — whenever she happens to catch a glance of him — in his stupidly endearing jeans and t-shirt, amid everyone else’s glamour.

He cannot get himself to relax at all. He’s wound up and really anxious. Drogo disappeared somewhere with Jhiqui a while back. Grey’s been halfheartedly making small talk with people — pretty awkwardly. They invariably settle on talking about Missandei, how everyone knows her. He’s repeated the excessively simple story at least a dozen times already. She tutors him. That is how they met. The end.

He quietly sneaks out the back door, onto the small patio. He pulls out his lighter and plastic baggie with a couple of joints in it. His supply is getting low, and he wanted to try and sustain himself on alcohol, sort of as an experiment, but he needs to take the edge off.

“I didn’t know you smoked.”

He turns. She’s standing in the doorway, the fringe on her dress floating in the light — and freezing — breeze. She steps down into the patio, barefoot.

Her nose scrunches up delicately, when she smells the weed. “Ah,” she says.

He raises his fingers to his lips, plucking the burning joint. He holds it out to her.

She shakes her head, crossing her arms over her chest, swaying back and forth on her naked feet. “No, thank you,” she says.

Grey takes another hit before he snuffs it out and puts it back into the baggie.

“Thanks for coming,” she says softly.

He shrugs. “I had the night off,” he says, voice low to match hers.

“When is your nameday?”

“Hmm?”

“When is your nameday?” she repeats. “It just occurred to me that we’ve known each other for more than a year, so yours must have already passed at least once. But I don’t know when it is.”

He doesn’t answer her right away. He looks up at the sky — cloudy and murky, obscuring the stars. Then he says, “It was at the beginning of last month.”
“Oh! Why didn’t you say anything to me about it?”

He shrugs. “I don’t really celebrate it.” He lightly smacks his tongue to the roof of his mouth, tasting the herbal remnants of his smoke. “It’s not really my nameday,” he says. “I don’t actually know when I was named. I was just given —”

“— a nameday when you immigrated,” she says, interrupting.

He looks at her, eyes narrowing slightly. “Yeah,” he says.

They fall back into silence. His anxiety is still sharp and acrid. The weed is not even making a dent in it. He knows that she must be freezing her ass off. He feels lame and dumb, because he has no jacket to give her. He knows that she’s freezing outside with him because she just wants to talk to him — and he knows that he makes it hard. And he also knows that she’s attracted to him. He understands that part. He just doesn’t understand why she insists on pushing it.

He’s definitely questioning the wisdom of showing up here. He doesn’t want to lead anybody on. And he’s an idiot — a real idiot.

He feels a light tug on the short sleeve of his tee. He looks over at her.

She’s smiling at him. “How come you didn’t dress up? Too cool to? Not your thing?”

He knows her teasing intention with the question. But it makes him feel like crap. “I honestly forgot,” he says. “I’ve been so busy that it just slipped my mind.”

“Oh, it’s okay,” she says. “I don’t care.”

He stares back at her. And instead of telling her that she looks really, really nice — beautiful — he says, “You look cold.”

She nods vigorously. “Wanna go back inside?”
The party has dwindled down to just a few of them. Streamers and balloons are littered all over the floor — there was a haphazard teardown of the decorations by departing party guests trying to be helpful during the mass exodus around one in the morning. There’s nothing crazy broken or soiled, but there are cups littered all over the nooks and crannies of the townhouse. There are tons of dishes piled up on the kitchen island and in the sink. It’d take a good hour at least, before the house is in its original condition.

Missandei tries to help with the ongoing cleanup efforts, but Doreah drops her garbage bag and gently pushes Missandei out of the living room and tells her to go the hell home. She and her friend Jean have clean-up covered.

Usually Missandei would insist on staying and helping, but it kind of is her nameday and she’s pretty exhausted and loopy and a touch nauseous from too much alcohol even though she stopped drinking a while ago — and Doreah’s the kind of person that super sweet and self-sacrificing and really means it when she tells her friends to go home on their nameday.

Missandei smiles gratefully and wraps her bare arms around Doreah’s neck, kissing her cheek quickly, whispering her gratitude into her friend’s ear, swaying back and forth a bit.

“You’re taking her home? She’s been drinking a lot.”

It takes Missandei a moment to realize Doreah isn’t talking to her. Her hands are on Dor’s shoulders as her head swivels around.

Grey is rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. He looks at the both of them. “Yeah,” he says, looking a little hesitant and pensive before he throws them an awkward half-smile. “Sure.”

Doreah gently pushes Missandei away, toward Grey. Then Doreah leans down and picks up plastic garbage bag again. “When you finally see Jhiqui again, will you tell her that I’m going to torture her before I kill her, the next time I see her?”

“Totally,” Missy says. “You will probably see her before I do, so before you kill her, can you have her bring my coat home?”

“Totally.”

Jhiqui has been a crazy drill sergeant with everything having to do with the party. Jhiqui in general, is militant about stuff that interests her. But when her attention is diverted, everything can go to crap. Jhiqui wasn’t even around for the cake and candles — totally missed the opening of presents. In fact, Missandei opened the gift Jhiqui got her — a really soft and cute blue cardigan — without Jhiqui present.

Missandei’s coat is locked in a bedroom upstairs — the bedroom that Jhiqui is probably having sex with Grey’s friend in.
Grey helps her gather up all of her gifts into multiple bags. Missy swipes Jhiqui’s car keys from the counter and uneasily runs half of her stuff out to trunk of the Toyota, her stomach lurching with the bouncing motion of trying not to slip and face-plant into the icy walkway. It is freezing without her overcoat, her teeth chattering. Grey is close behind, without a jacket too, also holding bags of her gifts and a few leftover bottles of wine in his hands.

“Doreah told me to take these,” he explains, placing the stuff into the trunk before shutting it.

“Did you not bring a coat?” she says, running around to the passenger side of the car, unlocking it and immediately crawling in. But the car is freezing, too. The windows are iced over. She shoves the keys in the ignition and turns on the car as Grey opens his door and climbs in.

“I left it in Drogo’s locked car,” he says, also shivering.

“Ah. Our friends are great.” She’s fiddling with the dials, wincing as a blast of cold air hits her in the face before she adjusts and directs the air to the windshield, trying to defrost it quickly, regretting that they didn’t think to warm up the car, wondering if they should duck back into the house for a bit. She’s a demonstrative sort of person, so she doesn’t think very much of it when she reaches out sideways to vigorously run her cold palm up and down his right shoulder and arm, rubbing warmth between them with friction. The gesture is second nature — something she’d do for any of her friends.

So when he flinches and jerks his body away, she also snaps her hand away, as if stung.

“Sorry,” she says as she turns to look out the window — only seeing a sheet of crystalline ice. Her jaw is still quivering from the cold. She feels tired. And silly. And she raises her closed fist and starts rubbing the fleshy side of it against the glass, trying to melt the ice faster.

“Don’t do that,” he says from behind her. “Just let the car do its thing.”

She turns back to him, looking at him in the dark. “Can I borrow a credit card or debit card?”

He stares back at her for a moment — thinking it over — before he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his wallet. He opens it up and pulls out a red card, handing it to her.

Missandei clutches the card in her hand and throws her door open. She’s unsteady on her feet — her brain is fuzzy and tingly in her head. Her heels are completely unsteady against the icy asphalt ground. She keeps one hand on the car as she reaches out with the other and starts scraping the windshield with the card, her whole body starting to shake violently against the breeze, the dress she borrowed from Doreah just hanging off of her body, which feels frail and slight and weak.

She crosses to the other side of the car — his side — and scrapes that down too, burying her frozen nub of a left hand in her armpit.

She left the car and scraped down the windows because he seems like he’s having a pretty crappy night — went to a party he didn’t want to go to, got stranded by his friend, had to make small talk with a bunch of people he doesn’t seem to like that much. And also had to talk to her — who is also someone he doesn’t seem to like that much at times. She left the car because she’s just so annoyed with herself for caring so much and being such a dork about it — and also a little bit at him, for his standoffishness.

If he were Neal, he’d be out of the car the second she left it, chivalrously wrestling the card away from her, scraping down the windows himself, making her go back into the car and sit.
But he’s really not Neal.

The car is substantially warmer when she re-enters it, but she’s still shivering hard, nonetheless. She drops the card on his leg, careful not to accidentally touch him. And then she crosses her arms over her chest and hooks her right leg over her left, trying to retain some heat. She can still taste the acrid remnants of booze on her tongue, and she clenches her teeth down so she doesn’t gag too obviously.

“Done proving a point?” he says, casually replacing the card back into his wallet. “Was it worth it?”

It comes flying out without much thought. She says, “Fuck you.” And it sounds bitter and angry and petty — and they surprise her — her feelings. It’s the most honest she’s been in a while.

It’s quiet for a moment, just the whir of air pushing out of the vents. She hears his low chuckle over the rumble of the car. And her body spasms uncontrollably for a split second. She hazards a glance at him out of the side of her eye. He’s fully turned to her — and smiling. She kind of watches in awe, as his hands slowly crosses the distance between them, as his warm palms gently grab onto her elbows, his thumbs pressing against her bones. He slowly pries her arms apart. She resists for a split second, before she just yields and lets him hold the weight of her limbs. She holds her breath as his hands softly drag down her arms, making the small hairs stand on end.

He encases her smaller hands in his, squeezing tightly. “You’re so fucking cold,” he mutters.

As if on cue, her body convulses.

He closes out the GPS app on his phone and shuts off the car, turns off the headlights. He pulled in a visitor spot because he doesn’t know which spot is theirs. There’s a part of him that was reluctant for the drive to end. Because it means waking her up.

She told him she was dizzy during the early part of the drive, after she had given him her address. He told her to drop the seat down and to close her eyes.

In the sparse light, he can make out her shadowed features. He can see the neckline of her low-cut dress twisted and askew, dipping dangerously and indecently. Her bra is dark and lacy. He reaches out and carefully tugs the material of her dress so that it covers her chest better. Then he places his hand on her bare shoulder — smooth and really soft. He gently shakes her. “Missandei,” he says, voice quiet and low. “You’re home.”

Her eyes blink open, momentarily disoriented and confused before she recognizes his face. She gives him a shy smile before a yawn takes over. She covers her mouth with the back of her hand, looking out the window. “Wow,” she says. “That drive flew by.”

“Not really,” he says. “It was half an hour.”

Together, they unload the trunk, trying to get all of her bags in one trip. He follows her through the courtyard and up a flight of stairs, watching her closely as she shivers in the cold and sways on her wildly impractical shoes, ready to catch her if she suddenly trips and falls.

They make it to her door without incident.

“Sorry the place is a mess,” she says, flipping on the lights. “Didn’t expect a guest.”
Her place is a little disorganized — there are women’s shoes littering the entry way and bunch of dishes piled in the sink, mail on the coffee table. But actually not too bad. The apartment is rather nondescript though — nothing about it really stands out to him as quintessentially her. But he supposes people could say the same about his place and about him.

She scurries across the living room with the handful of bags that contain her gifts, heading toward a bedroom — probably hers. He stands in place dumbly until she calls out, “You can put the stuff in here!”

Her bedroom is crazy. It is littered with clothes and — amazingly — even more shoes. It is also really girly — with candles and knick-knacks on the side table and beaded necklaces hanging off the ceiling light fixture, making it look kind of like a chandelier.

He sets his bags on the ground in front of a chair, with the others.

She’s got a thick white quilt draped over her body, completely engulfing her. Just her head is exposed to him. Her makeup is all smeared on one side because she slept on it. She looks so much younger.

“I should go,” he says.

“How are you going to get home?”

“A cab or something.”

She wrinkles her nose. “It’s so late, and it’s freezing. You should stay here. I can drive you home tomorrow. I have to go retrieve Jhiqui at some point anyway.” She lifts a floral fuzzy blanket from the foot of her bed. “Don’t be difficult and weird,” she says, holding out the blanket to him, her eyes wide awake and alert-looking. “So we can match,” she explains, jiggling the blanket open. “You must be cold.”

Her mood is light and unencumbered — it’s not like that night a year ago, when she drunk dialed him. He also lives clear on the other side of the neighborhood — on the other side of campus. It would take about twenty-five minutes to drive to his place. He’s exhausted. He has nothing going on early tomorrow. He’s stayed over at Jaime’s and Addam’s, at Drogo’s or Daven’s sometimes, when he’s too stoned or drunk or it’s too late to go home. And — he supposes — they are friends now. She’s kind of his friend.

His gut tells him to go the fuck home right now, but his brain is telling his gut to chill the fuck out — what’s she gonna do to him? Murder him in his sleep?

He’s more worried he’ll have a nightmare or something in front of her.

But then, so what? Best case scenario, she doesn’t even register it and sleeps through it. Worst case scenario, it freaks her out and she’s put off of him indefinitely. He supposes he can deal with anything in between.

He reaches out and grabs the fuzzy blanket. “Okay,” he says.

“Oh my gosh, it’s a sleepover!” she says, bellowing out the last word, bouncing on her feet. “I lurv mother-effin’ sleepovers!”
They don’t have a couch that’s long enough for him. They just have a loveseat in the living room. Missandei must have gained some bit of wisdom about him since the last time they slept in the same room together— must have intuited something — because she gets on her knees on the carpeted floor next to her bed and starts shoving her clothes against the wall, clearing a space, telling him that they can chat as they fall asleep. He tells her that he’s exhausted, and he’s not sure how much chatting he’s up for. She wrinkles her nose at him, tells him that he really doesn’t understand how slumber parties work.

He grins at her, tells her that she’s right. He really doesn’t. He also reminds her that it’s two in the morning, as she tries to hide a yawn from him.

He also generally doesn’t co-sleep with anyone — especially not girls. That’s just a personal rule that he has for himself.

She unrolls a cushioned pad that she found underneath her bed and uncaps it in a corner before she puffs out her cheeks and start blowing air into it, her wide eyes wandering around aimlessly.

The sight of it makes him smile at her. She smiles back, the air coming out of her mouth stuttering against the pad.

At the bathroom door, after she flushes the toilet and exits out in her sleepwear — an oversized long-sleeved shirt and loose shorts — she randomly tells him that she just barfed and it made her feel loads better, and she hands him a toothbrush still in its packaging. Her face is clean and devoid of makeup. They switch places and he shuts the door behind him. He sees a bunch of makeup brushes piled up in the corner of the sink area.

The bedroom lights are off but there’s a soft buttery glow coming from a small lamp on her side table when he re-enters the room.

And she’s lying on the floor, covered with her white quilt, on the mat, fiddling with her phone, which is plugged in and charging.

“Missandei,” he says, letting his tone convey everything.

She looks at him, rolling her eyes. “I got here first. And you’re the guest. Don’t argue with me.” She pushes herself up, bracing herself on her arm as she places her phone on the side table. She lies back down, curling slightly, pulling her knees up and rubbing her face against her blanket, her hair bouncing slightly with the motion. He bites down on his teeth, clenches his jaw for a moment as he thinks.

He crosses the short distance and then kneels in front of her. She looks at him questioningly.

And then he bends down and hooks his arms under her knees and under her neck. It’s a little awkward and clumsy with her massive blanket getting dragged around with her, but he gets to his feet as she freezes in his arms and her eyes dart around. She smells like soap — floral.

She raises a hand and presses it against the center of his chest, over his t-shirt, before she realizes what she’s doing and snatches her hand back. They both ignore the mistake. She laughs uneasily.

And then she announces, “You’re ridiculous!” before he drops her on her bed. She lands with a light thump, her eyes shiny and her face breaking into a laugh.

She flips her white blanket over him after he lies down. For extra warmth, she tells him. He can smell her in the fabric — in the pillow, too. The pad is warm from her body heat.

She clicks off the light. And then moments later, she says, “I snore, by the way.”
“Ha,” he says. “I know.”


He shoves his hands under his head, splaying his elbows outward. “Do you go camping often?” He’s referring to the sleeping pad and also the sleeping bag on the floor as extra cushion.

“Yeah!” she says. “I love nature.”

“Never would’ve thought.”

“Why not?”

“You don’t look like a girl who loves nature.”

“I think I get what you mean by that.”

“Yeah. You look high-maintenance and fussy.” He smiles in the dark.

“And emotionally fragile. It’s true,” she adds sarcastically. “Do you go camping?”

“No really.” He breathes quietly, looking up at her ceiling. “But I like to do that kind of stuff too. I backpacked down the Essos coast last summer.”

He wakes up when he hears an insistent knocking on the front door of the apartment. He hears Missandei grunt from up above and the rustle of her blankets as she sits up, blinking rapidly, rubbing her eyes. “What the hell?” she mumbles, hopping off the bed, careful not to land on him. A thick swatch of blanket hits his face as she claws her comforter off the bed and fully encases herself in it again.

He follows her into the living room, just in case there’s a murderer pounding on her door.

“It’s Jhiqui and your friend,” she says, looking through the peephole.

“Oh, yay,” Jhiqui says immediately, when Missandei unlocks and opens the door. “You’re home! My phone’s dead. But Doreah left a note and told me you took my car.” Then Jhiqui catches a glimpse of him, as she pushes her way into the warm apartment. Her eyes widen for a split second before her mouth curves into a smile. “Oh, haay, ” Jhiqui drawls to him. “Fancy seeing you here. Did you guys sleep well?” She’s not his favorite person so far.

“He was stranded, and it was too late for him to figure out how to get home,” Missandei says, frowning. “What the heck, guys?”

“Sorry, man,” Drogo says sheepishly, his voice a low rumble. “We kinda just fell asleep and didn’t wake up until this morning. I didn’t mean to leave you like that.”

“Yeah, sorry, babe,” Jhiqui says. “Can we buy you guys breakfast?”

Grey catches Drogo looking at him urgently, from behind Jhiqui. The guy looks rumpled and also a little cranky. It’s clear that he doesn’t want to do breakfast. It’s clear that he’s gotten his fill of Missandei’s friend and just wants to leave. And Drogo’s also not hiding his expression from
Missandei, who is standing quietly, with her mouth shut tight in a thin line.

Grey smiles a little bit, at Drogo. “Yeah,” he says. “Breakfast would be great.”

Drogo’s eyes narrow.

They head to a diner in Drogo’s car. Grey happily pulls on his black jacket, zipping it up and shoving his hands into his pockets. Missandei is quiet and had thrown on gray sweatpants and a thick red hoodie. It’s really different from her usual get-up. She had pulled her hood up, her curls peeking out messily. She sighs tiredly and tilts the top of her head toward the window. Her eyes are downcast, catching his.

He smiles at her. It surprises her, and it takes a moment before she smiles back.

Her mood is considerably more cheerful by the time her hands are wrapped around a hot cup of watery coffee. She breathes in the aroma melodramatically before taking a sip. “Oh God, yes, mama,” she says. “I need this badly.” She alternates her sips of coffee between sips of water. She tells them she’s pretty hungover.

She makes a big show of poring over the menu, picking out the most expensive item off it. It’s steak and eggs.


“Yeah,” Missandei says. “But I feel like steak today.” She smirks at her friend viciously. “I think I also want an extra side of bacon and a muffin.”

Jhiqui rolls her eyes. “Sure sure. Whatever you want, princess.”

“Maybe I’ll get a milkshake, too,” Missandei says, flicking the plastic menu down to the table.

“Oh my God!” Jhiqui exclaims. “You’re not going to eat all of that!”

Missandei stares at her friend steadily. “You said I could get whatever I want,” she says, voice low and heavy and tinged with aggression. This is a side of her that Grey has never seen before.

Drogo’s laugh comes out in a short snort.

When they say goodbye, Jhiqui sounds hopeful. Unfortunately. She tells Drogo that she’ll text him later. Missy watches and tries not to wince as Drogo gives a noncommittal response, a little stunned at how her friend eagerly nods. Missandei wonders — just for a paranoid moment — if this is what her friends saw, whenever they watched her interact with Neal. Was she as delusional as Jhiqui about the reality of things, too?

Drogo pulls Missy into a big hug — guy is affectionate, which is weird considering his friend is the total opposite of that — and then he cups her cheeks in his thick hands as he looks down at her face.
He says, “It was really great to meet you. I hope you had a good nameday. Sorry we didn’t get more
time to chat. But next time?”

She nods. “Definitely.”

“Can I get your number? So I have it?”

She blinks, glancing at Grey and Jhiqui real quick. He is predictably blank. And Jhiqui is grinning.
“Okay,” Missandei says, pulling her phone out of the pocket of her hoodie.

When she says bye to Grey — it feels weird. It comes on the heels of the bear hug from Drogo, a
guy she barely even knows. She and Grey just stand facing each other — aware of their friends’ eyes
on them.

Grey gives her a half-smile. He shrugs. And then he says, “Okay, bye. See you later,” before waving
slightly, before turning around and walking to Drogo’s car.

“Did you have fun?” Drogo asks, when they hit the first stoplight.

“Sure,” Grey says.

“Missy seems cool. She’s really funny.”

Grey stares ahead at the road. He thinks that he’s tired — that’s he’s going to take a nap when he
gets home. “Yeah, she is,” he says. He doesn’t expect it when Drogo’s hand shoots out and roughly
shoves him. He sways and lightly hits the passenger side door. He looks at Drogo, who is grinning.

“Bud, don’t worry,” Drogo says, laughing a little bit. “I’m not doing anything fucked up with her
number. I just figured it’d be handy to have because she’s your friend and stuff. Besides —” Drogo
chuckles lowly, “— it’s obvious that she is pretty into you.”
He met her during a class group discussion two weeks ago.

Things start going really south when she coyly brushes her nails over his bare ass. In between kisses, Grey tells her not to touch him there, but she throws her head back, exposing her throat. She drunkenly laughs like a lunatic and adopts a syrupy sweet voice and tells him confidently that she knows what will make him feel good.

He had seen her swallow a few pills before she took off her clothes.

She’s tiny — thin — and even through the fog of the drugs in his system, he’s conscious about not accidentally hurting her. That’s why he holds back when she boldly runs her fingers over his butt again, this time alarmingly dipping into the crack.

There’s no mistaking the drop his voice, when he warns her not to touch him there again. She’s unhearing though, and when she moves, he grabs her wrist. She thinks it’s a joke — or a game. So she fights him. Her makeup around her eyes is smeared and dark, making her eyes sockets look hollow. Her laugh is husky and raspy and rattling in his ear, as she shoves him and tries to hit him. When he holds her arms above her head to stop the hitting, he looks down and sees her bare chest, her breasts heaving, her neck flushed.

She starts saying no, rapidly, in succession. She tells him not to hurt her. It confuses him, causes him to recoil. He takes his hand off of her wrists, and he starts lifting his naked body off of hers.

And then her laugh morphs. He watches in horror as her laugh turns into tears, as it transforms into loud, body-wracking sobs. She grabs him and begs for him not to leave her. Her blond hair is splayed across the pillow, like a fan. Her clammy hands are on his back. She’s frantic, alternating between pinching him and rubbing his skin. Her voice is stuck between a hum and a cry. She’s drunkenly asking him, over and over again, not to leave. She calls him Daddy.

The word stops him cold. The pulse in his throat is choking him, and the room is spinning in dizzying, jerky circles. The noises she’s making is freaking him out. He’s starting to hyperventilate, sucking in and pushing out air too fast.

She hits him — in her panic — her long nails rake across his face and the pain is sharp and stinging and hot.

He says, “What the fuck!” touching his face where she had hit him. He shouts, “You’re fucking crazy!”

She says, “Fuck you! I hate you!” before she collapses into a mess of tears again.

He trips and falls down hard on his knees, as he tries to pull up his pants. She’s yelling after him as he stumbles out of her apartment. He throws up in the bushes, just outside of the door.

When she sees him again in class on Monday, she pointedly ignores him.
When he tells Drogo, Jaime, and Addam the story, carefully omitting certain details, Drogo snickers and shakes his head. Addam asks Grey if the girl was hot. Grey almost doesn’t understand the question, so Addam repeats it, slower, like Grey is an idiot.

Grey tells Addam, “Sure, she was hot.”

Addam says, “Ah, it’s a proven fact that the hottest girls are also the most insane. It’s science.”

Jaime clears his throat, leaning back on his hands, crossing one ankle over the other. He says, “I feel bad for that girl. Seems like she’s going through some shit. That’s kinda a sad story.”

Missandei somehow naturally finds herself playing the role of designated adult. She grabs Clea’s shoulders and yanks her friend off of the street, pulling her back onto the sidewalk. Music rumbles from with the open front doors of the club. Her body is slick and sweaty, Clea is stumbling, knees buckling. Missandei holds onto her waist, bending awkwardly to catch her friend’s weight.

Clea hits the ground anyway, just not as hard as she could’ve. She laughs. And a trio of passersby ask Missandei if her friend is okay. Missandei waves them off in frustration, before she yanks Clea’s skirt down so she’s not flashing her lady parts to the whole fucking city.

“Stay here,” Missandei says, holding onto her friend’s face, kneeling. She shakes Clea’s face. “Hey! Pay attention! Stay here! Okay? I will be back in a second!”

Clea laughs and says, “Okay, okay, okay,” swaying dangerously from side to side.

Missandei hurriedly gets to her feet, cursing her stupid one-half-size-too-big heels — they were on sale and are super cute — and she runs around the corner, spotting Brienne propping up Jhiqui, who is talking to a middle-aged homeless man.

When Missandei nears, she hears homeless guy saying, “Look, you’re hot as fuck, girl, but I ain’t playing your game. That’s some fucked up shit.”

“Aw, come on!” Jhiqui whines, leaning heavily against Brienne, whose face is bright red. “This is a homegrown, purebred white blond slave girl that I’m selling. Now — how much would you pay for her?”

The homeless guy snorts. “Naw, girl. I ain’t into that.”

“Guys,” Missandei says, interrupted. “Let’s go. I left Clea on the street corner.”

“Ooh!” Jhiqui says, drawling. “How much would you pay for this pretty not-white girl? She’s worth way less than the blond, right? Duh.” Jhiqui starts giggling uncontrollably. Brienne looks embarrassed and drunk. And the homeless guy looks vaguely amused, as he looks up and down Missandei’s body.

Missy is not in the mood. She’s been chasing them down for the last half-hour. Clea thought she had lost her house keys until she found them in her purse, which was at coat-check. Missandei had to figure that one out. Brienne has been pulling a disappearing act all night, giving Missandei a heart attack each time because she likens Brienne to a bunny that is just so innocent and helpless against the cold harsh world. She keeps telling Brienne not to wander off and also not to accept drinks from
strangers, but Brienne insists on wandering off. Lastly, Jhiqui has been rowdy and a crappy influence on everyone.

Missandei points to the right and says, “You stupid bitches! We’re leaving! Clea is too drunk! Get the fuck over there! Jesus!”

“Stop being such a whore, Missy,” Jhiqui slurs.

When Missandei rounds the corner, she sees Clea lying down on the sidewalk, amid a bunch of loitering clubbers, sleeping.

Drogo kicks Jaime’s legs off the table as he walks by, before he collapses on the couch next to the guy. Jaime snaps up a little bit, into sitting position, throwing an amused look to Drogo before he puts his feet back on the table. He flips a page of his book.

“Man, why are you studying on the first Saturday off that you’ve had in months?” Drogo says.

“I’m not studying,” Jaime mutters. “I’m just reading.”

Drogo leans over and interrupts Jaime’s reading, pressing the thick softcover book to Jaime’s chest so he can read the title. It’s a travel book on the Summer Isles. Drogo snorts and lets go of the book. “You learning a lot, Bieber? You gonna be our tour guide? Show us all there is to see?” He smirks.

“Well, someone should be in charge of shit and make sure we don’t fucking die. Obviously the leader should be me.” Jaime shrugs. “Because I’m like, white,” he deadpans. “It’s only natural.”

Drogo laughs silently, twisting and drawing his legs on the couch so he can kick Jaime into the arm of it.

“Ugh!” Jaime says, laughing too, fighting off Drogo with his hands. “Your feet smell like cheese!”

They recently bought plane tickets to the Summer Isles. They take up an entire row. Jaime had asked Grey which seat he wanted. Jaime’s accommodating tone and smiling face just grated on Grey’s nerves. Grey doesn’t know how this whole fucking thing got away from him — how he ended up as a hostage on Drogo and Jaime’s group texts and group emails, hammering out details and itineraries. They’ve asked him what he wants to do and what he wants to see. And he told him that he doesn’t really care. He also told them that it’s not his style to plan a lot of stuff beforehand.

He neglected to tell them that he actually doesn’t want to go on a trip with them — not that he doesn’t want to take a trip with them ever — but more that this trip may not be something he wants to share and play tourist on. He thought there would be more time to drop the information, but Drogo bought plane tickets for all three of them. Grey was notified when Drogo told him that he owes the guy money.

The trip is still months away. But the mere mention of it gets to him. He knows he’s being irrational and stupid. But every time Jaime or Drogo or even Addam and Daven talk about what a blast it will be and how the beaches will be nice and how the women will probably be gorgeous — he wants to choke one of them, any one of them. He feels this stupid rage over the whole stupid thing — because he’s rigid and there is a specific purpose for specific things. And he’s not blowing a shit ton of money to have a fucking blast.
Without a word, Grey gets up from the armchair, crosses the living room, disappears into the kitchen. There, he grabs a glass from Addam and Jaime’s dish rack and starts pouring himself a glass of water from the Brita pitcher in the fridge.

“Yo, Dovoedd! Can you grab us a couple of beers on your way back?”

She brings the tray of nachos — chips, canned chili, cheddar cheese, pickled jalapenos, and pineapples on half because the girls always complain about her inclusion of it — and drops the hot sheet onto a pair of cork trivets on the coffee table. She takes off the oven mitts and trades them for her bottle of beer on the table.

The girls — minus Jhiqui — all reach for napkins and chips

“Guys, the calories,” Jhiqui says. “The calories!”

“Whatcha doin’?” Missandei says, looking down at Doreah and Brienne.

“I’m giving her cornrows!” Doreah says.

“It’s a look,” Brienne mutters, face flushing.

Missandei makes a sympathetic noise and clinks her beer bottle with Brienne’s. Then she crosses over to the other side of the coffee table so she has a seat in front of her nachos. It’s supposed to be a movies and pajamas night, but they have yet to start the movie. Clea, in pigtails, says she’s waiting for her mud mask to fully dry so she can wash it off. Then they can start a movie.

Jhiqui holds up her phone, shows them a picture of some guy with curly brown hair. It’s Tinder. She asks them if he’s cute or not.

After Drogo didn’t call or text her and ignored her messages, Jhiqui was in a pissy mood for a solid week, alternating between complaining about men and swearing them off for good. After that, she joined Doreah on Tinder, stating that the concept of swiping men left and right and discarding them appealed to her. Missandei didn’t really have much to say about that — she just kind of wondered what Neal was up to — just for a split second.

Doreah, Jhiqui, and Clea spontaneously decide to go on a sangria run after Clea washes her face. They poo-pooed Missandei’s beer selection.

Brienne looks pretty ridic in cornrows — they both know this. They both laugh over this as Missandei takes pictures on her phone, as Brienne bashfully covers her red face and tries to make Missandei swear to show no one the photos.

“I did something stupid,” Brienne suddenly says, all seriously.

Missandei straightens in her seat at the tone. “What’s up, babe?”

“I kind of went on Jaime’s Instagram a while back. And there was a picture of him and some girl I don’t know.”

Jaime is Brienne’s ex.
After a pause, Missandei says, “It doesn’t necessarily mean anything, Brie.”

“Or it does mean something.”

“But you two are broken up.”

Brienne blinks. And then she sighs. “I know.”

Missandei gets to her knees. She leans forward and wraps her arms around Brienne’s shoulder. She kisses Brienne’s hair, her cornrows. She squeezes tight, and she says, “I’m sorry that you saw that. That really sucks.”

The ensuing quietness is awkward. Missandei searches in her mind for something to latch onto — something to appropriate to say. She quickly comes up with a bunch of platitudes about how it’ll get easier with time, and she knows that Brienne is smarter than that.

Instead, she tells a truth about herself, something she doesn’t really talk to anyone about. So that her friend might feel less alone. She says, “You know that boyfriend I had in high school?” She sees Brienne nod. “Well, he left me. Twice. The first time was for the idea of a new girl. The second time for an actual new girl. People leave me.”

The water rushes past his shins, trying to pull him back into the ocean as he pushes against the sand. Addam is walking just ahead of him, flesh a little pink, surfboard hooked under his arm, dripping wet, his bright-orange swim shorts almost blinding in the sunlight. The saltwater burns Grey’s eyes.

Since they sought out a secluded spot to surf, it’s a bit of a trek to get back to their group. Addam never stops talking. He chatters a mile a minute about a bunch of stuff — mostly about how Jaime’s so bitchy sometimes and has some weird vendetta against Daven’s new girlfriend. Addam thinks she’s all right enough. She’s really pretty at least and is down to hang out with them and seems to make Daven happy enough and stuff. Isn’t that enough? Isn’t that just what it’s all about?

Grey grunts, adjusting the weight of his own surfboard.

“Exactly, bro,” Addam says. “Exactly! You get what I’m saying then!” He snorts and then spits to the side, before he says, “Bummer Jaime had to work today, huh? Man, that guy is always working. I told him not to worry about rent and stuff because my parents don’t care, you know? But he insists on covering his half and stuff — and I really respect that, you know? But he shouldn’t fucking like, kill himself to do it. I’d rather spend time with him than have his money, right? That’s really what it’s all about. Spending quality time together.”

Grey’s head is tilted toward the ground, looking at his own walking feet when he hears Addam’s low whistle underneath the wind.

“Dude, Drogo is with a couple of hot girls I have not met yet. Damn.” Addam quickens his pace, and Grey raises his head, looking into the distance, trying to spot Drogo. He swallows and tastes salt from the ocean when he spots him. And her. He’s pretty sure it’s her, even though her face is obscured by sunglasses. He recognizes the hair. And the skin color. And the body. The bare body.

Addam flips his board and drops it in the sand just some yards shy of them. Grey keeps his steps slow and steady, as he advances on them. He sees Addam introducing himself to Missandei and her
friend Doreah. He sees Addam still talking. And then he sees Drogo spot him. He sees Drogo’s raised arm, waving at him, face grinning. Missandei follows the line of sight. And the way her lens stare back at him, reflective and impassive — the way her mouth is expressionless — unnerves him.

The sun gets in his eyes, and he drops his gaze.

She slowly sips from a beer bottle, her arms lightly crossed over her chest. She’s wearing her blue bikini — really because she was pretty sure she’d run into him. She’s nodding along to the group conversation, politely answering Drogo’s friend’s — Addam’s — inquiries. He wants to know her name, where she’s from, what her major is. His questions are probing, but his manner is really easy-going. She’s glad she’s wearing sunglasses. She can furtively alternative between the group conversation and watching Grey slowly walk up to them. His expression is stormy. And she’s trying not to stare too much.

He drops his surfboard next to Addam’s, bypasses a bunch of people lying on beach blankets. Addam claps him on the shoulder when he joins them. “This guy has no hustle sometimes,” Addam says, laughing. “Ladies, this is our friend Grey. Grey, this is Missy and Doreah.”

“They know each other already,” Drogo says, gesturing vaguely.

“Drogo texted me,” Missandei says, directing her comment right at Grey. “Told us to come down if we were free.”

After a beat, Grey lifts his shoulders up a little bit. And he says, “Cool. Well, have fun,” before he walks off, sitting down in the sand next to a huge blond guy and a girl.

“He makes it so rewarding to be his friend sometimes,” Drogo says, laughing.

The sand is warm and dry underneath her bare feet as she quietly walks up to him. He’s sitting by himself and staring at the ocean, a layer of sand stuck to his bare back and shoulders. She softly says, “Hi,” when she’s right next to him, standing.

He says, “Hey,”

“Do you want to swim?” she says. “With me?”

He looks up at her. “No,” he says. And he says nothing else.

Her heart is thudding in her chest. The sun feels warm on her skin. She has three beers in her. She takes off her sunglasses, holds them loosely in her hand at her hip. She looks down at him. She says, “Will you take a walk with me? I just want to talk and hang out with you a little bit.” She feels inordinately brave. And she steels herself for more rejection. She also remembers to add, “Please?” And it sounds pleading and a little sad.
He’s getting used to the sight of her in a swimsuit, getting used to all that exposed skin. He watches her chase the frothy waves, wind blowing her hair back, listens to her cackles whenever water nips her knees — and he’s only a little bit tense.

They haven’t talked about much that is substantial. They’ve talked a little about Summer Tongue — about his finals. They’ve talked about his friends — she said they are nice, really friendly.

She’s taunted him, walking backwards, telling him that he’s sometimes a stick in the mud. She asks him if he’s allergic to fun.

He sees the big wave coming — and he grins at her — right before it hits her square on the back and she shrieks, bouncing forward, trying to get closer to shore.

“It’s cold!” she says, crossing her arms over her chest.

“It’s actually not bad,” he says. “You get used to it.”

She looks at him suspiciously. She left her glasses up the beach, in the sand because she was afraid of losing them. She keeps her arms crossed over her chest, and she spontaneously dunks her body down into the water, submerging herself up to her chin.

Her eyes widen and she lets out a high-pitched squeal. She gets pulled back a little bit by a wave.

“Missandei!” he calls out from shore. “Can you swim?”

“Uh, yeah!”

He hears her laughing.

He clenches his jaw as he walks into the water after her. He watches as she looks down at her cleavage and adjusts her swimsuit top. Her arms go up to her neck and she unties the strings, pulling them up. Her breasts get pressed together for a moment. He can see the outline of her nipples. And then her head flips up — she catches him watching her as she re-ties the swimsuit strings behind her neck. They stare at each other for a moment.

“Sorry,” he says, deciding that it’s smart to keep his apology vague.

“It’s okay,” she says. “I’m not uncomfortable.” Then her mouth slyly tilts up into a smile. Then she pushes off the ground and starts floating backward, away from him.

“Missandei!” he shouts. “Dammit!” He follows, catching up to her within a few strokes. He grabs her arm under the water. He pulls her to him. Her body presses up against his momentarily. He hears her sharp intake of breath. He ignores it. Instead, he says, “Do you have a death wish?”

She’s breathing heavily, from the exertion of swimming. She says, “Relax, Mom. I told you. I can swim.”

They tread water in silence for a while. Missandei sometimes flips onto her back, staring up at the blue sky.
She collapses onto the sand in exhaustion. They fought the waves coming back in. He told her not to expend so much energy with a crawl stroke. Just swim sideways. She might’ve been too arrogant about her swimming abilities. He was patient and cautious, as he swam beside her on the way back.

She rolls onto her back on the beach, groaning. He’s looming over her, dripping on her. “You have sand all over you,” he says.

“Whatsoever.” She spreads out her arms and legs, waving them up and down in the sand, occasionally hitting his ankles with her arm. “Look, I’m making a sand angel.”

“Come on. Get up.” He holds his hand out to her.

“No,” she says.

“Seriously,” he says, bending down to grab her hands. He tries to lift her up, but she slackens her body, she goes limp. “Seriously!” he says, getting down lower to hook his elbows underneath her armpits. She laughs, feeling warm from the scratchy contact of skin to sand to skin. The side of his face is pressed against the side of hers as he tries to lift her into standing position, from behind. He gets her to her feet almost, but she won’t hold up her own weight. She just collapses back down when he lets go.

“Missandei!” he says in frustration as she laughs. “I’m going to leave you here!”

“Go ahead,” she says, staring up at him. “I dare you.”

“Missandei!”

She immediately shuts her eyes and rolls over, curling her body, whimpering a little bit, after the sand hits her face. She feels his hands on her back.

“I’m so sorry!” he says immediately. “I didn’t mean to kick sand in your face! Are you okay?”

“It’s so scratchy!”

He helps her sit up. He pries her hands off her face, mumbling that her hands are so dirty. Her eyes are still shut tight. She’s still groaning pitifully. She feels his hands on her face, brushing off all of the grains. And she can’t even enjoy his closeness because every time she moves her eyeballs, it’s like sandpaper against the back of her eyelids. He blows on her face. And she frowns. She tries opening her eyes — and it’s totally a huge mistake. She makes a noise and shuts her eyes tightly again, feeling them water.

His hands are cupping her face. “God. I’m so sorry,” he says. He’s close. She can feel his breath. His thumbs rub against her cheekbones. “We have to flush out your eyes.” She hears him grunt. There’s a moment of silence, before his hands squeeze her face lightly, before he says, “Sit tight for a bit, okay? I’m gonna go run and grab some bottles of water, okay?”

“What?” she says. “Can’t I come with?”

“You’re going to fall because you can’t see where you’re going.” He pauses. “I’ll be quick, okay? I promise. Jesus. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know it was an accident,” she says, feeling tears — just a physiological response — drag their way down her cheeks.
“Ah,” she says, lying back down on the sand. His clean hands are back on her face. He’s quietly telling her to try and open her eyes. And she tries — she gets a fuzzy glimpse of him looking down at her — but then icy water splashes her face and she immediately shuts her eyes again. She can’t help it.

He tells her he’s going to pry her eyes open then. He tells her regretfully and gently, as if breaking the news quietly will make it easier for him. She tells him it’s fine. She jokes with him and says, “I didn’t expect to be waterboarded when I woke up this morning.”

She hears him laugh. She feels his warm palm slide across her jaw as he tilts her head.

The cold water is a shock. She can’t help but shriek a little bit. A little bit of water goes up her nose, and she coughs violently, her body jerking up. He’s rambling another litany of apologies, hands on her neck, her face, in her hair.

The other eye goes substantially better. Though she still whimpers and cries, because the water is so cold.

“Try and open your eyes.”

The grit is gone. But her vision is still a bit fuzzy. She blinks a few times, to make sure she can. She can tell that the sky is noticeably darker. The sun is setting.

She sits up. Her hands automatically go up to wipe the rest of the water out of her eyes, but Grey stops her, gently blocking her with his clean hands on her cold face. His thumbs goes over her lashes and she closes her eyes, letting him rub away the moisture.

She can see a lot better when she opens her eyes again.

“I’m so sorry!” he says, his face guilt-stricken.

His hands are still on her face. She smiles at him. Her sandy hands come up to gently lay over his, on her cheeks. She grabs his fingers. “Can I ask you something?” she says quietly.

“Oh, God, what?”

“How come you haven’t asked me out?”

He tries to lift his hands from her face in panic, but she holds on tight, keeps them there.

“You can tell me the truth,” she says. “I can take it.”

His face falls. His whole body slumps, as if defeated. Her heart is hammering. And she feels a sense of dread. She almost wants to take back the question entirely.

“Grey?” she says.

He sighs. “I just think it’s best for us to be just friends.”

“Oh,” she says, her voice breathy, her eyes blinking rapidly.
Grey leans over the counter to peer at the payment console, holding a pair of black pumps loosely in his fingers. He asks his customer, an older brunette in glasses, if her credit card has a chip on it. She tells him it does. He smiles at her, reaches over, and touches the bottom of the console. He tells her she has to insert the card — it’s not a swiper. She mumbles that these things are all different sometimes. It’s something he hears a lot, ever since they switched out the machines. He laughs lightly.

After making sure her shoes match one another, he replaces them in their box, puts the box in a bag, and walks around the counter to hand her the purchase. He tells her to have a great night. His head is pounding.

At the end of the night, Grey reaches up to his neck and loosens the knot in his tie before pulling it completely off. His body is sore and aching — he’s been overdoing it at the gym and in practice — as a means of distraction.

He sort of falls asleep on the bus ride back to his place, his head lolling back and forth with the jerky stop and start of the journey. His mind floats back and forth between semi-awareness and pain — and moments of complete and blissful blankness.

At home, on the toilet that he shares with two other tenants, he’s shocked to see a deep dab of bright red blood after he wipes, on the toilet paper.

He runs. He steps into his shoes and he pulls on a t-shirt and a pair of shorts. It’s midnight on a school night, but he needs to clear his throbbing mind of all of the shit that he’s Googled about ass-bleeding in the last hour. His heart is choking up his throat. The cold air is a steady press against his damp face.

In his second mile, as he climbs up a steep hill, as his thighs burn and the cords in his shins compress and stretch in a pain that he’s at least familiar with, he suddenly remembers a dark room and a door shutting. He immediately raises his hands to his face, trying to banish the memory. He starts counting — doing math in his head — starts reciting tomorrow’s schedule to himself out loud. He even starts singing a little bit, sounding nuts, with the heavy thud of his feet and his gasping breaths.

When he gets back home, his headache is still harsh. His hands tremble as he kneels on the ground and digs underneath his bed for a shoe box. He pulls out syringes and needles — pulls out a baggy of white circular pills. He gets up and stumbles to the sink, still sweating and breathing hard from the run. It actually hurts him with a pang, a little bit, as he opens the bag and empties it, watching the water pull the pills down the drain.
She switches over to OKCupid because Tinder is just a hook-up app. She has decided to be smarter about dating now. She has decided to look for something meaningful and for something that will actually last. She has decided to stop chasing boys that aren’t interested, boys who are unavailable — emotionally or otherwise.

Cliff is not really someone she usually dates. He’s an engineer. He’s a little nerdy and a little overly nervous — he rambles a lot in his nervousness. They’ve had coffee together so she knows he’s not a psycho — pretty sure. This is their second date. Brienne told her that sometimes people don’t make the greatest first impression — maybe give him another chance. She and Brienne ended up talking at length about physical attraction — with Missandei asking if that’s something that can grow. Brienne says she thinks so.

Cliff handed her a bouquet of purple daisies when he picked her up. She almost wasn’t sure what to do with it — she and Jhiqui don’t own a vase. She was uncharacteristically flustered and put the flowers in a tall glass of water.

“You look very pretty tonight,” Cliff says to her, from across the table.

She smiles. “Thank you.”

“Fuck!” Drogo shouts angrily. Grey immediately scrambles out of the boat, Jaime following quickly behind him, when they see Drogo taking a few steps forward on the dock, advancing on Daario menacingly. “Goddammit, I’m going to beat your ass.”

Grey pushes his way through his teammates, smacking his body, his chest, against Drogo’s. He hears Daario laugh from behind them, hears Daario say, “Stop using me to make your boyfriend jealous. I don’t want to be involved in your fucking weirdass sex games.” Grey feels Drogo lunge forward, as Grey's hands press Drogo back. Drogo outweighs him significantly, and he feels his feet trip against the wooden planks. He grunts and pushes Drogo back as hard as he can.

He hears Jaime snap, “Shut the fuck up, you fucking idiot.” Grey spins his head around for a second, seeing Jaime hold up one hand to Daario’s smiling face. The rest of their teammates and their coach are crowding around Daario, some softly murmuring for the guy to shut his mouth, to stop taunting Drogo.

Grey crosses his arm around Drogo’s shoulders, pushing him backward, this time gentler. “Come on, man,” Grey says. “Let’s take a walk. It’ll be good for you.”

Drogo snarls and throws Daario another hateful look before relenting and turning around. Grey lets him go. Their feet hit the lawn and he glances at Drogo, who is probably the most competitive and hot-headed person he’s ever met. They walk for ten minutes, for Drogo to cool off. Drogo gripes about how Daario’s missed practice two days this week, talks about how the guy showed up hungover and lacking focus — just wasting their time and hard work.

Grey says quiet, noncommittal things, trying to keep the energy low.
When he goes to the doctor to get his shots and a prescription for anti-malaria pills, for the trip to the Summer Isles, he casually asks the female doctor about ass-bleeding. She’s very matter-of-fact and plain-spoken, asking him about the color, the texture of his poop and the blood, asking him if it hurts to go. He tells her that everything feels normal — okay — except he won’t stop bleeding. The blood is bright and fresh. He tells her he read that that’s good, because the problem is in the lower tract, not the upper tract of his intestines. He tells her in hopes that she will confirm to him, that he is probably okay.

But she just tells him that the ass-bleeding is certainly odd. Maybe it’s hemorrhoids. She tells him to make another appointment to see her, so they can check out what’s going on with his ass.

Reception tells him that the doctor actually has an open slot for three hours later the same day. He takes it. He spends the three hours in a bookstore, occasionally going into the restroom to check that there is still blood coming out of his butt, that he hasn’t stupidly imagined this.

There is the doctor and a medical assistant in the room and he’s naked underneath a gown and bending over. When she confirmed his family history based on the questionnaire he filled out and asked if there was a history of cancer, he told her that he doesn’t know. His parents died when he was young. He was told that his aunt died from a heart attack.

He shuts his eyes momentarily, when he hears his doctor ask her assistant for the lube.

She tells him to relax and that’s exactly what he doesn’t do. It’s rough and awkward and he grits his teeth as she apologizes and asks him if it hurts. He tells her it doesn’t. There’s nothing painful about her latexed finger up his ass hole. It’s just uncomfortable as fuck.

He hears her gloves snap as she tells him he can get dressed and they will talk.

After all of that, she tells him she didn’t feel anything out of the ordinary during the exam. If it’s a hemorrhoid, it’s a really small one, maybe. He asks her what his options are — because he doesn’t want to bleed out of his ass forever. She tells him he can schedule an appointment with a specialist.

Grey goes to the pharmacy that Jaime works at to get the malaria medication.

Jaime rings Grey out, picking up the canister of Metamucil and scanning it before he drops it in a plastic bag along with the pills. Grey expects for Jaime to crack some joke about pooping, but he doesn’t. He just gives Grey the total, and Grey swipes his credit card through the card reader.

It’s their last lesson before finals — and his last lesson with her ever. There are no more advanced courses for Summer Tongue. He has reached the end. The lesson is a bit pointless. They kind of go over the material that might be on his exam, but he doesn’t really need it.

Things have been good since that day on the beach. Normal. She told him she’s cool with friendship. She’s down for friendship. He’s been consistent. Friendly at times — aloof every now and then. Shut-mouthed when it comes to details about himself.

“Well, good luck on your finals,” she says as he puts his books away.
“You, too,” he says.

“See ya.”

“Later.”

“Great talk,” she deadpans. “As always.”

He laughs.

The tip of the joint glows orange as Podrick sucks in a hit. They don’t usually hang out with Pod, a sophomore, because Jaime and Drogo find him annoying — but Pod offered to share his weed, and Daven invited the guy. Pod pulls the joint out from between his lips with two fingers and passes it to Jaime, who brings it up to his face. They can actually hear crickets chirping in the distance, standing in the well-lit alley between two buildings — one a bar, the other a restaurant. Grey finishes off the joint before walking off to the garbage and tossing the filter into it.

“You guys wanna split a basket of fries?” Pod asks eagerly, cheerfully.

“Yeah, sure,” Jaime says, answering for both himself and Grey. “Go on ahead and order the fries for us. Dude, if they have pimped out fries — like chili fries or garlic fries — get that shit. Otherwise, we want ketchup and ranch. Can you order another pitcher, too? Thanks. See you in there.”

Pod hesitates. “If they have both chili fries and garlic fries, what should I order?”

Jaime scoffs. “What are you, stupid? Chili cheese fries, obviously.”

Pod nods. “Gotcha! Of course! Okay! See you guys in a bit!”

Jaime’s smirking when he turns back to Grey. Grey raises his hands and gives Jaime a slow clap, face dead.

“See?” Jaime says, adjusting his snapback on his head. “I told you I’d treat you right, baby. Gettin’ you a second dinner and errthang.” It’s a rerun of Jaime’s ongoing joke when they first grabbed a bite to eat together before heading to the bar. Drogo’s working a shift at the restaurant tonight. He was standing right there between the two of them earlier in the day when Jaime put Grey on the spot and asked Grey if he had dinner plans. Drogo was amused, teased them about their date. Jaime carried the joke forward, manipulating Grey into saying yes to dinner.

This is a stupid bar. Janeya, Daven’s girlfriend, picked it. There are glowing red lights all over the place. It looks like the inside of spaceship from a porno video. The drinks are insipidly fruity and overpriced.

“Oh, God,” Jaime mutters, watching Pod enthusiastically wave them over from across the room.

Grey sees the synchronized swoosh of hair, as a bunch of girls — Janeya’s friends, he guesses — turn their heads to stare at them — to stare at Jaime.

Grey’s mildly surprised when Jaime slips his arm around Grey’s waist, steering him away from the center of the huge row of tables, where Addam is holding court. He directs them to an area on the
end. He gestures for Pod to pick up all the food and the drinks and meet them over there. “Come on, boo,” Jaime says. “You know I get jealous.”

This is not normal for her — but Brienne and Sandor are fitter than she is. So she’s setting the pace of the hike, the switchbacks up the mountain making her thighs quiver. She blames their height. Tall people have longer strides and get places faster. She asks them to pause for a second. They let a family pass them as Missandei pulls out her selfie stick from her backpack.

Immediately, Brienne is frowning. Sandor just puts up with the pictures. It’s funny — the friends she has that are photo whores refuse to hike or go camping with her, and the friends who are down for roughing it in the woods hate getting their pictures taken.

“Picture time!” Missandei says. “Picture time! Up there!” She points to a boulder that’s as tall as Sandor. There are a few bumps and ridges that they can use to climb it. She slips a little bit on the way up and Sandor has to push her with both of his hands on her butt. It makes her laugh so much that she almost completely loses her hold and falls off the rock.

She makes Sandor and Brienne take a smiling picture — then one with a funny face. She thinks that Brienne looks the cutest in the funny-face picture, so she posts that one to Instagram.

At the top of the mountain, she feels a little whoozy looking down, feels a lot exhilarated. She turns to Brienne and Sandor, who are both grinning at her.

“You guys feel like grabbing some drinks tonight? My friends have this going away party thing at a bar close to my apartment.”

They prefunk with a bottle of vodka in her living room. Sandor is not a fan, but he drinks it anyway. She plays the part of the hostess and hands them each a glass of orange juice also. She cracks open a bag of pretzels and start mindlessly munching on the twists. Brienne keeps giving her shit for leaving her door unlocked — they walked into her apartment while she was still changing into her going-out clothes — Brienne keeps telling Missandei that they could’ve been robbers or rapists coming to slit Missandei’s throat.

“So wait,” Sandor says, grinning wryly, his scar crinkling with the light overhead. “Why do people who are going on vacation for a month need a going-away party?”

“Sometimes people with a lot of friends do weird shit like that,” Brienne says. “We just think it’s weird because we don’t have a lot of friends.” She snickers, raising her glass of orange juice and vodka to click it with Sandor's, who is drinking his straight.
The first thing Brienne says when they enter the establishment is, “Oh, great. You took us to a place where models hang out. Thanks.” Brienne makes a beeline for the bar, already holding some fingers up. Missandei rushes over, on the tail-end of Brienne’s gin and tonic order. It comes quick, and Brie takes it down even quicker. Missandei and Sandor watch her.

“Looks like we’re in for a fun night,” Sandor mutters, raising his glass of beer to his mouth.

Brienne spins around, leaning her back against the bar top, blue eyes scanning the crowd. “So, which one is he? Which one is the tutee I’ve heard so much about?”

Even with heels on, Missandei has to get on her tiptoes to get close to Brienne’s height. She grabs onto Brie’s forearm to balance herself and she gently rests her chin on Brienne’s shoulder. “There,” Missandei says, pointing to Grey and Drogo, who are across the room talking to each other. “The thinner, darker guy.”

“Ah,” Brienne says.

“He’s really smart,” Missandei says. “Picks up things really, really fast.”

Brienne laughs, the sound of it low and a little rough. “Well, he sure is hot.”

“He’s alright,” Sandor chimes in. “Not really my type though.”

When Missandei exits the restroom, she sees that Brienne’s face is bleeding red, and her friend is engrossed in a conversation with some smokin’ blond guy in a snapback hat. She catches Brienne’s panicked gaze and Missandei’s grins widely, giving Brienne a double thumbs up. Brienne’s eyes widen into circles and she lightly shakes her head, causing the guy she’s talking to angle his head around to glance at Missandei.

“Hey.”

Missandei turns to the sound of the voice. She sees warm eyes, crinkled in the corners, a strong jaw, soft wavy hair, and stubble.

“I saw you come in,” he says. “And I thought to myself that you were someone that I wanted to talk to.” He pushes out his hand. “I’m Daario.”

She smiles, shaking his hand. “Missandei.”
“Uhh.” Drogo pokes Grey in the shoulder. “Check it out, man,” he says, pointing to Missandei and Daario, laughing together over something at the end of the bar. “What a fucking assclown,” Drogo mutters. “Do you want me to go over there and break it up?”

“Nah,” Grey says, picking up his glass — a drink that Daven had picked and bought for him. He sips it, tasting it. It’s soda and whiskey. “Let her have fun,” he tells Drogo, knocking his drink back.

“Man, watch it,” Drogo says, watching Grey. “We have an early flight tomorrow.”

“Babe!” Missandei says excitedly, rejoining Brienne at the bar. “Who were you talking to! That was a long conversation!”

“Oh, God,” Brienne mutters, rubbing her hands down her face, hitching her leg up to sit on the stool behind her.

“BRIENNE!”

Both of their heads jolt up. They see Addam, his hand shooting up to wave at them. Missandei turns to Brienne quizzically and is about to shoot Sandor a look of confusion when Brienne suddenly gets tackled by Addam. His arms wrap around her midsection and his face presses into her collarbone as he shoves Brienne into the bar counter.

“Oh, dude!” he says. “It’s so good to see you, Brienne!”

“Whoa, you guys like, know each other,” Missandei says, in a daze.

“We’re old friends.” Addam finally lets Brienne go, flashes Missy a toothy grin. “Hey! Good to see you again, too!”

Brienne looks totally unbalanced. She says, “Uh.”

“Oh, shit!” Addam says, directing his attention to Sandor. “Dude, you are really tall, and you must work out. Do you get seasick, my friend?”
“That’s Jaime’s ex,” Daven tells him and Drogo quietly, leaning over the small table, looking up at them through glazed eyes. “The one that really fucked him up.”

“Seriously?” Janeya says, wrinkling up her nose. “Her?” She’s swaying back and forth, her arms wrapped tightly around Daven’s bicep.


When Missandei comes out of the restroom for the fourth time of the night, she finds that Brienne predictably pulled her disappearing act again. Missandei does a few laps around the bar — knowing it’s futile. It’s usually pretty easy to spot Brienne. She interrupts Sandor’s conversation with Addam and asks them if they’ve seen Brienne. They tell her that they think Brienne and Jaime are talking outside.

“What?” she says in confusion.

The entrance door to the bar almost swings into her face. It stops because it catches on the toe of her boot. She blinks rapidly.

She feels hands on her arms, holding her elbows. “Ah, are you okay? Did I get you?”

She straightens and looks into the face of the blond guy that Brienne was talking with earlier. He’s grinning like an goofball at her. She carefully extricates her arms from his grasp. “You’re Jaime?” she asks. “Brienne’s Jaime?”

His smile widens even further. “Yeah,” he says. “I’m Brienne’s Jaime.”

“Holy shit,” she says, staring at his face. And then she shakes it off. She blinks. “Is she okay? Where is she?”

“She’s heading home,” he says.

The drink-off really takes off in earnest when Addam drunkenly shouts for them to put the bill on his tab. Grey didn’t want to participate in this to begin with — but in the chaos of rule-creation and then rule-enforcement — he finds himself facing down Daven, Daario, and Sandor. Pod was the first to drop out. Jaime and Addam held on until the sixth round. Drogo just bowed out. And it’s just like Drogo to take games very personally and seriously — like a psycho.

“Ah,” Grey says, groaning, twisting his body under Drogo’s hands. “Dude, too hard.”

“Bieber!” Drogo snaps loudly. “Get over here and take over.”
Grey sees Jaime’s red hat hop up a little bit, next to Pia in the crowd, before he hears Jaime’s voice calling out. “Coming!” Jaime gets to them really quickly, delirious and cackling as he cracks his knuckles right into Grey’s ear. Drogo’s hands lift off of Grey’s shoulders and Jaime’s slighter ones replace them. He laughs like an idiot as his fingers dig into Grey’s back, massaging it. “Okay, stay loose. Stay loose, baby. You’re doing great,” Jaime says from behind him. “So, what’s the gameplan, boss?” he adds, now talking to Drogo, who is standing in front of Grey.

Grey’s the fucking middle of a weird human sandwich. Drogo’s crotch is like, right in his face.

“Goddamn,” Daario calls out, from across the table. “I can’t even fucking make a joke about what I’m looking at because it’s too fucking easy. You fuckers are ridiculous.”

Drogo tilts Grey’s chin up with his forefinger. “Don’t listen to him, champ. He’s just jealous.” Jaime bursts out laughing from behind, dropping down and leaning hard against Grey’s back, pressing his face against Grey’s neck.

She’s sitting in between Addam and Daario and watching Grey interact with his drunk friends. She can’t believe what she’s seeing — the way they are touching him, the way he’s letting them, the way they talk to one another, the way his jaw quivers as he quietly looks back and forth between the two of them, trying to hold back his laughter.

After two more rounds, the Daven guy is not in a good state, but he keeps insisting on continuing on. His girlfriend has been pissed ever since the game started. It’s when she dumps his shot in his lap and he almost falls backward in his chair that he becomes disqualified. He uses the opportunity to follow her into the women’s room, so they can continue their drunken fight.

Sandor’s done after that.

Daario smiles at Grey. “Wanna call it a draw, brother?” he says, slurring his words brutally.

“Fuck that!” Drogo shouts, before Grey can open his mouth to answer. “He would rather die!”

“And he ain’t your fucking brother, bitch!” Jaime adds. He’s kind of hilarious. Brienne kind of didn’t emphasize that very much in her descriptions of him.

The server puts down another round in front of them. She sees Grey hesitate, his heavy-lidded eyes staring down at the shot. He touches the rim of the glass with his fingers, pulling it closer. Alcohol gets on his fingers, and he lifts his hand to his mouth, licking his fingers. He sighs kind of mournfully, looking down at the table, as Jaime and Drogo rub his face excitedly. And she can’t help it. She’s been drinking, too. She keeps staring at him.

These fucking assholes. He feels like death. He was about to take Daario up on the draw, too.

His whole body shudders, when he gets a whiff of the shot. He shuts his mouth and plugs his nose, swallowing the vomit in his throat. The room is spinning violently, and he has to concentrate really
hard to keep holding onto the shot.

“I don’t know,” Grey says quietly, placing the shot back down on the table. “I don’t feel good.”

“I’m done,” Daario says, dropping his head into his arms on the table. “God,” he says, voice muffled.

“He’s done,” Grey repeats. “So, we’re done, too?”

“Nah, dude,” Addam says, laughing. “The rules clearly state that you have to get one up on him, to win.”

“Come on, bud,” Drogo says, lightly swatting his face. “Just one more!”

“One more! One more!” Jaime says, getting a chant going.

Fuck Jaime.

Fuck Drogo.

He must’ve blacked out — even if just for a little bit — because the next thing he knows, Missandei and Drogo are shouting, arguing with each other over the table. He groans, feeling his body dangerously swaying back and forth before Jaime’s hand clamps down over his chest to hold him steady.

“Just look at him!” Missandei yells. “He is done. He said no! He doesn’t want any more!”

“Look,” Drogo says. “Just chill out, doll. He’s fine. One more isn’t going to kill him.”

“Fuck you, dude! You’re being a real dick. You’re supposed to be his friend.”

“Hey now, guys,” Addam says, breaking in. “Let’s all calm down.”

“Addam!” Drogo snaps. “Don’t! Shut up!”

“Don’t you dare touch me!”

Grey opens his eyes in time to see Missandei suddenly nearby, snapping her arm from Drogo’s grasp. He tries to say something, but the room is chaotic — just a mess of lights and color.

She gives Jaime a glare. He raises his hands in surrender, taking a small step back, away from Grey. Grey’s face is hot and damp with sweat when she touches it. She bends over, looking at him in the face. His eyes are shut tight.

“Hey,” she says softly. “It’s me.”

He opens his eyes. For a moment, he looks steady — and utterly angry and miserable. He closes his eyes again. He mutters, “Dizzy,” quietly.

She sighs, standing up straight. She looks over her shoulder. Daario is passed out on the table. Sandor is snoring against Addam’s shoulder. And Jaime and Drogo are only starting to look a little
bit sheepish. She gives them another withering look. “Will you help me with him?” she asks.

After the short walk to her apartment building, with Drogo and Jaime taking turns carrying Grey. Drogo lays an unconscious Grey on her bed. He asks if Jhiqui is home — nervously. Missandei rolls her eyes and tells him that Jhiqui is sleeping over at her boyfriend’s place.

“We’ve got a nine o’clock flight tomorrow,” Drogo says, yawning. “Wake him up at six for me?” Her jaw drops. “Are you fucking serious?”

“Yeah,” Jaime says, adjusting his hat. “Pretty serious. He’ll be pissed if he misses the flight.”

“Do you guys want to crash here, too?” she asks.

“Nah, dude,” Jaime says. “I still have to pack.”

“You still have to pack!” Drogo snipes. “For real?”

Jaime shrugs. “I’ve been busy, dude!”

Drogo smushes her face into his bicep when they start saying goodbye, smearing her makeup. “We cool?” he says, voice rumbling. “Didn’t mean to yell at you before.”

“Yeah,” she says, voice muffled. “We cool.”

Her apartment is closer to the airport than his is. She pulls off his socks and shoes and pants and shirt, apologizing to him silently for the breach, sweating by the end of it because he’s relatively heavy. She resists touching him more than necessary. She pulls her blankets over his bared body.

She shakes his pants, hearing it jingle. She digs out his keys.

Then she tosses his clothes into her washing machine and starts it.

She quickly changes into casual clothes, into a loose pair of jeans and a t-shirt. She throws on a coat and grabs Jhiqui’s car keys, which, thank God she left the car at the apartment.

It takes Missy twenty minutes to drive to his place, because the roads are clear and she’s speeding. She apologizes to him silently, for the second breach of his privacy, before she unlocks his door with his key. She spots his suitcase easily. He’s so organized. She grabs the stack of his passport, his boarding pass, and an envelope of what she thinks is currency off of his table. She unplugs his phone charger from the wall.

She loads his stuff into the trunk.

Back at her place, she checks in on him to make sure he’s still okay. She gets on her hands and knees and finds the outlet so she can charge his phone for him.
It’s three in the morning when all’s said and done. She sets multiple alarms on her phone, to ensure she wakes up in time to wake him up. She’s too tired to really make a sleeping spot. She just shoves some of her clothes out of the way, lies down on the floor next to the bed, and pulls a spare blanket on top of her body.

His sleep is restless. There are pockets of time when he wakes up and finds that the world is still spinning harshly and he’s still nauseous. He quickly falls back asleep after each episode, his mind fuzzy and a blur.

It’s still dark when he wakes up for real, when he snaps up in bed because he has to puke. He’s disoriented right away — it’s a second, maybe two, before he realizes that he’s not at home. He’s somewhere else. Somewhere strange. He pushes off the bed, and he’s stunned when he sees Missandei’s curly hair, her head poking out from underneath a blanket. He almost stepped on her.

He’s booking it to the bathroom — fighting to recall exactly which door it is. He scrambles, making a lot of noise. The door slams open, hitting the wall. The toilet seat is barely lifted in time. And he gags loudly before his body lurches forward and expels the disgusting contents of his stomach. He pukes for a long time.

He can feel her hovering nearby. He can see her feet as he keeps heaving into her toilet.

He’s whoozy and shivering when he’s done, when there’s nothing left to give. She wordlessly hands him a glass of water. He kind of observes to himself that this is some bizarre role reversal. He holds onto the sink with one hand, takes his time with her mouthwash, with the toothbrush she handed him, trying to get the sour taste of vomit off of his tongue.

It’s five in the morning, and it takes a little bit of time — especially with him in his still-drunk, raging-hangover state — to explain to him that he doesn’t have to panic. All of his stuff for the flight is nearby. He can keep sleeping until it’s time to go.

“You went and got my stuff?” he says in confusion.

“Yeah,” she says, tiredly rubbing her face. “I got your suitcase, your passport, your money, your phone charger.”

“Oh my God,” he finally says, after the longest pause. “Thank you.”

She laughs humorlessly. “Don’t mention it. Your friends are assholes.”

“I know.”
It’s impossible for him to get back to sleep after that. He feels like utter shit, but his mind is too restless. He turns in bed, onto his side. Her back is to him. He thinks she’s sleeping. There’s a solid foot of space in between their bodies. He feels bad for her.

He had grabbed her hand after there was nothing left to say, had pulled back her blankets and guided her onto the bed, next to him. He had said nothing about it. She didn’t ask anything. She just laid down and curled her body up, sighing.

He tries to get up without waking her up, but the alarm on her phone blares and she’s groaning as she fumbles around for the source of the noise on the nightstand.

He tells her to keep on sleeping. She tells him she’s driving his dumb ass to the airport, so no, she can’t keep sleeping. He tells her they have another half an hour before they have to get up and leave.

The sun is rising and her bedroom is gradually brightening. They are doing this odd thing where they lie down in her bed, facing each other, staring at each other’s faces. She didn’t wash her face before falling asleep. Her makeup has dragged itself over her cheeks. She seems completely unaware and devoid of self-consciousness as she flutters her eyelashes.

This is one of the rare moments in his life where he tightly wishes to himself. He wishes he was capable — and able — and normal.

She’s definitely going back to sleep after she drops Grey off. She might go back to sleep for an entire week. He’s characteristically quiet on the drive to the airport. She turns on the radio — talk radio — for something to listen to.

She gets out of the car in the departures drop-off area. He doesn’t look very good, so she rushes to the trunk, so she can lift out his suitcase for him.

They both fumble with it, both fight over it awkwardly.

“Whatever,” she says, finally giving up, letting him have it.

She gives him a tired smile next to the car. She’s about to wave him off and tell him that she’ll see him later, duck back into the car and head on home. But he takes a step toward her. And she freezes, looking at him warily.

Then she realizes what’s happening. She opens her arms, laughs, and she walks into the hug. It’s loose and weird at first, but she holds on tight — until he strengthens his hold, too. He smells like her — like her shampoo and her soap and her laundry detergent. She didn’t shower like he did, so she must smell disgusting to him, comparatively. She presses her face into his neck, because this might be the first, the last, the only time she will ever get to do this. He’s so great. He’s so fantastic. The thoughts come out before she can stop herself from thinking them.
She’s giddy when they pull apart. Her heart is pounding hard.

“I’ll talk to you when I get back,” he tells her. “God, thank you for everything, Missandei,” he says.

Jaime is all over him as they wait to board. He jumps when he hears a rush of air, when he feels Jaime’s nose against the back of his neck. Jaime’s sniffing him. His head — and his fucking hangover — rattles when Jaime palms his head, when Jaime wiggles it.

“I’m so excited!” Jaime says cheerfully. Grey has no idea how this fucking guy is so peppy. Drogo, behind them, will only speak in cranky grunts and mumbles.

“Dude, you need to simmer down,” Grey mutters. “I cannot handle you like this for the next fifteen hours.”
Grey feels significantly better after the first leg of their flight because he spends six hours sleeping, curled up next to the window uncomfortably, forehead pressed against plastic. Jaime tries to wake him up once to show him a view of the vast gray-blue water during a cloud break, but he swats Jaime off, shimmying himself further into his coat.

Drogo buys them some overpriced beef jerky and a bottle of apple juice during the layover. Grey’s nauseous, tells D he’s not hungry at all, but Drogo insists. The jerky is dry and salty on his tongue as he grimaces and raises his hand to block his face from Jaime’s constant picture-taking.

He keeps observing that this feels different. This is the first time he’s gone anywhere with other people. He feels the weight of it already, overbearing and intimidating. Jaime and Drogo don’t talk as much as Addam, but they both still talk a lot. Grey supposes that a critical difference between him and them is that they grew up with siblings, were socialized in a certain comprehensive way. The people who fostered Grey had children, but that’s an entirely different thing.

Jaime has an inability to just sit still and sit quietly. He keeps telling them he is bored. He keeps inventing games and trying to rope Grey into them. He keeps rambling just to hear the sound of his own voice. Grey’s patience is wearing thin. He keeps wanting to punch the dipshit out.

When he walks back to them after visiting the toilet — he’s pretty elated that he’s not ass-bleeding today — he finds Jaime and Drogo chatting about last night, about the party. Grey plops down next to Jaime. Grey rests his feet on the chair across the aisle and pulls the bill of his hat down, covering his eyes. He leans his head back, trying to get some more shut-eye.

Jaime’s snickering. “Fuck, man. She was so pissed at you! Her face when you called her doll and told her to chill out — I wanted to shit my pants laughing.”

Drogo’s responding laugh is wheezing and breathy. “Secret? I said that on purpose. Just to fuck with her.”

“You’re an asshole! She’s such a sweetie!”

“I was so wasted!”

Grey tugs his phone out of the breast pocket of his coat. He flicks his cap up a bit as he turns on the screen. He silences his phone before typing out a text.

When her phone vibrates and chirps, she wakes up just a little bit more. She looks at the clock with one eye and is bummed to realize that her day is just gone.

She’s cheered up a little bit, when she groggily looks at her phone screen and sees that the message is from him. It’s a simple message. He’s just thanking her again for last night, and he’s asking her how
He finds that speaking Summer Tongue with people who aren’t Missandei is a foreign and awkward endeavor. It starts with the flight attendants on the second leg of their flight, simply asking them which beverage they’d like. Even though the attendants understand enough English to do their jobs, he nonetheless asks for water in Summer Tongue, the syllables feeling thick and awkward. There’s something about the cadence of Missandei’s voice and her manner of speaking that has imprinted on his brain over the last two years.

The customs agent speak English, the common language, of course. He’s not even mildly surprised when, after one glance at his face and his passport — with his name, Dovoghedhy — he and his luggage get pulled to the side. Jaime and Drogo cast a glance back at him — but this was a possibility he had already mentioned to them.

“Why are you searching my luggage?” he asks in English, as a gloved agent slams his suitcase on the table and starts unzipping it.

“You need to cooperate!” the agent holding his passport snaps, accent thick.

They repeatedly ask him why he’s in the Summer Isles. He repeatedly tells them he’s a tourist, and he’s vacationing with friends. The eye contact consistently lingers for too long — they’re scrutinizing him, glaring him down. He watches as they rifle through his things, touching his toiletries, his power cords, asking him what certain items are. He answers in short phrases, and at times, their sneering is obvious.

His money is zipped in his jacket pocket. He stands there rigidly as they switch to Summer Tongue, uncaring if he understands or not. They’re talking about him, using a word he doesn’t understand.

Grey’s suitcase is disorganized and his clothes are spilling out when the gloved agent looks past him. “You’re free to go,” he says, making no move to zip up Grey’s luggage.

Grey flips the lid of his suitcase, presses down on it, and closes up his shit.

Her date is washing his hands in the men’s room. There’s an empty plate and a ceramic cup — a soy latte — in front of her. Her date insisted that she get a pastry. She hadn’t wanted one because she wasn’t hungry and she tries not to eat out of boredom because of the empty calories, but her date insisted and then they started politely and awkwardly arguing about it in front of the cashier.

Missandei purses her violet lips, casts a careful glance around the coffee shop — she doesn’t know why, it’s not like she’s doing anything bad or wrong — and crosses her legs under the table, repositioning her navy skirt with one hand as she checks her phone. It’s been so hot lately that she hasn’t worn pants in a week.

She refreshes Instagram — scrolls through updates quickly. She passes the photo at first, but then her thumb snaps on the screen and pulls the last picture back. It’s badly lit. It’s Jaime’s account — she
just followed him back this morning. His picture is of Grey — slightly blurry — standing in front of a table with two officials. The caption says: This #criminal was detained because he thinks he’s too good to bribe officials.

She frowns, scrunching one hand in her hair, the other quickly typing out a message. She sees her date come out of the restroom in her peripheral vision.

“I like how there’s only one bed,” Jaime says when they walk into their room at the hostel, placing his suitcase in a corner. He immediately plugs in his power cord and starts charging his phone.

The walls in the room are plaster and originally painted with a thick layer of white, now stained sepia. Wooden shutters don’t do much to block the noise from a nearby water fountain. The bedspread is the color of clay, matching the tile work on the ground. The room smells faintly of mildew and bleach.

“Bet you’re used to fancier digs, eh, Jaime?” Drogo says, taking off his jacket before pulling his sweat-stained t-shirt over his head. “Champagne, caviar, bedsheets lined with gold.” He balls his shirt up in his hands and drops it in a corner of the room. It reminds Grey that they need to stop off at a store and buy some laundry detergent or soap at some point.

“It is pretty weird to see how the 99 percent live,” Jaime unzips his suitcase.

It’s scorching hot in Ebonhead — but the locals they’ve seen are walking around wearing jeans and long sleeves. Jaime has already said that he thinks they are going to go mad by the end of the month. Grey lays down on the bed and hears Drogo flick on the air conditioning unit. His back is sore from sleeping all fucked up on the plane.

Jaime and Drogo continue changing their clothes and chatting — both energetic and antsy to move after nearly an entire day sitting in a plane or in an airport. They talk about finding an ATM, finding food, finding something to drink. Jaime reminds Drogo to only drink water from bottles, even though their hostel host said that the water is filtered. Drogo makes fun of Jaime, asking him if he read that tidbit on Reddit.

Grey hears the muffled sound of conversation in Summer Tongue echoing against the walls. It’s an odd accent — a reminder that this place didn’t cease to exist when he left it. It carried on and evolved. He wonders if the way he remembers his parents sounding — the way he has modeled his own accent — is a relic from the past, frozen in time from decades ago.

He raises his phone to his face to check it. He smiles to his phone. She texted him back, told him that she sees that he’s causing trouble already.

Jaime is perplexed with the shower set-up, but Grey and Drogo adjust to it fairly easily. The bathroom doesn’t have an area separated for bathing or showering — there’s no tub. There’s just a showerhead attached to a hose and a bucket next to the drain in the floor. The toilet and sink is right in front of him, and the knob for the water comes off in his hand when he twists it.
It’s kind of weird — how far back muscle memory goes. He finds himself unconsciously adopting habits from so long ago. The way he sits on the toilet — squatting and hovering. The way he automatically saves soapy water in the bucket, going back to a taught system of conservation. Sometimes he fights to hold onto his Westernization — reminds himself to stand up straighter and to take up more space. Sometimes it feels utterly comfortable to compress and stay low to the ground.

They walk through rows of food carts after dinner, the smell of sizzling meat and corn permeating the humid, night air. English is barely spoken here, but sellers know a few stray phrases — they know how to aggressively greet and they know basic numbers. Jaime is especially susceptible, with his light skin, light eyes, and light hair. He is always approached first, sometimes exclusively. The first few days were tense and stressful.

Sometime in the first few days, Jaime haplessly stood frozen as a woman pulled away the collar of her shirt to reveal a scar and bruising from transporting baskets of fruit on her shoulders every day. Jaime bought a pineapple for probably triple the going rate. The pockets of Jaime’s shorts are filled with paper wrappers, from the gum and candy that he buys from children with leftover change.

A tray of cookies get placed on the table they are sitting at when they stop off for a beer. Grey watches as a little girl about seven years old talks to Jaime in Summer Tongue, rambling and telling him in a rehearsed monotone that her grandma made the cookies and that they are fresh.

“Ah, no thanks, kiddo,” Jaime says, shaking his head. “Sorry, but no.”

The girl hits up Drogo, launching into the same speech again. He lets her finish it before he chuckles softly, pats her head, and says no. Drogo is usually good with hawkers — Dothrakis have the same bartering culture, so he’s familiar. But Drogo also has a soft spot for little girls, says they often remind him of his youngest sister.

Grey stares ahead into the distance resolutely when the girl rounds on him. In Summer Tongue, he tells her he will not be buying any cookies before she gets a chance to finish her speech. She snaps her mouth shut mid-sentence and starts to cut down the price, offering him a two for one deal. He gruffly tells her he will not be buying any cookies and tells her to move on. She glares at him before walking over to the next table.

“Ice cold, bro,” Jaime says. “You are ice cold.”

Grey grunts, picking up his beer bottle. “You think children are so innocent,” he says, voice raspy and low.

“God, who hurt you?” Jaime rolls his eyes.

Grey snorts, feeling his face twitch into a small smile.

“Hey, can you ask that guy over there where the toilets are for me?” Drogo says. “I gotta go.”

Drogo and Jaime constantly need for Grey to be a translator for them — for basic needs like bathroom, food, transportation, and tickets to venues.

Grey gets up from his seat.
She goes out with the girls her last night before she boards a plane to go back to Myr to stay for the rest of summer. She wears a sparkly blue crop top that exposes her navel — a decision she comes to regret a little bit as errant sticky hands from creepy guys skim against her back and her stomach in the dark club.

Then, some blond with cropped hair and a bottom lip piercing corners her as she waits in line for the toilets. His hand is braced next to her face and he’s looming over her as he dips in and says something into her ear, something indecipherable over the booming bass of the music.

She’s sweaty. She’s been drinking. She thinks he’s hot. And she hasn’t had sex with anyone in over six months because she’s been so preoccupied.

She lets him pull her into the men’s room, takes the lead in there — and together they stumble into an open stall, ignoring the crowd of restroom users, the crowd ignoring them. The door slams shut. She tells him she has to pee — and then unabashedly pulls down her panties, letting them drop to her ankles as she sits on the toilet, her black skirt covering her lap as she pees. He’s watching her with a grin — a look of amusement. She’s already forgotten his name.

After that, it’s just short words, sometimes phrases. She asks him if he has a condom. He’s already ahead of her, tearing apart the packet. Her fist punches the stall door roughly when he enters her. Her head rolls back, and her eyes shut.

Later, when she goes and retrieves her jacket, Missandei finds that her hand hurts a little bit, whenever she closes it. She ignores it — laughs as she uses that hand to push Doreah and Clea into the backseat of an Uber. She calls out to the front seat, asks Jhiqui if she still has Missandei’s phone in her purse. Jhiqui had taken it during dinner because she was fed up with Missandei always being on it.

“Yep! Still got it!”

The sign up ahead says that the 8 a.m. bus is boarding in five minutes. They are staying close to the outskirts of the city to save money. They have to take a bus or the train into the city center to hit up the art museum.

Grey quickens his pace, weaving in and out of the crowd of people dragging along backpacks and children. He can see the shiny aluminum side of the bus up ahead, almost a speck in the distance. They might be able to shortcut through a field.

“Hold on. Wait.”

Grey doesn’t stop immediately — he’s too focused on making the bus.

“What the fuck, man! I asked you to fucking wait for one fucking second!”

He comes to a stop, breathing a little bit hard, his pulse running through his arteries hotly as the sun
blinks overhead. When he turns around, Drogo’s face is red and Jaime is standing there looking blank, eyes darting back and forth between Drogo and Grey.

Grey clenches his jaw, swallowing. “The bus is leaving,” he says quietly.

“No shit the bus is leaving,” Drogo says, patience snapping. “But what is the fucking rush? We can’t catch the next one?”

“We’ll have to wait for the next one,” Grey says.

“No shit, Grey!” Drogo shouts. “Like I’m stupid and think that buses just magically appear out of thin air after one leaves. You’re so fucking condescending. Fucking leading us around like we’re fucking dogs.”

Grey scoffs — it’s an unconscious response. A short breath is expelled, and then he just stands there, impassively staring back at Drogo, who alternates between being able to look back at him — and being too pissed to look at his face. It’s the same for Grey, too. He is also pissed. He is actually fucking tired of their fucking neediness and helplessness and their inability to fucking get even basic shit done. He is tired of constantly fetching shit for them as they sit back and relax and crack jokes like two assholes while he does all the heavy lifting. He can’t believe this is getting thrown back into his fucking face like this.

“Man, fuck this,” Drogo says angrily, turning around, walking into the crowd. “I’m out.”

“D!” Jaime calls out. “Come on! Where are you going!”

After a moment, Grey shakes his head. And then he tells Jaime he’s going to catch the bus, before he spins around and starts running toward the speck, across the field. He can hear Jaime call his name. He can hear Jaime following. He can feel the slip of the dry, superfine dust underneath his feet as he navigates through the dead tufts of burnt grass in the heat, lungs wide, open and pulling in the thick air. Sweat blooms on his face, and he blinks. He used to have to take off his shirt and get whipped in the back with a switch, whenever he ran away. He used to get hit more if he cried from pain.

There’s no air-conditioning on the bus. He’s damp when he boards it.

Jaime collapses in the seat next to him, gasping and dripping sweat, shoving his bag underneath the seat in front of them. The bus jerks to the right, dropping an inch as the driver releases the brake. They slowly ease onto the road.

Jaime says nothing about the fight with Drogo. Instead, he says, “You’re really fast. Jesus.”

Grey pulls out his phone and waits for the super slow connection to sync everything up. There’s another message from Missandei. He opens it. Reads it. His eyes widen, and then he reads it again. And then he reads it a third time.

Missandei runs into her grandma’s arms, spinning the both of them around outside of the Myr airport. In Low Valyrian, her grandmother cups her face — searching for physical changes from the past year — and tells her it looks like she hasn’t been eating enough. She touches Missandei’s hair, tells her the color is no good. It looks fake. Missandei laughs and touches her dark purple-tinted hair. She tells her grandma it’s supposed to look fake.
Her brother Marselen lifts her suitcase into the trunk of his car, grinning before he shuts it, before he pulls her into a spine-cracking hug.

They are in the midst of catching up during the hour-long drive home when her phone buzzes. Missandei flips it over and the message preview causes a brow to arch in confusion. The sound of her grandmother and brother’s voices fades away as she unlocks her phone and navigates to her texts.

His latest text to her says: *I know you’re not a construction worker.*

She looks up, to reread the latest string of their messages. She stops breathing. And then her blood runs hot — angry. She realizes: Jhiqui.

Timestamped from 1 a.m. is a message Missandei totally didn’t write.

It says: *hay baby Im not a construction worker but I would like to use ur wood.*

By the time they get back to the hostel after going to the art museum and the outdoor market, they smell really rank. Drogo is freshly showered and sitting in the common area, talking with a bunch of other tourists from Westeros. He gives them a small smile when he sees them walk in.

Jaime had posted a picture of Grey with a middle-aged bearded man wearing a canvas apron on Instagram. Neither are looking at the camera. Grey’s back is straight as a board and both of the man’s hands are thrown up in the air. The caption talks about how Grey fought to the bitter death over a few small coins because he wanted to take money out of the mouths of the man’s poor children. There are a bunch of notifications on his phone because Addam and Daven keep responding to Jaime’s picture with stupid comments, and they keep tagging Grey in them.

“Are you guys hungry, yet?” Drogo asks, walking up to them. Grey inhales when Drogo reaches out and lightly grabs his head, tapping Grey’s skull with a thumb. “Do you want to go get dinner after you guys shower and stuff?”

“Yeah.” Grey claps Drogo on the chest once as he passes by, heading to their room.

“*Grey.*”

His eyes snap open — open to pitch black. His heart is palpitating violently, chest heaving, body damp with sweat.

“You were talking in your sleep,” Jaime whispers from beside him in bed. They are touching shoulders. Just beyond Jaime, he can hear Drogo lightly snoring.

“I’m going to go grab some air,” Grey whispers back, sitting up, the bed creaking. He snatches up his phone from the floor. He hears Jaime sighing softly as the door to their bedroom lightly latches.
He quietly pads through the dark hostel and goes out onto the patio adjacent to the kitchen, his feet bare. If he goes out the front door without a key, he will be locked out. He pulls a foam cushion off a chair and sets it on the stone floor, sitting on it.

He hits the green call button and holds his phone up to his ear. He’s about to hang up on the third ring when she suddenly picks up. He can hear her breathing before she speaks.

“Did I wake you?” he says quietly.

Her voice is soft and sleepy-sounding — so girly and cute that it makes his chest ache. He shakes his head — he doesn’t know why he’s calling — lightly hitting the back of it against the wall behind him.

She thought she was dreaming at first — thought she was talking to him in her dream. But the sound of his voice in her ear grew steadier and steadier — more consistent — louder.

“I wasn’t the one who sent you that message, you know,” she whispers into her phone during a lull in the conversation, after he tells her that he had a nightmare, sparing her the specific details of it. She rolls over to press the side of her face into her pillow. She’s sleeping in the room that she grew up in. “Jhiqui thinks she’s so hilarious.”

He tells her that he knows she didn’t send it. The text didn’t sound like her.

“It’s nice to be back home,” she says softly. “But it’s also weird. I keep walking by my brother’s old bedroom, and I keep thinking he’s in there. I almost knock on his door without thinking sometimes. I keep accidentally calling out to my grandpa — because I think he’s gardening in the yard or something.”
Grey visits the place of his childhood nightmares

Chapter Notes

I did that thing again where I posted two chapters in a short space. Don't skip chapter 12, please! :D

For the first time in a long time, she wakes up to the sound of her grandma vacuuming her bedroom. She peeks an eye open and immediately shuts it because the sunlight is so overbearing, busting through the slats of her blinds. Her grandma pauses, letting the vacuum keep running as she stoops over and starts picking up Missandei’s discarded clothes — a lacy turquoise demi bra, a thong that had fallen out of her suitcase, and a loose pair of bikini briefs with flowers on them and a persistent period stain.

Her grandma casually folds the tiny items before stacking them on top of Missandei’s suitcase. Her grams is addicted to cleaning. Missandei has speculated that that’s why she’s such a dirty slob — it’s because she was raised by a woman who constantly trails after her, catching every crumb she thoughtlessly drops.

She rolls over and picks up her phone, immediately checking for new text messages. There are none, which she notes with disappointment. And then she rolls her eyes at herself. Because she’s an idiot. She had gotten off the phone with him late. There’s barely been time for him to leave a message.

Breakfast is reheated rice porridge, from dinner the night before. Missandei pulls on her sandals before scratching her nails into Lucy’s neck. Lucy is her grandma’s little brown mutt — something her brother Mossador brought home a year ago to stave off their grandma’s loneliness, living in the house by herself. Missy kisses her grandma bye before she runs out of the house, almost gasping at how hot it is outside. She unlocks the fence and slides it open before hopping in her grandpa’s old beater. It’s a flatbed truck that he used to cart his landscaping stuff on. Her grandma never drives it because she says it’s too big. She hasn’t had the heart to sell it, though. It ends up being the thing that Missandei drives around when she’s home.

An hour later, Missandei loudly honks the horn when she spots a tall blond hiding underneath a straw sun hat in the arrivals area at the airport.

Missandei lets out a high-pitched scream when Brienne hops into the truck. Brienne is just staying for a little over a week — because of her work schedule. Missandei had begged and cajoled her into coming, promising that all she really has to pay for is the plane ticket. Food and room and board is taken care of.

Brienne smiles, holding her hat to her head as she buckles her seatbelt with the other hand. “I am going to fry here,” Brienne says. “I already know it.”
One of the topics over breakfast is his ass-bleeding. He tells Jaime and Drogo about it because Jaime was bugging him about the fruit he was exclusively eating for breakfast, demanding to know why he wasn’t eating the awesome curried stewed goat. Drogo is mildly worried, and Jaime can’t believe that the doctor didn’t know what was going on with his butt. Grey shrugs and tells them it’s probably a small hemorrhoid and every time he takes a hard dump, it probably scratches the bump and makes it bleed again and stuff. Grey darkly tells them that he’s a woman now — he wears maxi pads whenever it’s that time of the month and everything.

“Fuck, man,” Drogo says. “Can you please go to the doctor again when we get back home?”

After their meal, they hop on the bus — standing room only — and head into the historic district to walk around and see the old buildings. Grey and Jaime get to stare at each other the whole ride, Jaime obsessively scratching at the peeling skin on the bridge of his nose. They are all getting very familiar with one another. They know one another’s morning routines and it’s an effortless dance, every day. With an expertise born from years of corraling younger siblings, Drogo forced them all to sync up on shitting through sheer willpower, through sheer belief — got them all to go in the morning so that their long days out don’t get interrupted with emergency trips to the toilet.

They stop at a park to view the waterfront. Jaime climbs on a concrete wall to take better photos. The wall borders massive succulent plants, four feet off the ground.

“I haven’t posted in almost a day,” Jaime says, walking back and forth on top of the wall. “But I don’t want to post just to meet a quota. I want to post something cool, ya know? Brainstorm with me, guys. What would be dope?”

Missandei laughs maniacally as her foot presses down harder on the brake, as the steering wheel roughly jerks to the right. She corrects it and the truck hits a pothole — sending them flying for a gruesome moment, the top of her head skimming the roof of the truck. Beside her, Brienne is clutching the handle over the window and also clutching her own knee, biting down on her screams, which come out muffled and terrified.

Missandei bends down and rolls up her window to minimize the dust clouds in the car, twisting along the dirt road. Then she revs the truck, and it bounces with a heavy thunk. Brienne screeches again.

“Fun, right!” she says, screaming at Brienne before reaching out to turn up the music.

Her grandpa’s truck so fucking old that it doesn’t have a CD player — just a tape deck. Missandei had pulled out Marselen’s old Discman and plugged an adapter into it. They are rolling through all of her old mixes, currently listening to the “Summer Wedding Mix.” It’s a mix that she was going to play at her and Neal’s wedding, if they had a ceremony in the hot months. It has slow romantic Mariah Carey songs interspersed with stuff like Coolio’s Gangsta’s Paradise. Missandei had cackled when she found the stack of her old mixes in her closet in a cardboard box that her grandma had packed away. Missandei was kind of an idiot during her teenage years.

She hits the brakes and they come to a bone-smashing halt at the end of the road. “We are here!” she
announces, shutting off the engine.

“Oh, yay,” Brienne mumbles in a daze.

It’s a relatively secluded beach, at the end of a dirt road that usually takes twenty minutes to drive through. Missandei shaved off seven minutes going sixty miles an hour down it.

Missandei is rubbing SPF a million onto Brienne’s virgin-white back as Brienne hunches over her phone. Missy can hear sound coming out of it — a video — and then Brienne gasps, her hand flying to her face.

“What?” Missy says.

“Dude,” Brienne says, holding her phone up to Missandei’s face. It’s Jaime’s Instagram account. Missandei reaches out with her lotiony hand and tilts the screen so she can see it better underneath the sun’s glare. It’s a fifteen-second video. The caption says: He is okay. Don’t worry.

She squints as she makes out Jaime’s face talking into the phone screen — she can’t hear what he’s saying — and then she sees Grey in shorts and a t-shirt, standing on the edge of a garden bed, facing some gnarly desert plants. He bends his knees, going into a squat.

“Oh shit.”

The backflip off the wall looks good, actually. Clean and neat.

Quickly, the video shifts back to Grey standing on the wall. She can make out Drogo and Jaime laughing in the background. This time, the backflip is different — faster somehow — and her stomach drops when he hits the ground in an unexpected way. He lands on his feet, but awkwardly. He immediately slams down onto his knees. The video cuts out in a flurry of motion before there’s a quick shot of red blood smeared down his shin.

Jaime is sitting on the dirt ground, clutching his stomach, swaying back and forth, his face red as his laughing morphs into hiccups. Drogo’s hands on Grey’s bleeding leg trembles and shakes every time Drogo loses control, every time he breaks into a giggle fit.

“You’re getting water down my pants, man! Ah!”

Jaime shows them his phone screen. They hear the video replaying. Jaime had made him flip off the wall like, ten times, trying to get the perfect slo-mo capture of it. Bieber and D were so impressed with his skills that he became haughty and arrogant and told them he could do a double flip. He did it perfectly once, but Jaime was a dum-dum and wasn’t recording. So Grey tried to redo it. But instead, he bit it.

Jaime’s been watching the video he spliced together on a loop, in a deep show of narcissism. His flushed face is serious for a slow second before he hears himself scream like a girl on the video — then his composure dissolves and he starts bouncing with laughter again. “You hit the ground so hard! The sound you made!” he says, turning the phone screen back to his face. “I can watch this forever!”

“Oh my God,” Grey says, his eyes wide, pressing his hands over his smile, pressing back his laugh
as Drogo pulls apart plastic, crouched over Grey’s right knee where a swatch of his skin has been scraped off. Bright red blood is already puddling again.

“Thank Jesus you got the overnight ones,” Drogo says, pressing the maxi pad he picked out of Grey’s backpack onto the wet wound that he had doused in their drinking water.

“Wait,” Grey says, looking Drogo in the face. “I forgot to tell you about the AIDS that I have.”

Drogo freezes.

Grey laughs in his face.

He tells Jaime and Drogo that they will not fucking pay to use a washer and dryer. He can tell from the look of them that they are useless at going back to basics, Jaime significantly more than Drogo. Jaime’s crazy smart, but his dumb rich white boy tendencies come out the strongest in the most mundane moments. Sometimes he makes really stupid assumptions — like when he mentioned to them that special water goes into the toilet, explaining that toilet water is different from shower water or sink water. He and his siblings were apparently told that as children so they wouldn’t drink toilet water.

And sometimes when Drogo and Grey call him out on his stupidity, asking him to cite his sources — he sheepishly tells them that the housekeeper or the family’s driver or his dad’s personal assistant imparted this misinformation onto him.

Jaime is kind of amazed that clothes can be washed without a machine. He goes into the bathroom to keep Grey company as Grey washes all of their dirty clothes for them, using the detergent he bought and the bucket on the ground. Jaime usually rambles at him, voice echoing as Grey is elbows-deep in sudsy water and sometimes their socks and shirts and underwear. It’s an activity they do at night, after a long day walking around.

Grey puts the damp clothes on hangers after he wrings them out, stashes them in an open wardrobe, a bath towel spread out on the bottom to catch the errant droplets of water.

Brienne doesn’t have a big family so at times, hanging out in Missandei’s grandma’s house with Missandei’s brothers, their wives, their kids, the aunts and uncles, their spouses, their kids coming and going — it’s overwhelming.

Brienne is naturally inquisitive, so she asks a lot of questions. There’s a language barrier between Brie and Missy’s grandma, so Brienne mines most of the information from Missandei’s brothers. Missandei passes a bowl of lentils to Mossador as he explains to Brienne that it’s customary for Naathi to marry young — because they value family above all else. He tells Brienne that they are an artful, peace-loving people, which has its good sides and some downsides.

Brienne curiously asks what the downsides are. Missandei glances at her big brother, smiling at him briefly, before she tells Brienne that strictly in a very generalized way, Naathi don’t really value
ambition and education. And even though they teach pacifism to both boys and girls — there’s a
greater emphasis on girls to be submissive.

“How come you aren’t like that, Missy?” Brienne asks.

Beside her, Mossador chuckles, shaking his head.

Missandei shrugs, opting to give Brie the cliff notes version of things. “There are some things about
Westernization that we accept because we think it’s better for us in the long run. And there are things
about it that we reject, to retain a sense of who we are as a people.”

In an early conceit of this trip, he had planned on asking Jaime and Drogo to give him a day to
himself. He was going to keep it vague and say that was just shit he needed to do. Some things
should be kept private. But then he’s lying in bed with them in the dark, listening to the whirring of
the air conditioning unit and Jaime’s thick laugh, massaged by a bit of beer, as he tries to get them to
play twenty questions.

“Guys,” Grey says to the ceiling. “Do you want to visit an old internment camp?”

“Oh my God, fuck yes we do,” Jaime says.

The tour van picks them up at their hostel at seven in the morning. There are several other families —
several returnees like him on board. There are also a bunch of random tourists who look like Jaime.
Grey sends her a text, tells her he’s leaving the city and he will probably not have service for the rest
of the day.

He can’t sleep at all on the five-hour drive there. Drogo, he has found, can sleep anywhere, in any
state, in any environment. Jaime reads his travel book for part of the drive, uncomfortably squished
between Grey and Drogo’s shoulders. Grey doesn’t comment on the reading — he doesn’t know
what he doesn’t know about Jaime. And he hasn’t asked. He has tried to teach himself that in the
absence of information, it’s prudent to assume the best. He does this to combat his natural extreme
pessimism. Jaime has been dropping random factoids the whole trip, telling them historical tidbits that
he has read.

Grey’s glad to stretch his legs when they finally stop. He’s glad that his surroundings aren’t
immediately recognizable. The internment camp has been decommissioned. And he was a child
whose stay lasted just a few months.

“What questions so far?” their tour guide asks, facing the crowd.

Jaime raises his hand. “Do you know the prevalence of sex trafficking here? Or whether there was
some sort of sex trade economy within the populations here?”

There is a lengthy pause. The tour guide schools his features into one of professional indifference.
“There are no records of that,” he finally says.
Jaime’s face scrunches up skeptically. “Okay?” he says, dissatisfied.

“Any other questions?”

“Yeah,” says a man in the front. “Wouldn’t you say some people were better off going to Astapor? After all, the local government here was crumbling and it was descending into lawlessness anyway.”

Grey can’t listen anymore. He starts walking off, feigning interest in the landscape and the structural remnants of what was once here.

He clears his throat, brushing his hands together, clearing the dust from them. He unwillingly starts remembering this image of his mother doing the same, after leaning a straw broom against the wall. He wonders if simple motions can be things that are inherited, genetic and hard-coded. He remembers a simple airy house — and kind of the concept of happiness for a while. He remembers how he sobbed into his hands, into the dirt ground when he was told there was no food left and what needed to be done. He was maybe eight years old. He volunteered, for some reason thinking it would be kinder that way — and that was the beginning of that particular thought process in him — the notion that he has to be cruel in order to be kind.

His father was somehow proud of him, when he led Momo out into the yard. Momo was running all over and jumping on him, because the dog thought they were going to play. It must have been a world-changing shock for that dog, when he held it from behind, hugging it one last time before he dragged a blade across its throat. And then his father shouted at him to hold the thrashing dog down as it died. A lesson he learned that day is that everything, everyone fights to live — at the end. He made himself watch as his mother dipped the dog in boiling water in order to skin it. Momo lingered grotesquely for a few weeks, in the form of jerky.

He found himself to be similarly expendable in the face of great famine. He was sold — twice.

“Not much to look at anymore, huh?”

Grey turns to Drogo. “There were once shelters right around here. Some of the buildings were pretty advanced — tall.”

“Yeah?”

They spend their last week in Omburu. It’s the island of his birth. That’s something he tells Drogo and Jaime when they are on a boat, the smell of gasoline prominent. Grey doesn’t quite understand the urge he feels inside, to seek out this sort of history — he’s almost already sure he knows what he will find — which is nothing. But it’s with a bizarre obsession that he leads Drogo and Jaime down a never-ending maze of dilapidated roads. He had told them to stay at the hotel where they will be more comfortable — a little wary that Drogo will get upset again if they waste so much time on nothing.

But Drogo intuit Grey’s mood. And Drogo is patient. It stirs feelings of guilt.

They start walking with the sun still in the sky and it’s dark by the time he finally gives up. He can’t find the house he grew up in. When he calls it quits, he drags his hands over his face, before entwining them on top of his head. He walks off a few feet and stares out into the dark.
“White people like crustless sandwiches and making decisions slowly,” Jaime says, hunched over the checkered table, sunburnt to shit, laughing drunkenly into his arm. It’s their last night and Drogo declared that they will end the trip like how they started it — brutally hungover and wishing for the sweet embrace of death.

They alternate their beers with this homemade moonshine. He trips over the words, when he asks the owner of the restaurant in Summer Tongue if they are going to go blind drinking it. He laughs when the owner takes grave offense. He ordered two rounds to make up for the slight, underneath the bright lights, the dark sky devoid of clouds, and strains of Doors songs that he doesn’t know — Jaime has to tell him.

“How do you know that feeling about girls?” Jaime says, raking his nails slowly across the table. “When it’s so overbearing that you are constantly on the brink of limitless self-loathing — because you don’t even know if it’s possible to be enough? Because you feel too much.” He laughs quietly. “I am obsessed.” He tells them about Brienne — none of the logistical details — just earnest words about her goodness and words about what he deserves. It’s something that Grey has a hard time looking at — he stares at the table — and it’s also something he has a hard time listening to.

“I get that feeling,” Drogo says, sighing. “About girls. I understand.”

“You’re always so fucking quiet about girls,” Jaime says, kicking Grey’s shin under the table. “You know that Addam and Daven thought you were gay for the longest time?”

“Uh, I did too,” Drogo says. “When we first met.”

Grey shrugs. “Most people do.”

“Well?” Jaime says expectantly.

Grey casts his eyes up momentarily. His heart beating in his chest is steady. Like Jaime, he also has this concept of what is good and what he deserves — and then what she deserves. And then he says, “Yeah,” slowly. “I also understand that feeling — about girls.”

Jaime claps his hands together, laughing — for reasons Grey doesn’t really understand. But the laughter is infectious, and it causes him and Drogo to laugh along, too. He is very sure — they are going to have a miserable flight home tomorrow.

Jaime suddenly stops laughing. “I was molested by my stepmother,” he says, his eyes looking far away. “When I was young. She took advantage. That’s something that happened to me. And it’s also something that not very many people know about me. But I dunno, man. We’ve seen a shit-ton of horrible slavery and human trafficking shit on this trip.” His green eyes shift, searching over Grey’s face. “And I know that was your life. And it’s so fucked up and unfair. And we’ve been pretending that we don’t know — but we do know this about you.”

Grey stares back at him.
Grey buckles his seatbelt, tightening it. He zones out when the flight attendants go over the emergency procedures. He figures he will cheat death yet again — if it comes to it. Or he will just die. No biggie.

His head is pounding, throbbing. He has cotton-mouth, no matter how much gum he chews. Over a quick breakfast, Drogo swore that he will never drink, ever again.

“Goddammit, amazing. Drogo is already fucking sleeping,” Jaime mutters under his breath, staring mutinously at the flight attendants and their bright, frozen smiles. “They need to shut the fuck up already. I’m going to eat my fucking seat cushion if they don’t shut the fuck up soon.”

“Want to use my headphones?” Grey asks.

Jaime shakes his head, reaching over to pat the back of Grey’s hand on the arm rest. “No, boo. I can’t listen to that repetitive electronica shit that you listen to. It makes my ears bleed.”

She thinks it’s really odd that he wants to pick her up from the airport when she comes back from Myr. For one, he doesn’t have a car. But she takes him up on it anyway. He tells her to look out for a black car when she calls after picking up her suitcase from baggage claim. He abruptly hangs up before she can ask him what make and model she should be looking out for.

There are a lot of black cars out in the pick-up area. And she grunts in annoyance and is juggling her bags, trying to get to her phone so she can call him again — when she hears a honk. Her head snaps up and she recognizes Drogo’s car and Grey driving it. Oh, he borrowed Drogo’s car.

“Oh my God, you got so dark,” she blurts when he rolls down the window to peer out at her.

“You got dark,” he retorts.

She grins. “Hi! Man, it’s so good to see you!”

He reaches down and pops the trunk. “It’s open for ya.” He hooks his thumb and gestures backward.

“God, such a gentleman,” she says, dragging her big suitcase and laptop bag to the back, smiling to herself the whole way.
Missy buys a car

She knows a little bit about cars, but the true experts — her brothers — are far, far away. So she makes Sandor tag along when she goes shopping. Sandor knows less about cars than she does, but he’s six-foot-four, two-hundred pounds of muscle, and has a five o’clock shadow by noon. It was a coin-flip between using him and using Grey — but Grey said no. Which is fine. Grey also doesn’t have a badass scar running down half of his face, so there’s that too.

She loops her arm around Sandor’s waist when they exit Jhiqui’s red Camry at the used car lot. He stiffens a little bit, glancing down at her. She gives him a smile.

She prepped him on the way over, told him he’s supposed to be a grumpy gus — the bad cop. He’s supposed to generally nay-say everything — from mileage to pricing to safety features to size. And at some point, he has to threaten to leave the lot. Maybe they will actually do it, too. Maybe they will actually leave the lot.

A sales associate spots them, grins, and starts walking their way. Missandei lightly pinches the flesh on Sandor’s hip.

“Hi, there! I’m Mike! Can I help you guys?”

“Oh, hey,” Sandor says gruffly, voice a deep timbre. “We’re just looking. For my girlfriend.”

“Hello!” she says sweetly, smiling and cocking her head to the side.

Grey’s back is to the front door, so it’s more Daven’s reaction — Daven’s eyes lifting and looking far off from across the coffee table — that makes Grey swivel around. Her hair is tied up, her skirt obscenely short, her lips blood red, and her eyes are wide and wild. Sandor has a look of sustained patience standing behind her, holding the door of Daven’s condo open.

“What up!” She shoots her arm up, stands on her tiptoes — white teeth bared like an animal — and then she spikes her keys — throws them to the ground as hard as she can. “Motherfuckers!”

“Missy got a good deal on a new car,” Sandor deadpans, shutting the door behind them.

“Fuck yeah I did,” she says, stooping down to pick up her keys, carefully keeping her knees pressed together. “I don’t know why I just did that,” she says, holding her new car keys up to her face, scrutinizing them, kind of rubbing off some imaginary bit of dirt.

“Such a lady,” Drogo says, sitting on the couch next to Addam, with a remote controller in between his legs. They had paused the game when the door opened. “Congrats on the car.”

She surveys the room quietly. Then she says, “Am I barging in on your boys night? Sandor said to come by?” — even as Daven rises from his seat to walk to his stainless steel fridge to grab two beers.
and two chairs from his dinette. Daven drags the chairs over and hands the beers to Jaime to uncap.

“Nah, babe,” Addam says, smirking, his eyes purposely looking her and her get-up up and down. “You and your skirt are always welcome. Gives us something fun to look at besides Jaime’s ugly mug.”

“True dat.” Jaime pops off a cap with a bottle opener and hands her the beer bottle. He uncaps the other and leans forward to hand it to Sandor.

Daven gently nudges a chair behind her, hitting the back of her legs. “Sit,” he says softly.

Grey suddenly rises to his feet, from his position on the floor. “Smoke?” he says, looking to the balcony. He feels her eyes on him.

Drogo and Jaime start up the game again, as Daven, Addam, and Sandor follow Grey out through the sliding glass door. Daven picks up a paperclip and a glass pipe off his patio table and starts quickly cleaning it up a bit.

Grey leans back against the railing, twisting his head to look down for a moment — Daven lives on the eighth floor. He grabs the pipe and lighter when Daven hands it over to him, touching his mouth to it, flicking fire over the bowl, sucking heat into his body. He holds his breath and transfers the pipe and lighter to Sandor.

Addam’s grinning through to the other side of the glass door. “She’s so fucking hot,” he says. “A sweet girl, too. Think she has a boyfriend?”

Grey releases the smoke from his lungs. “I dunno,” he says, gripping the railing behind him tightly. “Why don’t you ask?”

Drogo absently tells her to help herself to some pizza, not taking his eyes off the TV. She resists for a good five minutes before her stomach rumbles and she relents, telling herself that this is her dinner.

“How’s Brienne?” Jaime asks, also staring at the TV screen, rapidly clicking one button really fast in succession.

“She’s good,” Missandei says, wiping her mouth with a napkin, seeing her lipstick on it when she pulls it away, wondering if there’s red all over her face now. “Still busy with her internship at the newspaper, but she and I get together about once a week or so.”

“Yeah?” Jaime says. “You should bring her on by sometime. You know. Whenever.”

She doesn’t think Jaime can see — because he’s so focused on the game, but just for a moment, her eyes widen into round circles as she smiles widely at him — Doreah calls it the Joker face — and Missandei teasingly says, “Oh, really? I should bring her by? Just whenever? Just casually? You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Jaime?”

From beside him, Drogo snorts.

She’s about to retort with something snarky, but then she sees him glance at her out of the corner of his eye, a dimple digging into his cheek as he smiles slightly. And it makes her think back to all of the things Brienne has told her about this particular relationship — how it ended up being volatile and destructive. Missandei also remembers that even during the lowest points, Brienne was always telling her, always strongly emphasizing to her that Jaime is a really good person.

Missandei shoves a piece of crust into her mouth. “Alright,” she says, voice muffled, chewing with her mouth open. “Alright. But you owe me.”

“Of course,” Jaime drawls. “A Lannister always pays his debts.”

Honestly, sitting on a chair and perpetually pulling down her skirt so she doesn’t flash anyone as she watches a bunch of boys shoot pretend-guns and shake down hookers isn’t really her idea of fun. Grey is also doing a spectacular job of ignoring her.

When she announces that she’s going to take off as they switch remote controllers around, Daven quickly apologizes for the rest of the group, apologizes for boring her. He tells her they can stop playing the game. He’s kind of a sweetie pie. And she tells him not to be silly — they should totally keep playing. It’s no big deal. She says she’s just going to head out. She asks Sandor if he’s okay to get home without her. Drogo volunteers to drive Sandor home later.

“I’ll walk you down,” Addam says, jumping up from his seat.

He gives her an arm for her to hold and use for balance as she steps back into her heeled boots, carefully zipping them up with her butt pressed against a wall, so her skirt doesn’t ride all the way up. After she straightens, she calls out, saying goodbye to the room. They all say bye back to her in unison.

Addam’s hand is on the small of her back, guiding her through the door.

She’s already in her jammies and curled up in bed and reading a book when she hears Jhiqui come home — the first time in an entire week.

She’s not that surprised when her bedroom door gets thrown open, when Jhiqui’s giddy face greets her. Jhiqui takes a running start before leaping onto the bed, shouting, “Cannon ball!” Missandei rolls over, scared Jhiqui will land on her if she doesn’t.

They catch up a little bit, Jhiqui’s perfumed head resting on Missandei’s chest, playing with their intertwined hands.

“Guess what!”

“What?” Missandei says.

“Nick asked me to move in with him!”
He had to request a day off specifically for the appointment. And Amanda — now a manager — was a bitch to him about it, acting all suspicious. So he told her he has to get a camera shoved up his butthole because he keeps intermittently bleeding out of it.

It’s been so easy for Jaime and Drogo to ride his ass about seeing a doctor. They’ve brought it up literally every time he’s in their presence. He had told them it isn’t a big deal. He is getting used to the ass-bleeding. It doesn’t happen all the time. Just sometimes.

They didn’t fucking buy it.

He had been shortsighted. He didn’t realize that sharing parts of himself and making people invested in him means that they would be all up in his fucking business all the time.

A byproduct from the months of rectal bleeding is celibacy. He was generally okay with it — until he had to watch Addam hit on Missandei. That was fucking lame. It’s lame that it felt lame. And so he decided to just fucking make a doctor's appointment already.

He couldn’t eat and he had to drink this entire jug of godawful water-laxative. He picked up the jug at Jaime’s pharmacy, when Jaime was on shift, just to shove it in that fucker’s face.

“Relax,” Grey's doctor says, gently nudging his bare legs further apart on the stirrups.

It seems that people are always telling him to relax.

He has to silence his phone when he meets with Deek because Jaime and Drogo are blowing it up with their stupid, inane ramblings. They are pretty excited that his ass hole is in tiptop shape and the cause of all of their worries is the teeniest little hemorrhoid. And to be honest, a part of Grey is also pretty relieved that that was the issue. He’s not dying.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” Deek says, manually opening the garage to his mom’s house.

Grey has to wade through an excruciating show-and-tell of aquarium fish as Deek slowly talks about their feeding schedule and what he named them — all fifteen of them. As reward for his patience, Grey stuffs a plastic bag containing ten white tablets before he walks down Deek’s driveway, heading toward his bus stop.

This date with Addam is — in one word — awkward. She can’t say that Brienne didn’t warn her. She can’t say that Brienne didn’t observe that she and Addam have very little in common.

She doesn’t know if she’s only been around him when he or she’s drunk or what, but talking to
Addam when he hasn’t been drinking is difficult. Even small moments, like deciding where and what to eat after the movie is rife with uncomfortable silences.

She and Addam see a Kevin James movie. And when he suggests it, she kind of thinks it’s a joke. But then she realizes it isn’t a joke at all — and feels bad for treating it like it was a joke. She must have forgotten that white people love Kevin James. She has no idea how she forgot that.

Over pizza, they talk about the movie. She knows she sounds like an idiot for trying to read even a little bit deeply into the plot — she jokingly tells Addam she took a film studies class last year, so she kind of knows everything about movies. He doesn’t realize she’s kidding around, so he like, asks her about the class — asks her to tell him more about it, face open and attentive.

“So,” she says, when she’s standing in front of her new and used Honda Fit. They had driven separately — met at the theater. It’s entirely way too early to call it a night. It’s nine o’clock.

“So,” he echoes, teetering back and forth on his feet. “I had fun. It was good getting to know you better.”

“Yeah, definitely,” she says, nodding. “I had fun, too.”

When he places his hands on her shoulders and angles his head down toward hers, she automatically tilts up. His lips are warm and soft and pliable. She can smell his cologne and feel the gentle scrape of his stubble over her chin.

There’s enough light to see his eyes when he pulls away. He smiles down at her, dropping his hands from her shoulders, grabbing her fingers. “So,” he says. “Friends?”

She immediately breaks out into a laugh, closing her eyes momentarily. Then she cranes her neck back to stare back at him. She squeezes his hands. “Friends.”

They hear his phone buzzing in his pocket.

“Cool,” he says, still holding onto one of her hands, lightly swinging it as he pulls out his phone with his other hand, checking it. “You got anything going on after this? Dav just texted. Want to meet up with him at a party? I only ask because he’s been in a rough spot lately. He and his girlfriend recently broke up, and he’s been kind of going out a lot lately.”

Grey lifts her onto the kitchen counter after she asks him if he knows any magic tricks. Her legs automatically part and her arms automatically slide around his shoulders. He steps into her, running his hands up her bare thighs. Her mouth drops, and she laughs, telling him that it tickles.

He says, “Yeah? Does it?” and runs his hands back down her leg, to her knees.

She bites down on her bottom lip — stained a berry pink — laughing and nodding, her blue eyes become just two dark lines, her hair flopping over her shoulder, lightly hitting him in the face. She lifts up a cup of rum, haphazardly mixed with Coke. She presses the rim of it to his mouth.

His brain feels soft and expansive in his head. He’s breathing easy. He presses his thumbs into her flesh. He says, “Are you trying to get me drunk?” He takes the glass from her, smiling like he really means it — he really feels it. He throws the drink down his throat — cold and wet and sweet. He
inhales. “My mother warned me about girls like you.”

She pouts, clawing her nails over the back of his head, pulling his face closer. “You mean bad girls like me?” He can smell the alcohol on her breath.

“Yeah,” he says. “Bad girls like you.” He closes the distance, kissing her hard and urgently as his hands grab onto the fabric of her denim shorts. One thing he’s really good at is making it seem real — this is something he’s been told. What is impossible for him, however, is sustaining the performance. He was reportedly a difficult child to care for. His foster mothers’ criticism of him was that he was cold — that he was utterly unable to love and accept love and give love.

When he pulls away, he says, “Do you wanna get outta here?”

“Please,” she whispers, kissing him again.

He pulls her off the counter, holding her weight, slowly dropping her to the floor.

He sees Missandei staring at them.

Her arms are crossed protectively over her chest as she walks through the living room. Addam stops her by the door as she rifles through the pile of jackets, trying to find hers. He asks her if everything is okay, and she tells him that everything is totally okay. She just feels a little sick, probably something didn’t agree with her from dinner. She tells him she’s going to head home. He looks at her doubtfully, asks if she wants him to go with her — they could maybe go grab some soup or medicine at a twenty-four-hour grocery store. She smiles at him for that — tells him it’s a nice offer, but she’s really fine. Go have fun. She’ll talk to him later.

She pulls her hair out of the collar of her jacket and wrenches the front door open.

She’s trying not to trip down the steep walkway in her heels when she spots him out of the corner of her eye, walking off to the side of the lawn, having come from around the back, steadily closing the distance between them.

“Missandei,” Grey says.

She slows to a stop when she hits her car, parked in front of some bushes. She turns around to face him. She’s going to try really hard not to be a hysterical bitch about this. “Hey,” she says.

“I didn’t realize you were going to be here,” he says neutrally.

“Just popping in for a little bit. But now I’m heading out.” She digs her keys out of her coat pocket and unlocks her car. “See you later?”

He grabs her arm just as she turns away. She stills, facing away from him, though she can sort of see their reflection in her car window. His hand is still holding her arm when he says, “I like your new car.”

She sighs, gently pulling her arm out of his grasp. “Yeah. I like it, too.”

“Missandei, come on,” he says quietly. “Don’t go. Stay for a drink.”
She touches her cold nose with her warm hand, and she thinks back to specific moments in the time that they’ve known each other. She thinks about how sometimes a spade is just a spade — sometimes what she sees is really what she gets, that there’s nothing deeper. She also thinks about breaking patterns — and how much she utterly sucks at it. Over the summer, her grandma nitpicked tons of little things about her appearance and attitude — her hair, her weight, her posture, her outspokenness — all too keenly worried that Missandei will become an old maid spinster. Her grandma’s focus on her marriageability has become oppressive ever since the death of her grandfather. Her grandma is trying to spare her a lifetime of profound loneliness.

She turns around. “Dude, it’s fine,” she says. “I’m not falling apart or freaking out. I get it. We’re friends. You don’t have to babysit me. Go on back to the party. Have fun.”

“And did you have fun?” he says, voice low. “With Addam?”

Her hands immediately snap out and hits him square in the chest, knocking him back a step. “Fuck you, asshole,” she says. “I was trying to be classy.”

“Fuck you!” he snarls.

“No!” she shouts. “Fuck you!”

“Fuck you!”

Her right fist at her side opens and closes. “Fuck you,” she says.

“Fuck you.”

This argument is fantastic. “Fuck you.” She sets her mouth in a tight line. “You want me but you don’t want me,” she says bitterly. “And that is why you’re angry. Seriously. Fuck you, Grey.”

He’s shaking — maybe the more accurate word is trembling — and he’s going out of his mind as he pushes her back against her cold car, his hand running up between her legs, stopping when it starts to get indecent. She is always wearing these fucking skirts. And he’s about to cruelly say something about her desperation for him and her obviousness — but she pitches her face forward and sucks his breath into her mouth before she kisses him, with her eyes wide open, staring him in the face — and maybe he actually means that there’s something about his desperation for her and his obviousness.

It gets crazy after that. He’s got her underwear pulled down her thighs, red and exposed underneath the hem of her skirt when she groans and lightly hits him with her fist on his shoulder, before she tells him not yet, not here. She fumbles behind her, opening the door to the backseat of her car. She grabs his shirt and falls backwards, pulling him, guiding him. He pulls her underwear the rest of the way off. The space is impossibly tight, but he shuts the door behind him anyway, because he thinks that’s what she wants. The car lights overhead slowly fade into darkness. And they don’t say much as their hands mash together blindly, as his mouth works over hers mindlessly.

He pulls out his wallet and drops it on the ground after he picks out the condom.

She bites down on his lip and smacks the door over her head when he pushes into her. “What the fuck,” she grinds out, through her teeth.
And it is *never* this easy.

It is fast and almost numbing — just a chase — just a sprint to the end. She’s vocal — breathy, grunting into the side of his face and digging her fingers into his shoulder as he pushes her against the door, movements shallow in the tiny space.

Tension is coiled up, harshly inside of him. It builds up.

And the moment it releases — he shudders and whimpered and drops his head down to her chest — that’s the moment he immediately realizes that he has made a horrible mistake.
He anchors his hand against the driver’s side headrest and uses it to pull himself up, off, and out of her. On morphine, he feels warm, weightless — utterly painless. Her bare thighs unconsciously flex at the movement, pressing softly against his hips before she relaxes them. She pulls her feet up, shoes still on, scooting up and bringing her knees up to her face as he pulls the condom off. He tugs up his pants with one hand and collapses on the seat next to her.

She’s reaching up to touch her hair, shoving her fingers into her curls. Then she sighs, shifting around in the seat as she pulls her skirt back down over her legs. She’s watching him as he lightly stretches out the used condom before tying it off. He lightly squeezes it — it’s a small ritual that he does, to ensure there are no leaks. He’s biding his time, collecting his thoughts, trying to figure out a way to properly articulate what he’s thinking.

Missandei leans forward. His eyes follow her movements carefully. He can still smell her — her shampoo or perfume — and the sex. She unclips the cover to the console between the two front seats and pulls out a white tissue. She uses it to pluck the condom from his hand, wrapping it up in the tissue, encasing it lightly in her hand.

“I’ll toss it,” she says.

It’s the first thing she’s said since ‘fuck you.’

Upon his silence, she nudges his leg with her foot, her heel lightly digging into his thigh. “Don’t worry. I’m not harvesting your sperm to conduct scientific experiments with it.”

He grabs her ankle, rolling his palm under it, not sure how he should be reading her. It all seems so surreal, like he can’t yet put words to what just happened. He fucked up. This is new territory for him. Usually, his pants are already zipped up and he’s already leaving. He can’t do that here. He can’t say those things to her. “I wasn’t worried about that,” he says.

She gives him a small smile, before pulling her ankle away, before dropping the used condom in her cupholder. She shuffles over in his direction, getting to her knees. She leans over him. He can feel her breath, her body heat, her fingers on his skin. She steers his head with her hand on his cheek. She kisses him softly. He automatically closes his eyes, lightly pressing back.

“That was fun,” she says, when she pulls away. “I should get going though. I have to get up early tomorrow.”

When she gets home, she stubs her toe on a cardboard box in front of the door, in the dark. A sharp pain breaks across her foot and her hand shoots out, futilely grasping onto the wall as she tumbles down noisily, hitting the ground with a thump. Missandei twists her body, repositions her legs so they are pulled out in front of her. She bends over, sitting on the ground, rubbing her throbbing foot.
She kicks the cardboard box with her other leg — it’s light — sending it skittering across the ground ten feet before it smashes the opposite wall with a hollow metal clang. “Jhiqui!” Missandei angrily yells from the floor, feeling her face burn. “Can you not put shit in the entryway! God!”

She gets nothing but silence in response. Jhiqui’s not home.

Missandei unbucks her shoes and walks through the living in the dark, navigating around all of their cardboard boxes. She still fucking needs to put up an ad on Craigslist for Jhiqui’s bed and mattress because Jhiqui’s not taking it with her to her boyfriend’s place — and Jhiqui is shit at doing that sort of stuff in a timely manner.

Missandei viciously throws her shoes into the closet before she untucks her shirt from her skirt. She slides down the zipper at her hip and drops the skirt to the floor, stepping out of it, naked waist down. She lost her underwear in her car somewhere. She didn’t have the stamina to fucking look for it when she arrived home.

She’s substantially calmer after her hot shower. She usually doesn’t shower at night — her grandma is superstitious and used to tell her that she opens herself up to ghosts if she goes to bed with a wet, cold head. Missandei’s not superstitious, but certain preponderances do become ingrained over time.

The lights are on and Jhiqui is on the couch and browsing on her tablet — still wearing stockings and a maroon dress from her date — when Missandei walks into the living room wearing a robe.

“Ooh! I’m glad you’re home, babe! I need your opinion on something!” Jhiqui reaches out and grabs Missandei’s sleeve, pulling her down to the couch. The tablet is thrust in between the two of them as Jhiqui navigates around her Pinterest account. She’s created a board with pins of furniture and home accessories that she’s taking inspiration from, when decorating her new apartment with Nick. She asks Missandei for her thoughts on ottomans, tables, color schemes, throw pillows, and dishware.

Missandei points to a pale yellow and dark grey tablecloth. “I bet you can make that yourself,” she says.

“You think?”

“Totally.”

“Oh my gosh!” Jhiqui says, swatting Missandei’s arm with the back of her hand. “It’s been forever since we’ve gotten the girls together and just done like, a crafts day. We should totally get one of those going soon!”

“Sure.”

His stomach is killing him and he’s sweating up a storm, but he takes his shitty mood and his undependable bowels to his classes on Monday anyway. He pretty much wants to kill himself halfway through his Public Finance and Cost-Benefit Analysis class.

His body feels heavy and disgusting. The water heater at the house is totally busted and he and three other people have gone without hot water over the weekend. His landlord is being a difficult bitch about hiring someone to fix the fucking thing. Her solution was to suggest that they fucking boil water on the stove.
Missandei also hasn’t answered his text.

She discreetly scratches the back of her shin with her foot. She usually never wears pantyhose because it’s impossible to find an affordable pair that matches her skin color, but she broke it out for her internship interview. She spent a really long time trying to decide how much to accessorize — and also how much cleavage is just enough. She settled on a silver metal bangle and three buttons undone on her pressed dress shirt.

When her name is called, she is led into a conference room encased in glass. She heads toward a balding white man in glasses and a suit. She pulls her shoulders back. She holds her chin high. She walks with a slight sway to her hips. She smiles widely, showing the top row of her teeth.

It’s so cold that their coach has made them train indoors for the last week. Grey’s squatting next to the rowing machine after Daven vacates it, adjusting the seat for his legs when Drogo plops down on the one nearby, in between Jaime and Addam. Those guys even chat as they work out — because they seriously cannot stop themselves from making noise during every waking moment of every day of their entire fucking lives.

Even though Jaime and Addam cohabitate together, they still update each other on every inconsequential thing that occurs to them — they report every inconsequential thought they have to one another. Addam’s dad has apparently been applying pressure on him to come back home to take a job at his dad’s company and Addam doesn’t want to. It’s been an ongoing conversation for months now. Nothing ever changes. The story is always that Addam’s dad wants him home, and Addam doesn’t want to go home. Addam is cowardly and doesn’t have the balls to tell his father the truth. Addam is cowardly and doesn’t have the stomach to risk losing his parents’ financial support in order to go his own way. His plans for his future are vague — just dreams. He and Jaime go back and forth over his options and his feelings constantly. The story never changes.

Grey doesn’t understand what the fucking point is — in the constant fixation on revisiting stories and outcomes that don’t change. He doesn’t fucking understand how people who have everything can still manage to lament the small inconveniences of their bloated lives.

Jaime and Addam also constantly complain about their upcoming separation. They can’t live together forever — and they are always bitching about it — getting maudlin and telling sentimental stories to each other. For what? To stave off some stupid minor pain that hasn’t even occurred?

He doesn’t even fucking understand how people have this notion that there is any permanence in happiness. They are so stupid.

“Haven’t seen Missy in a while,” Drogo says to Sandor. “Is everything alright with her?”

“Missy?” Sandor says. “Yeah, as far as I know. She’s fine.”

“Ah,” Addam says, sliding backward. “I think I know what’s going on. A few weeks ago Missy and I had the most awkward date. She’s probably just hiding out a bit because of that. I should call her.
and clear the air though, huh?"

She finds that online dating is a less pressurized venue for guys who would normally never approach her in a bar or in a grocery store. Not to be mean, but she means dorky, nerdy, unathletic short guys. It’s easier for them scroll through on their phone and click buttons, type out short messages. Online, she doesn’t see their height, their build, the way they walk. She doesn’t hear the way they talk, the way they tell jokes, the sound of their laugh. It’s hard — almost impossible — to predict chemistry accurately through swipe gestures.

When he tells her that she looks prettier than what her profile photo presented, she resists telling him that she knows — she picked that profile picture on purpose. Instead, she smiles and tilts her head down a little bit, in a fakery of humility — and she tells him thank you.

Raul is a barista who is going to night school for a business degree. She originally liked his bio because he wrote about how he grew up in the projects, hails from a big family, will be the first in his family to graduate. Missandei has figured out that the guys she finds scorchingly sexy and deeply fuckable tend to know they are hot. Hot people are kind of boring and tend to be superficial. Missandei has also figured out that the guys that come off sweet, smart, and quirky in written words tend not to be as confident in themselves when she’s staring them in the face — she also finds that she generally does not want to fuck them.

So she’s trying something new. At some point, it’s gotta stick. At some point, it has got to make sense. Jhiqui fucking met Nick waiting for a fucking bus and now they are buying furniture together.

She asks Raul to tell her about his parents — what are their jobs? She forces herself to listen to his response.

In all honesty, sex with Grey wasn’t that great. She didn’t come. It lasted only a few minutes. He’s emotionally constipated. He won’t even reveal to people simple shit like what his favorite food is. And now she can move on — now that she’s gotten that infatuation out of her system.

He doesn’t tell his landlord that he’s going to try and fix the fucking water heater. If he tells her, she will threaten to dock from his rent money — for any destruction of her property. He wants to tear her vocal chords out with his teeth sometimes.

He has spent an obscene amount of time watching YouTube videos and reading online forums and articles. Jaime blabbed about Grey’s lack of hot water issue to the other guys, like the huge gossip queen that Jaime is, Grey almost spat right in Daven’s mouth, when Daven asked him why he just doesn’t call Home Depot and schedule an appointment to get the water heater fixed. Daven explained to him that a repairman will come by at a time that is convenient and take a look at the thing. Then he will fix it. Daven told him that it’s actually pretty easy — to fix things.

He’s pretty sure that there’s a busted element and it’s not a complete circuit, so that’s why neither elements are heating. He bought a tester for a few bucks and figured out that there’s electricity going
to the tank. He thinks that it’s the top element that’s broken. He buys a replacement and a special
water heater wrench, to pull the element out — the cost was nominal.

The house is so fucking old that he’s not altogether sure that he’s actually shut off electricity to the
tank. He tests for a current — and it shows there isn’t one. But he’s also not a fucking electrician. He
hopes he doesn’t get electrocuted to death. No one will find his body for a few hours. His landlord
will be so pissed.

He gets drenched to shit when he pulls the water element out, because he decided not to drain the
tank before fucking with it. Too inconvenient to.

He’s wary that there’ll be an explosion — irrationally — when he flips the electricity back on.
There’s no explosion.

He sits in the bathroom, in his wet clothes, for the next half hour. He hopefully turns on the faucet
every ten minutes, trying to see if the water is warming up.

When he feels lukewarm water flowing over his hands, his knees actually go a little weak. He strips
off his clothes, locks the door, and hops in the warmest shower he’s had in forever.

Missandei drops her still-drying crappy painting of a rose onto the slushy ground and runs over to
where Brienne is doubled over on her knees, retching into the base of a tree. They were doing their
ladies crafts night — doing a paint and sip where they all get instructed to paint the same thing while
guzzling wine. Brienne kind of overdid it. She’s been on a crusade to force fun down her own throat
lately. And now it’s coming back out.

Missandei kind of straddles Brienne’s back and scrapes her blond hair back and off her face. “Oh my
God, take a picture of this,” Missandei says, laughing as Doreah starts digging through her purse for
her phone.

“No!” Brienne cries in between her wet convulsing. “Don’t take a picture! It’s so gross!”

“Hurry! Take a picture!”

“Oh, I’m trying to turn on the flash!” Doreah says in a panic. “Fuck!”

“No!” Brienne cries out, her pale hands reaching out into the pristine white snow to shovel it onto
her pink vomit. “Noo! Don’t take a picture of my barf! So gross!” She makes a little snow hill.

“So, I have a favor to ask you,” Missandei says as Brienne drops a cardboard box labeled ‘kitchen’
in the middle of the floor in Missy’s new studio apartment.

Brienne straightens, cocking her hip to the side, crossing her arms. “You’re gonna ask me for another
favor while I’m in the middle of carrying out a favor for you?” Brienne purses her full lips and grins
wryly.
“I’m horrible, I know,” Missandei says, grinning. She sighs. “So! Addam invited me to a dinner party that he and Jaime are throwing at their place. And I know he’s your ex and all, but I was thinking that it would be really be great if you like, came with me? I figured since you’re my friend, and they all know you? It’d make me more comfortable.”

Brienne cuts open the box in front of her with her car keys. “If you’re so uncomfortable around them, why are you even going?” she mutters, opening up the flaps, pulling out dishware that they had wrapped newspapers around. Brienne drops a stack of plates onto her lap, looking up at Missandei. “Oh my God, it’s because of him, isn’t it? Jaime’s friend? The quiet one you were tutoring!”

Missandei runs the back of her hand across her sweaty forehead. “Ah, dammit. You got me.”

When Addams offers to pour her a glass of wine, she takes him up on it. She comments that it’s weird that they’re drinking wine because they’re usually beer and hard liquor people. Addam says it’s thematic. And Missandei really loves that she worked her ass off getting Brienne to the dinner party — and that girl and Jaime are avoiding the poop out of each other.

Missy supposes she’s also a hypocrite in this respect.

She makes herself look at Grey, sitting across the table from her, face directed down at the lasagna that Jaime made. He looks good. He looks like what he always looks like. She assess all of her subtle responses. Her pulse is steady. Her face stays the same temperature. Her body stays the same temperature. He’s been inside her, but she’s still not sure what he looks like completely naked.

She clenches her teeth as she raises her glass of wine up to her mouth. “Brienne was so drunk not too long ago that she totally up-chucked into a tree and then buried her vomit in snow,” she says after sipping, adding to the conversation. Missandei turns her head and smiles at Brienne, as Brienne flushes bright red, even the tops of her ears. “It was super adorable because she was so embarrassed by it.”

Based purely on the way Jaime watches Brienne, Missandei is pretty sure that he is not dating Pia. It’s an observation she’s already shared with Brie, but Brienne likes to treat every bit of a reassurance and every compliment as these pitiful and pathetic morsels that people reluctantly drop because they feel sorry for her because she has a major complex about her looks. Jaime clearly doesn’t view things in that way.

It must be nice — to be loved like that.

When they start clearing plates, Grey stays in the kitchen. She hears the faucet running. Addam ushers everyone into the living room except Grey. Daven situates himself on an armchair and Drogo pokes him in the shoulder before jumping and landing on the sofa. Addam interrupts as she ineffectively wipes the table with her paper napkin — she needs a rag — and he steers her toward the group with his hand on the small of her back, telling to just sit and relax. He tells her that she’s a
“No, no,” Missandei says, digging her feet into the ground. “It’ll be faster if I help. It’s not fair if Grey cleans everything.”

“Dude, he likes to do it,” Drogo says from the sofa. “We’ve told him to leave the dishes in the past, and he refuses. He’s kind of insane in the brain with that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen his apartment.”

Drogo shrugs. “So you know.”


She can see his shoulders stiffen when she walks into the kitchen. He’s standing in front of the sink. The dishwasher is opened and the racks are pulled out. He’s not wearing gloves, and he keeps shutting the water off and on, in between scrubbing sessions.

She tilts her head. He’s using the dishwasher as a drying rack — instead of as a dishwasher. He’s . . . trying to conserve water?

She walks up to him from behind. “Here,” she says, reaching to grab his shirt sleeve, where he had haphazardly pushed them up to his elbows. “Let me roll these up for you.”

He reaches up and shuts off the water, pivoting his body to her and holding out his soapy hands, so it’s easier for her to roll up his sleeves. His forearms are warm and damp underneath her fingers. Her knuckles brush against his bicep. When they had sex in the backseat of her car, the space was so tight that her head smacked against the door. She remembers his hand coming up to protect her from continuously hitting it. She also remembers the way he placed his hands over her back, holding her to him, when they hugged at the airport.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he says very quietly, to be sure that no one can eavesdrop.

She places her hand over the center of his warm chest as her heart pounds in her ears. She leaves it there, feeling the rise and fall of his lungs. “It’s not fun when people ignore you, is it?” she says, equally as quietly.

He rolls his eyes and the corner of his mouth twitches. “Fair.”

She tries really hard to bite back her smile, but it slips out in spite of her efforts.

He raises a soapy hand and puts it over hers, on his chest. His fingers curl and he grabs her hand. He squeezes it tightly — almost to the point of it hurting — before he slowly lifts her hand off of his chest.

He pulls her so she’s standing in front of the sink. He steps in next to her. He lets go of her hand to pick up the sponge again. “I’ll scrub. You rinse and stack?” he says, looking at her from over his shoulder.
Graduation day

“Heeey, we should go in here!” Missandei says, giggling, hooking her arm through Brienne’s, tugging her through the door of a divey college sports bar just off campus. Sandor and Will follow behind, Sandor’s big hands on her shoulders and holding her up when she stumbles over the threshold. The four of them have been doing a pub crawl in celebration of their last quarter ever of college.

Will has been staring at her ass all night. She rolled out of bed to go running before her eight-thirty class and jumped into a pair of leggings — the ones that lift her butt up like whoa — and threw a loose workout tank over her sports bra.

When Missandei hears Addam shout Sandor’s name from across the room, she laughs, snorting, as she mentally pats herself on the back. She sees Jaime push up the bill of his hat as a smile slowly spreads over his tanned face when he spots Brienne.

Missandei is such a good pimp. Good pimps do pimp walks. She struts her way through the busy bar, giving Will a show, dragging Brienne as they make their way to where the boys are sitting. Her gaze then pauses on Grey, who is talking to Drogo. She drags an empty chair from another table and pulls it so it’s directly in front of the chatterbox. She smiles so hard at him that her cheeks start to ache.

He watches her with interest, dark eyes peering at her from over his beer glass, which he is holding up to his mouth. Drogo compliments her outfit, with a touch of sarcasm. She sticks her tongue out at him and pats her hair, runs her hand down her makeup-less face. No one can get her down tonight. She is having a great day.

“Oh my gosh, I love your shirt, Grey!” she gushes, leaning forward in her chair, her voice high and airy. His shirt is oddly flesh-colored, and it’s two sizes too big for him. “Where did you get it?”

He is stone-faced when he says, “In the trash.”

Her brows lift up. Next to Grey, she sees Jaime and Drogo turn their faces close to each other, silently communicating with smiles — making fun of Grey. She sees Jaime lean over, arm floating past Drogo’s face. Jaime’s fingers lightly flick the shell of Grey’s ear. Grey’s eyes narrow and he raises his hand to slap Jaime’s away.

“My housemate was throwing it away,” Grey adds. “I picked it out of the garbage.”

Jaime and Drogo suddenly crack up, hanging over one another. It seems they’ve been drinking. It seems that everyone has been drinking! She and Grey share a look — he tilts his head toward his friends and his expression is utterly unimpressed. A snicker sneaks out of her throat.

“I want a drink,” Missandei says, looking directly at Grey. “Come with me?”

“Sure.”

As her chair scrapes against the ground, as he stands up and starts following her through the crowd of people, she hears clapping. She and Grey both turn their heads around — and see Jaime and
Drogo cracking up, rapidly applauding with their hands held high up in the air.

“Good show!” Jaime shouts at them.

“Encore!” Drogo shouts.

She bites down on her bottom lip so she doesn’t accidentally smile too obviously. And then she flips them off.

At the bar, Grey asks her how much she’s had to drink already, even as he raises his hand to catch the bartender’s attention and pulls his wallet out of his back pocket, over his right buttcheek. She tilts her head down and over to watch the motion, checks him out, to mess with him. This thing — their friendship? — has slightly morphed. It now has this added quality, this added sense of knowing — this tension. She doesn’t find it altogether unpleasant. She supposes there has to be a certain intimacy that creeps over interactions, after you and your pal mash naughty bits together.

There has not been a repeat of that. There also has not been one word spoken about it out loud.

She tosses Grey a look of mock exasperation and tells him she’s only had a lot to drink. Like, a whole lot. Then she leans over the bar counter when the bartender comes over, the neckline of her tank top drooping down as she orders a lager. Grey orders the same. He picks his shirt and pulls it off his body as they wait for the bartender to come back with their order. He asks her if she actually likes the shirt.

She tells him that she’d like it more if it were lying on the floor of her bedroom.

“You don’t have a bedroom,” he deadpans. “You live in a studio. Your entire apartment is your bedroom.”

“It doesn’t have the same pizzazz if I say lying on the floor of my living-room-slash-kitchen-slash-bedroom.” She sighs, shaking her head, fighting another grin threatening to break out on her face. “You’re so annoying sometimes,” she says.

“Why are you in such a good mood?” he says, as two pints get placed in front of them. He hands the bartender his card and tells the guy it’s okay to leave the tab open. He holds up his glass to hers, clinking them together before she’s ready. He takes a sip, the white froth of the head sticking to his upper lip, making him look a little goofy, a little human before he licks it off. It’s a break from his normal extreme austerity and severity.

She tells him she’s in a great mood because her grandma called this morning to tell her that they — her family, her grandma and her two brothers — are going to be able to scrounge up enough money for a flight over. They are going to be able to come to graduation. It’s going to be the very first time they’ve gone anywhere substantial, since the family moved to Myr. She bounces on the balls of her feet, holding her beer, telling him that she is seriously so excited. There’s going to be so much to show her grandma and brothers. They’re finally going to see what they’ve been putting money toward the last four years.

Missandei starts rambling on about how small her studio is, but she has been thinking it over and she may have figured out a way to make four people comfortable sleeping in there and sharing one bathroom. And her grandma doesn’t really like to eat food that isn’t their food — their home-cooked food — so she’s going to stock her place with some ingredients. Her grandma is going to hate cooking on her tiny two-burner stove though — absolutely going to hate it.

“Sorry,” Missandei says. “That was a lot of information. I’m just so excited!”
“I can tell,” he says, his mouth quirking up into a small smile.

“Is your family coming in for graduation?”

“No,” he says, looking at her blankly.

She feels awkward all of a sudden, like she had put her foot in her mouth. “Oh.”

“I —” He clears his throat. “I don’t have family. I used to. I had two older brothers and three older sisters — and parents. But I don’t anymore.”

He’s not allowed his phone when he’s on the floor, so there’s no way for Missandei to notify him exactly when she’s arriving. It’s nearly the end of his shift and he’s with a customer when she arrives, wearing her internship clothes — fairly conservative and covered up in slacks and a cardigan. She gives him an enthusiastic wave and also gestures for him to take his time. He sees her wandering the area, looking at the shoe displays as he boxes up a pair of leather boots and stands up.

He cashes out his customer — a white blond lady who’s well put-together, who has been bossing him around for the last hour — not necessarily in an impolite way. She’s buying four pairs of designer shoes that he’ll be getting commission on.

Missandei ducks down a little bit as she makes her way back to him from the other side of the department, smiling slyly — disarmingly. He sees her pointed gaze, looking his body up and down. “Haaay!” she says when she arrives. “Is it hot in here or is it just you?”

He realizes that she’s never seen him in anything but casual wear. She’s never seen him in his work clothes. He looks around — watching shoppers drift through to the entrance of the mall. Young girls are wearing short shorts and tank tops. Missandei follows his line of sight. “It’s a little warm in here,” he says. He huffs out a short laugh and starts walking off to the back room, beckoning her to follow him.

He knows her shoe size. He pulls out a pair of Givenchy black cut-out sandals that he had set aside for her. They are on clearance. He spotted them and grabbed them because they remind him of the kind of shoes she’s always wearing. With his discount on top of everything — the Givenchy shoes are still stupid expensive. But girls are sometimes fucking insane.

“Thoughts?” he says, holding the open box in front of her.

He doesn’t expect for her to full-on squeal and claw her nails into his forearms as she hops up and down in excitement. He explains the price to her, how it’s a steal for these stupidly overpriced shoes. And she’s squeaking, “Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!”

He’s never been friends with a girl before. Not really. He’s only known them in small increments. His memories of his sisters are fragmented and cloudy at best — he had been too young when they parted. There was a clear delineation in school — boys are the ones he chilled and hung with. Pretty girls are the ones he was supposed to develop crushes on. He may have completely bypassed that part of his formative development.

Given his adult experiences with girls, he had braced himself for Missandei’s ire, her anger. He expected her to yell at him, expected some pissed off phone calls — and demands for many, many
explanations that he can’t even begin to give. A part of him also anticipated that she’d cut him out, sever him when she found him lacking.

She asks him if he’s eaten yet, at the end of his shift. She offers to buy him dinner. He tells her she can’t, because she just spent a lot of money on shoes. They end up going to some cheap dive bar with a happy hour. She ends up being so distracted at dinner — she keeps showing him pictures of her new shoes on her phone, cooing over them, like they are babies, like he doesn’t already know what they look like. She’s telling him about all the outfits that will go good with the shoes — and it’s really boring to listen to — but she’s so giddy and happy and her face is so animated that he just tunes her out, watches her to pass the time.

She spots them right away when she meets them at the restaurant, smoothing her cream-colored dress down her thighs, making sure everything is in place as she walks up to the table for four. She sees Jhiqui and Nick lean over to their friend — a Black guy with a smooth, shaved head. They point her out to the guy. His smiling is dazzlingly white when he sees her. He’s handsome.

His name is Tarik. He works with Nick at the bank. Jhiqui and Nick are scrutinizing the crap out of them, faces lit up like two moons as Missandei awkwardly tells Tarik about school and her major. She tells him it’s linguistics. He observes that she must speak a lot of languages. She says that she actually does, but that’s not what linguistics is. It’s not exactly about studying languages. And then she straightens and asks him what his hobbies are.

He asks her for her phone number at the end of the night, as he walks her to her car. Jhiqui calls her right away on the way home, wanting to know what she thought of Tarik. She tells Jhiqui he seems nice. Jhiqui starts talking about how great it’ll be for them all to double date — she and Nick are always on the lookout for new couple-friends.

Missandei says, “Whoa,” when Jhiqui starts talking about vacationing together. “Slow down there, tiger. I don’t even know if he’s my type.”

“Are you serious!” Jhiqui raises her voice. “He’s perfect! I have literally found the perfect person for you! Do you know how hard it is to find someone perfect? He has a good job! He’s smart! He’s good-looking! He is nice! He’s funny! I know he’s not super tall, but he’s taller than you are when you’re wearing heels! What is wrong with you, woman! You say you want some stability and you want a relationship but nothing you do is actually conducive to that!”

They don’t let go of the embrace until an officer outside of the airport shouts at them and tells them that the zone is for immediate loading and unloading only. In Low Valyrian, she tells her grandmother and brothers that it’s not too far to get to her apartment, as she tugs her grandmother’s bag to the trunk.

“Missy?”

She turns her head, eyes widening in surprise. “Oh, hi!” The word stumbles out of her mouth awkwardly. Standing a short distance away are Neal and his parents.
“Ah, they were on the same flight,” Mossador says, coming up from behind her.

Drogo offered him money for his services. It was a really empty offer because Drogo knew that Grey’d never take his money. When he walks up to Drogo’s apartment after getting off at the bus stop a few blocks away, he sees Drogo hunched over, head shoved in the interior of his car. He’s vacuuming it out. A plastic trash back is sitting next to a light post. The car is shiny — still wet — freshly washed. Grey has never seen this car washed in the entire time he’s known Drogo.

He slaps Drogo’s butt to get his attention. “Hey, man.”

Drogo shuts off the vacuum and turns his head to peer at Grey. “I thought I told you to dress nicely? My mom hates baggy clothes.” Drogo reaches out and tugs the waistband of Grey’s jeans. “Why don’t you own pants that fit you? She’s going to think you’re in a gang or you’re not very studious.”

“D,” Grey says, holding out his arms. “She’s gonna think I’m homeless before she thinks I’m in a gang. Come on.”

Grey hops in the passenger side seat as Drogo starts the vacuum again. He sprays the windshield with Windex and carefully wipes it down so it’s sleek, smooth, and unmarred. He pulls all of the discarded receipts from Drogo’s cupholders and tears them up before depositing them in the trash bag. Drogo tosses him an air freshener, still encased in its plastic casing. Grey rips it open using his house keys and his teeth, before snapping it to a fan.

Drogo checks his phone before he deposits it back into his front pocket. “They’re fifteen minutes out,” he says. “Bud — thanks so much — again, for being so cool with carting my family around.”

Drogo’s people are driving from Vaes Dothrak, five crammed into a car. With Drogo, they can’t all fit in one vehicle, so Drogo asked Grey if he would help with showing them around — sightseeing and stuff. He doesn’t want to stress his mom or Lydia out by having them navigating an unfamiliar city. He also doesn’t trust any of his sisters behind the wheel.

“Yeah, it’s no big deal,” Grey says. “I have nothing going on today.”

“Nah, man. You’re a true friend, man. And Dovoeddi?” Drogo grins. “If I see you so much as fucking look at any of my sisters even a little off — I’m going to fucking cut off your dick and feed it to your face. They are off limits to you.”

It is chaos when Drogo’s family arrives. Five females exit out of a small champagne Nissan like it’s a clown car. Drogo’s mom is a nice-looking tiny lady with long black hair, who immediately starts crying, running up and shouting at Drogo in rapid-fire Dothraki with her hands on his face as he stoops down and lets her kiss his face. His mom’s partner Lydia is a nice-looking white lady with graying hair cut really short.

He stands a ways off as they all crowd around Drogo. His sisters are chatting away in a mix of English and Dothraki — their voices girly and swarming — like the buzzing of really feminine bees.
They are smothering Drogo with hugs and are telling him they really need to pee. All of Drogo’s sisters are — in one word: hot. Drogo has told him that the youngest one is 15 years old. Grey has a hard time picking her out — because none of them really look 15 years old.

Still in Dothraki, Drogo introduces Grey to his mom and Lydia. Grey smiles and reaches out to touch their outstretched hands. He’s surprised into stumbling when Drogo’s mom’s vice grip clamps down on his palm and she yanks him down to her height. He freezes and jumps a little bit as she gives him a big kiss on the cheek.

“Look at him!” she says in English smeared with her Dothraki accent, still grasping his hand, turning back to look at Drogo and her daughters. “Drogo’s little friend is so cute!” She turns back to Grey and eyes him again. She reaches out and pulls at the waistband of his jeans, jiggling it. “Why is he wearing these ugly pants, though?” She turns back to her son. “Drogo, why do you let him wear such ugly pants?

A bunch of shit about Drogo suddenly makes sense now.

Adilah, one of Drogo’s sisters, is waiting for the unisex restroom when he exits out of it. He’s fucking exhausted. It’s not because they’ve gone all over town to look at buildings, bodies of water, and parks. It’s not because of the trip to the Crowns Gardens. It’s not even the hours he spent standing around waiting as the ladies kept popping in and out of dressing rooms in all of the stores they have gone into.

He’s exhausted because they are constantly talking and they all expect him to talk with them. He’s been asked a million and a half questions, and he’s been told a million and a half stories. They are all very nice people, but he is so fucking tired.

He nods at Adilah and is about to head back to the table where everyone else is eating dinner — but she puts her hand on his neck, her long fingernails tapping his chin. Drogo’s family members are touchy-feely as fuck.

“Hey, hold on,” she says, her long dark lashes fluttering. “I want to talk to you for a second.” Her voice is coy and syrupy.

“Nope,” he says, bypassing her, heading back to the table.

When Grey’s text comes through during dinner, she flips her phone over, putting the screen face-down, to be polite. Marselen notes it and asks her who is trying to reach her during dinner — maybe it’s important. Marselen is kind of an old soul. She would blame it on the fact that he’s a dad, but Mossador is a father, too, and he gets technology. Marselen doesn’t get how texting works. She tells him that the person texting her isn’t necessarily trying to get her attention. She can check the message later.

“Why are you being weird?” he says in English. She and her brothers switch over whenever they want to have a conversation in front of their grandma without her knowing what they are saying.
mostly because they are jerks.

“I’m not being weird,” she says.

Mossador’s hand suddenly shoots out and steals her phone right from next to her plate. “I wonder what it says.”

“What the hell. Stop!” Missandei leans over, grabbing his sleeve with one hand as her other reaches from the phone. She’s stretching the collar of his shirt out and he is laughing and holding her phone up and out of her reach.

From across the table, in Low Valyrian, their grandma is telling Mossador and Marselen to stop teasing their little sister.

“You heard her!” Missandei says, making another ineffective grab for her phone.

Mossador turns on her phone. Grey always writes really short, succinct messages that she can usually read the entirety of in the preview. Moss doesn’t have to unlock her phone to read the text.

“Is Grey the name of a girl or the name of a guy?”

Bieber offered to pick him up because Bieber actually has his car for once. When a massively gaudy black Range Rover pulls up to the house, Grey grabs his wallet and runs out to meet Jaime. Jaime throws open the passenger side door for him, grinning as the interior light comes on. Besides himself, Jaime is the only other one without family obligations at the end of the year. Addam and Daven’s parents also flew into town for graduation.

“God, this is massive.”

“That’s what she said,” Jaime says, fiddling with volume.

“I meant your car,” Grey says, climbing in.

“I hate it when you fuck up my dick jokes.”

On the way to the bar, Jaime asks him about the day with Drogo’s moms and sisters. Grey sighs and tells Jaime that Drogo grew up surrounded by a lot of estrogen. He tells Jaime about how close that family is and how Drogo is like, seriously, really a big brother and a son. It was kind of weird to witness it all.

When Jaime reaches out to clap him on the shoulder, lightly massaging his neck, Grey dully tells Jaime that he didn’t say that shit to get Jaime’s pity.

“I’m not touching you because I feel sad that you’re an orphan,” Jaime says. “I don’t give a fuck. I just miss you, dude. It’s been a while since I’ve seen you.”
When she walks into the bar, she sees that there are not a lot of people here because it’s a weeknight. She’s a little surprised to see Jaime with Grey — she expected him to be by himself. She points out their table to her brothers. After their grandma went to sleep in her bed, her brothers bugged her about going out to meet her friend, citing that they’re boring married guys with kids. Let them feel unencumbered and young again — just for a night.

She smiles at both of them and introduces everyone to one another. They all shake hands. She doesn’t realize how tense and how stressed she is over this meeting between Grey and her brothers until she finds that she’s really grateful for Jaime’s presence because he starts making conversation with her brothers, being nice and funny and kind, asking them about their lives — diffusing any potential awkwardness.

Jaime’s arm is hanging against the back of Grey’s chair as he jokes around and tells them that he thinks he and Grey should move in together after graduation — he’s just been trying to convince Grey for the last month.

“It’ll be fun, boo,” he says to Grey. “We’re good together.” He raises his hand and places on top of Grey’s head before he lightly knocks his forehead to Grey’s. It’s this cute affectionate gesture she’s seen them do a lot with one another.

“I don’t have money,” Grey says, elbows on the table, hunched over his beer. “I don’t have a job lined up.”

“But you will,” Jaime says. “I know how you roll. You’re gonna get a job.”

Marselen leans forward, toward the center of the table. Then somewhat quietly in Low Valyrian, but loud enough for Mossador to hear, Marselen asks Missandei if her two friends are together. As in — are they a romantic couple?

In Low Valyrian, Missy tells her brother that it’s really rude to talk about people in front of their faces. It’s one thing to do it in front of grandma because it’s convenient and she doesn’t care, but they should speak a common language with her friends. Her friends are going to think that they are saying mean things about them.

Missandei can see Jaime’s curious gaze on them, see Grey’s blank stare.

Mossador smiles and cracks that yes, they should at least wait until her friends have their backs turned before gossiping. That’s only the right thing to do.

Marselen snickers.

Missandei tells them both to shut up.

“Is everything okay?” Jaime says slowly.

“Everything is fine, my friend,” Mossador says. “Just a silly argument between brothers and sister.”

“Ah, I have siblings, too,” Jaime says, grinning. “And they are annoying. So I understand.”

Grey pulls his glass of beer against the table, bringing it to his mouth to drink from. He puts the glass back down over his napkin before he turns to Jaime and reaches out to wrap an arm around Jaime’s shoulders, giving Jaime a sideways hug. “So to answer your question,” he says to Marselen. “Yes, we are together. And yes, it is romantic.”

Jaime pitches forward, laughing suddenly and loudly. “Is that what they were talking about!” he says
to Grey.

With Marselen and Mossador also laughing beside her, hitting their hands to the table in appreciation, Missandei leans forward toward Grey. “Oh my God, you speak Low Valyrian,” she says to him. “How come you’ve never mentioned it?”

He shrugs. And in Low Valyrian, he quietly tells her that he’s a little rusty and that he learned it a long time ago. His accent is an Astapori accent. It’s very clear to her ears. He must have been far east at one point, Slaver’s Bay, to have acquired that accent. He breaks eye contact. She sees his fingers lightly tug at his napkin, before he swings his eyes back up to look at her steadily.
In the car on the way back to her apartment, Mossador taps her on the shoulder. “So which one of them is your man?” he says teasingly.

Marselen snorts. “The white boy of course. You know lil’ Miss only goes for white boys.”

She sighs, making a right turn. She sighs because she’s tired of this tired old crap from her brothers. They both married Naathi women when they were still in their teens, after exclusively dating Naathi girls. And she — well, she met Neal.

“First of all,” she says, “that’s just not true. Second of all, neither.”

It’s the sound of her grandmother frying eggs that wakes her up. Missandei rolls over the side of her bed that her grandma had vacated and carefully steps over Marselen and Mossador, still fast asleep and snoring quietly on the floor of her studio. In a white t-shirt and cheetah-print cotton shorts, she sleepily pads over to her grandma and kisses her on the cheek, brushing her hand against her grams’ delicate spine. With mild disapproval, her grandma tells Missandei that staying up too late and waking up too late is bad for her health.

Missandei laughs a little bit before she goes into the bathroom to brush her teeth and take a shower. She used to not be able to brush off her grandma’s commentary when she was younger — but she finds that living apart from her grams has made her able to view things with a wider lens.

While her grandma has always lived a fairly ascetic lifestyle — eschewing alcohol, cigarettes, and foods rich in fat — Missandei has these old memories of her grandma as an almost youthful, good-humored woman. Her grandma changed when Melaku started to get into trouble — she became stricter. Missandei could not be left home alone — Marselen and Mossador had to come home right after school every day, ostensibly to watch her.

After Melaku died, her grandmother retreated into religion and culture.

When she comes out of the bathroom wearing a modest dress that shows no cleavage, she finds both of her brothers awake and eating breakfast off of plates on the floor. Her graduation cap and gown is hanging up in the coat closet. Her grandma hands Missy her own eggs and bread and tells her not to get her dress dirty before the ceremony.
The campus is very quiet because of graduation. In a loose t-shirt, shorts, and a pair of running shoes, he stretches his hamstrings and does a few hops before he transitions into a run. Drogo had bitched at him to attend graduation, stating it was a big deal — finishing college the way Grey did, given how he started and the trajectory that his life took — but Grey is not really one for celebrating. To him, this day isn’t meaningful.

After letting go of Jhiqui, Sandor, Doreah, and Brienne from the squishy hug she had pulled them in, Missandei tells them she’ll see them later. She fights through the thick crowd siphoning out of the stadium, graduation gowns fluttering, with her arms blocking her face from accidentally getting punched, her phone clutched tightly in her hand. She’s trying to get to the water fountain on the north side.

She hears Marselen shouting her name. She starts rushing over to her family, kind of jogging in her heels as her grandma gestures for her to slow down, wary she’ll fall down.

Mars catches her when she jumps on him, hugging her tightly that she can barely breathe, spinning her around as the sun warms her face.

After she hugs Mossador too, she rounds on her grandma, reaching out to brush the tears off of her grandma’s cheeks with her thumbs. Missandei’s choking up a little bit, too — enough that she’s struggling to tell them how grateful she is for all of their sacrifices — for how they’ve taken care of her.

He adjusts his dark gray tie, pulling it away from his neck, and buttons his suit jacket as he walks up the steps of the King’s Club. This is a concession he has made for Drogo. He spots Jaime right beyond the entrance, also in a suit, browsing through his phone. Grey points to Jaime’s head — to his blond hair — and says Jaime looks less like Justin Bieber without a hat. Jaime flicks his eyes up to the ceiling in annoyance and says he feels like a douchebag in his suit and tie get-up.


Sandor arrives next, looking particularly grouchy. Jaime laughs when Sandor curses when he trips over the last step into the club. Jaime asks Sandor where his family is. Sandor gruffly tells them he has no fucking clue where his parents are, and he doesn’t give a fuck.

“Oh,” Jaime says, leading them into the main room. “What shall we call ourselves, then? Team My-Dad-Hates-Me? Team Unloved-And-Abandoned? We can form a posse.”

Addam’s parents rented out the whole building to hold a fancy schmancy graduation reception. Addam invited them and told them there will be a dress code — and they told Addam that that really sounded fucking lame. Then Addam plied them the promise of free food — catered food — and free champagne and wine.

When they walk into the main room, Grey understands why Jaime was hiding at the entrance. The room is incredibly white. Like — there are a lot of white people in the room. Daven spots them
immediately, as if he’s been on the lookout for them. His face does this quick transition from dour doom and gloom to a bright shining beacon of light. He’s standing with Addam and their respective parents. He enthusiastically waves them over.

Sandor grunts.

“Oh, fun,” Jaime says, pivoting toward the guys. “Let’s go meet the parents!” he says with mocking enthusiasm.

She already knows her brothers and grandmother are going to be uncomfortable at the reception, but it really beats being stuck in her tiny apartment and eating off the floor again. It’s also just a few hours of their time that they can kill before dinner or whatever. And they’re all gussied up already and stuff. It’s convenient. Plus, Grey texted her and told her he’s already there.

She’s not sure if Brienne is coming or not. Brienne’s being wishy washy about it, saying that her dad kind of hates Jaime so she doesn’t want to come with her folks and make things awkward. Missandei’s been texting Brienne back consistently, telling Brienne to stop being such a silly scared bitch. Missy also invited Doreah and Jhiqui because Addam said the more the merrier. Who knows if they’re gonna come. The reception might be their thing though — just for the sheer aspirational glam of the whole thing.

Her grandma looks up at the high ceilings when they enter the building. She takes her grandma’s hand, squeezing it. Her brothers start making jokes about how the other half lives, a touch of nerves and tension in their voices.

Daven’s mom is a blond with really big hair and really big boobs. She’s really drunk. And inappropriately flirty with them, always laughing suddenly and always touching Jaime’s arm, always staring at Grey for a few seconds too long. She does this in front of Daven’s dad, no less. Daven looks miserable and pretty embarrassed about it, with this flush creeping up his neck. It’s something they have all been pointedly ignoring. Addam is strangely quiet and demure around his folks — especially his dad.

Addam’s and Daven’s parents both happen to know Jaime’s dad, so they’ve been talking about that for the last five minutes.

She is not at all amused when she gazes over to Moss and Mars, who have become embarrassingly and distractingly loud the drunker they get. They keep gesturing to the servers, asking for additional bottles of wine. Drogo’s whole family — save for Lydia — is also causing a bit of a ruckus. Drogo keeps fighting with his sisters, trying to police them and stop them from stealing sips of alcohol. But he can’t really stalk them everywhere and, over the course of an hour, the baby of that family is
pretty tipsy — a fact that Drogo’s mom seems kind of unaware of. Drogo is kind of losing his shit. Steadily. Slowly. Inevitably.

She sweeps her eyes around the room — seeing a bunch of well-dressed people standing around and politely making conversation with one another. She looks back to her brothers and a part of her angrily thinks that they are living up to a bunch of shitty stereotypes.

He sneaks away and stalks through a door with a paper sign that says emergency exit only. It’s already dark when he gets outside.

Next to a dumpster, he unbuttons his jacket, pulls out the flap, and digs in his breast pocket for a small plastic baggy he had folded over onto itself a few times. He unrolls it and unsnaps it, tilting it and letting a white round tablet fall into his hand. He usually doesn’t take morphine by mouth — but he also wasn’t banking on needing it tonight.

He tilts his head back and throws the tablet into his mouth, dry-swallowing it, feeling it dragging down his esophagus.

Jaime, Addam, and Sandor have drifted over to their tables, a fact that makes Drogo’s sisters painfully distracted. Addam’s been capitalizing on it, flirting back. Drogo’s been clenching his fist and slicing his eyes at them in this aggressive sort of anger. Sandor and Jaime have been awkwardly trying to distract Drogo really ineptly. Jaime keeps talking to Drogo about the last time they were in this place, something about racism — he’s trying to bait Drogo or something. And he keeps failing pretty badly.

Her grandma seems bored. And she’s already asked her brothers multiple times if they should leave, but her brothers have consistently waved her off.

She spots Grey again — after losing him for the last half hour. He’s on the other side of the room by himself, snatching up a glass of champagne and chugging it down.

She knows he’s walking over and she feels his wrist lightly touch her back as he braces his hand against the back of her chair.

“Hello, my cutie!” Drogo’s mom says. “I was wondering when you were coming over to say hello to us. Come give us a kiss.”

She’s kind of stunned as she watches Grey walk over to their side of the table, bend down, smiling and obediently presenting his face to Drogo’s mom and Drogo’s stepmom. Maybe Missandei’s stupid mistake with this guy in the beginning is that she never explicitly told him to come over and
give her a kiss.

He cleans up so well. He looks so good.

When he comes back to her side, he’s smiling at her — unguardedly — and it makes her stomach flip a little bit. She bites down on her lip as he points to the ground and tells her that she’s wearing the shoes. She laughs a little bit at that, and breathily tells him that she loves the shoes so much — so, so, so much. She’s aware that they are not alone.

When she introduces him to her grandma, she does it in English. It’s nothing complicated. She just exchanges names — and her grandmother understands the word ‘friend.’

She’s surprised when he squats down almost to the floor to get mostly eye-level with her grandma, and he starts speaking in Low Valyrian with her, just simply asking if she’s enjoying herself. Her grandma is totally into it — and starts speaking to him animatedly — after hours of being relatively quiet. Missandei eavesdrops as her grandma asks him what he studied in school and he tells her that it’s economics and Summer Tongue. There’s a bit of talk about whether he enjoyed his studies — he says he does.

Missandei grimaces when she hears her grandma ask about his family — where they are and where they are from. And it’s completely this impossible and unbelievable thing, when she hears his low voice say that he’s on his own. His parents are gone. But they are from the Summer Isles.

And then Missandei hears her grandma’s sympathetically hum, before she hears her grandma tell him that she is sad for him. He tells her he’s okay because it happened a long time ago. Her grandma tells him that such things linger — that even though Missandei’s brother Melaku was murdered years ago — the pain of that loss is still acute.

They’ve stayed far longer than she expected to. She’s getting sleepy from the wine. With her chin on the table and her head encased by her arms, she asks Mars and Moss if they feel like heading out yet.

Marselen picks at tendril of her hair that escaped her updo, and he reminds her that she used to fall asleep in the autobody shop after school, when she was waiting for their grandma to finish work and come retrieve her. He reminds her that he had tried to put her on the chair in his boss’ office, but she wanted to watch him work — so she burrowed underneath a work table and often fell asleep there. And their grandma was always giving him such crap because she always smelled like car grease.

He tells her that they are all very proud of her.

She dreamily tells him that he and Moss are the best — the best big brothers ever. And then she mutters that she wonders what their parents would think of how far they have come — if their parents were here.

Marselen pulls his face back, his expression screwing up into one of distaste. “Who cares?”

“I do,” she says, sitting up slowly, feeling half of her face tingle from resting on the arm too long. “I mean, they are still our parents. And I still think of them.”

“They are not our parents!” Marselen suddenly snaps, making her recoil in her seat. She blinks rapidly, feeling the table quiet around them. He points behind her, to their grandma — and he says,
“That person there is our parent! And grandfather was our parent! The people who fucking put in the
time are our parents — not the losers who abandoned us without a second thought. You may not
remember them because you are too young —”

“I do remember them,” she interjects.

“You don’t even know what you’re talking about!” he says bitterly.

She blinks back tears as Mossador puts his hand on Marselen’s arm and pulls him up from the seat,
telling her that they are going to take a walk outside. It’s really excruciating to look around the table
at all the people who are either looking at her sympathetically or who are avoiding eye contact. She
reaches up and wipes her eyes, knowing she’s smearing her makeup, as Sandor’s heavy hand comes
down on her shoulder. She sucks in a big breath and forces some cheer into her voice as she tells him
that she’s all right. Really. She’s okay.

Marselen sort of quietly apologizes to her when they’re getting ready to go to the airport.
Technically, what he says to her is that he had been drinking a lot last night, and when he drinks —
he kind of becomes a jerk sometimes.

It’s enough for her. She leans into him as he hugs her, dropping a kiss on her head.

It’s not something he’s sure that he wants — a job at corporate. He was actually thinking that he
didn’t want to see another fucking pair of pumps ever again. But an opportunity came up, and he
figured that he’d interview for it — if just to get interview practice in. He’s more than a month out of
school, and he’s starting to grind his teeth as he sleeps at night over how disappointing he manages to
be sometimes.

He stands up when his name is called. He holds out his hand for the handshake.

“Hello. Nice to meet you. I’m Barristan Selmy.”

She’s at the doctor’s office for her a physical and a pap smear. When she’s directed to stand on the
scale, she drops her purse to the ground and takes off her shoes. She balks when the medical assistant
tells her how much she weighs. She tells the lady that it can’t be right. There’s no way she has
gained nearly ten pounds without realizing it. There is no way.

She is still pissed at herself as the medical assistant takes her temperature and measures her blood
pressure.

The pap is — as always — really fun. Or uncomfortable. But her doctor tells her that her ovaries feel
She kind of pauses when her doctor asks her if she is currently sexually active. Her doctor asks if it’s the same partner — Neal? Missandei laughs nervously — kind of feeling weirdly promiscuous, even though her doctor isn’t judging. And she says no, not Neal anymore.

Her doctor asks her if she needs a refill on her birth control. Missandei says no, she doesn’t.

“So what are you using as contraceptive?”

“Oh, I’m just praying.”

Her doctor gives her a look.

“I mean condoms.”

“Bingo. That is the right answer.”

She keeps tugging the hem of her baby doll dress down. She can’t tell if it’s her imagination or if it’s real — the uncomfortable way this dress is pulled across her body.

Missandei has been hungry all day. And so it makes a lot of sense when she orders a chicken salad with dressing on the side. She hates it. She hates every second of it. Across the table, he orders a double cheeseburger with bacon, and she wants to hit him across the face.

When the server leaves, his eyes narrow and he scrutinizes her for one long, unnerving moment. And then he says, “How come you ordered a salad?”

“I just want a salad,” she says.

“O-kay,” he says slowly, looking down at the table.

“And — I’ve gained weight,” she says, reluctantly.

His eyes pull back up to her face again — and then her blood gets hot when his eyes drift a little bit down, looking at her chest, her boobs, her arms — all the bits exposed over the table. “Should I guess how much weight you’ve gained?” he says, his face serious for a few seconds before his mouth curves into a mean-spirited smile.

She rolls her eyes, all the while feeling her skin flushing. She feels self-conscious about her body. It’s very weird. It’s really horrible. She’s not used to this feeling at all.

“You know what would help?” he says conversationally. “Actually if you’d drink less. There are so many calories in those mixed drinks you’re always pounding. You should consider scaling back.”

She can feel herself getting sensitive about it — defensive. She swallow the saliva in her mouth and she doesn’t say anything to him — not right away. She furtively eyes the hard lemonade — sugary lemonade dosed with vodka — that is sitting in front of her right hand. It’s with this uncomfortable weight in the pit of her stomach that she grabs the glass and takes a sip from it. It’s sour and makes her mouth water unpleasantly. She feels like she’s at the beginning of some precipice. She’s being stupidly girly about this — and Brienne has already given her a really great pep talk about this — but
sometimes Missandei really feels like this is the beginning of the end. Goodbye, abs. Goodbye, arms. Hello, cellulite. Hello, ten cats. Hello, being forklifted out of her apartment.

She really doesn’t want to be the sort of person who is so wrapped up in her looks though. She never even thought she was that person until the weight gain. And what does that even say about her? That she was fooling herself the whole time and she has always been a vapid, superficial twit? And now she’s gross.

“You should do a combo of aerobic exercise and strength-training,” Grey says. “Cardio to lose the pounds and weights to tone up. And you should eat less, of course.”

It’s pretty unexpected when she tells him that she feels really tired after dinner — so instead of going out to a bar afterward, she asks him if he would mind if they cut the night short. Of course he agrees to that, but it’s odd that the mood in her car is so tense and awkward. Leading up to dinner, she had been texting him excitedly all week — because they haven’t seen one another in a few weeks since he’s been spending a lot of time with Addam, Daven, and Drogo, before they move away. And there’s his new job and the long hours there trying to ramp up quickly. He was pretty sure that she’d be gushing about how glad she is that he gets to keep the same employee discount, but she was pretty quiet during dinner.

When they pull up to his place, she leaves the car running. She turns to him in the dark, smiling a little bit. She tells him good night.

“Do you want to come in for a little bit?” he asks.

“Oh, no.” She forces a smile at him again. “I’m pretty beat,” she says. “I should get going. But I had fun tonight. It was good to see you.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Totally!” she says. “Sorry I’m being so dull.” She tucks a bit of her hair behind her ear.

He lets the moment hang for a bit — as he thinks over something. He sees her eyes darting around in the dark, avoiding looking at him. Something must’ve happened, to make her mood like this. He feels — he feels kind of bad.

“How about you just come in for five minutes? I have something I want to show you.”

She really doesn’t want to extend this night, but he is weirdly insistent. So she follows him down the stone path, past all of the overgrown ferns, and hangs out under his awning as he picks out his keys and unlocks his door.

He tells her that she can sit on the bed when she enters the room and he flips on the light. Missandei carefully holds the skirt of her dress down as she lowers herself to his perfectly made bed. She crosses her legs, reaching down and absentmindedly grabbing onto the stiletto heel of her boot and
pulling it toward her body, stretching her ankle.

She watches as he shuts the door tight by pushing his body against it. And then he throws the deadbolt. It clicks loudly.

“Uh, why did you just lock the door?” she asks.

“So you can’t get away easily,” he says.

“Uh, are you about to murder me? What you just said sounded super murder-y.”

He’s looking down at her from his standing position in front of the bed and laughing lightly as he crosses his arms.

Her pulse is speeding up — because this is really fucking bizarre. “So what do you want to show me?” she says nervously.

“Are you mad at me?” he throws back. “Did I do something?”

“Oh.” She shakes her head. “No. I’m not mad at you.”

“Then why are you acting so strangely?”

“Because I am a weird person?”

“Missandei,” he says, lowering his voice like he always does with her name whenever he gets even a little bit frustrated.

She sighs. “I dunno,” she says. “I feel like a disgusting fatass. And you hurt my feelings by confirming that fact, okay?”
He realizes that he’s a real stupid dumbass as she continues explaining to him why she’s upset. He thinks she’s being irrational and has kind of lost touch with reality, that’s for sure, but nevertheless — he understands how the disconnect occurred. He was kind of wrapped up in his own shit at dinner and was distracted, so he didn’t really pick up certain nuances or characteristics in the conversation they were having.

She covers her face and melodramatically falls backwards on his bed, the hem of her dress fluffing up with the motion. She groans into her hands and tells him she’s being such a silly girl about this whole thing — she mutters that she actually knows she’s not disgusting and a pig. But the ten pounds are really messing with her head.

He resists agreeing with her — stops himself from telling her he also thinks that she’s being silly. Instead, he walks to his mini fridge and fetches a bottle of water. He uncaps it, takes a big swig from it, and then he walks over and holds it over her head on his bed. He tells her to have some.

She peeks one eye through her fingers and says, “Oh great. You got me a zero-calorie beverage so my fat ass doesn’t get bigger. Thanks for looking out, bro.” She uncovers her eyes and reaches up for the bottle. She tries to drink from it while still lying down. And she’s making a bit of a mess — dripping water down the sides of her chin, getting his bed wet.

It makes him laugh. Because she’s funny and adorable.

There’s nowhere else to sit in his tiny place, so he gently nudges one of her knees over and sits at the end of the bed. She shimmies around and repositions herself so that her head is resting on his pillow. She lifts her legs and places them on his lap. His hands go over her ankles, over her boots.

“Seriously. What did you want to show me?”

“Nothing,” he says. “It was just a lie to get you out of the car.”

“And into your bed?” she says.

He smiles at her feet. “Yes,” he says.

She tells him that it’s funny — because her grandma actually is always bugging her to gain a few. But then, the standards of beauty differ from place to place, from generation to generation. Her grandma would have her be a little bit heavier, but also for her to spend way less time in the sun. Her grandma wants her to be pudgy and pale.

These are things that he doesn’t really ever think about. And he tells her as much — that it doesn’t really occur to him. To him, weight is just weight. There’s not this whole other value applied to it. He tells her that he imagines he has this viewpoint because he is male.

“And effortlessly hot,” she adds, looking up at the ceiling.

He looks at his ceiling, too — his stained, ugly ceiling. “Well,” he says. “You’re beautiful.”
He can almost feel her eyes snapping down to look at him. He can see her mouth transition from a pout to a smile that so wide and happy that it makes him uncomfortable. He sees a few things flicker over her face — he absently thinks, again, about the nature of friendship and what is normal between him and her. He knows he is especially closed off and withholding. He can extrapolate and guess where a normal amount of affection lies. He always assumes that what she really wants from him is more than he can give to her.

He can partially see up her dress. Her smooth thighs disappear under the pastel hem, hollow-looking and dark. He averts his eyes. He tells her it's been longer than five minutes. She can go home if she wants. Or —

“Or?” she says.

Sometimes talking ruins moments. So she’s stock still and her mouth is clamped shut as his fingers pull down the zipper of one of her boots. His warm hand sneaks inside, and he holds her leg by the shin as he pulls off the boot. He asks her if she wants to keep her socks on. And she breaks out into a sweat and almost makes some dumb joke about how they should really take off their all of their clothes and have sex with each other again, this time on a proper bed — but she decides not to sabotage herself by saying that. She just thickly tells him she wants them off.

Her feet are bare and her heels are pressed into his leg. He looks at her from the other end of the bed, and there’s a small smile on his face as he asks her if she wants to watch a movie.

She’s shocked into laughing. Because it’s like he doesn’t want to get laid. She’s careful not to spill the bottle of water as she rolls over onto her side, pressing her face into his pillow to muffle the laugh. And then she says, “Yeah. Let’s watch a movie.”

Missy jumps up and down on her blades, in a neon sports bra and running leggings, tonelessly singing to herself. “I’m working on my fitness, working on my fitness. Even though I want to eat pizza and donuts and burgers and fried chicken and cheese and bread and pasta because carbs and cheese and fat taste so good —”

Brienne, wearing a headband, an oversized t-shirt, and loose black shorts, laughs from where she is tying the laces of her rollerblades, sitting on a bench beside Missandei.

Missy lets Brienne lead the way. To get on the path, they weave in and out between moms with strollers, little kids, and dogs on leashes. Missandei hasn’t rollerbladed in forever — the first ten minutes are a little shaky — but the muscle memory comes back pretty fast and soon she is gliding across the pavement.

It’s a hot day, so a lot of men are running with their shirts off on the interurban trail — a lot of eye candy. Missandei doesn’t care if she’s blatant with the watching — because she knows the way that some people watch her.

She thinks about Grey. She’s been thinking him a lot lately, actually. She’s been thinking about what
he must have been like as a child — probably quiet like he is now — obedient. Probably scared a lot of the time. There’s a lot more clarity now for her, on why he’s the way he is. She thinks about the way he looks at her and the way he sometimes acts around her, only when no one is watching. And she thinks about how such cloaking habits cannot be ingrained — they must have been taught.

She and Brienne stop off at a bridge, to watch geese. Brienne leans over the railing, a flush splotchy on her shiny cheeks. Missandei touches her back to the railing next to her friend, crossing her arms over her sweaty boobs.

“I’ve been seeing someone,” Brienne murmurs. “We’ve only been on a few dates, but he’s really nice. I like him.”

“What about Jaime?” Missy turns her head.

“What about Jaime?” Brienne says.

“Well, he’s single. And you’re single. . . .”

“Just because two people are both single doesn’t mean —” Brienne pauses. “He’s moved on. We’ve both moved on.”

When he arrives at Barristan’s office, Grey thinks it’s to talk about the report that he sent in the morning. But then Barristan tells him to close the door and take a seat.

He’s here on a trial basis — three months — and then there will be an evaluation. He’s putting off moving to King’s Landing for the three months — just in case things don’t work out. The commute to work has been pretty shitty. He was fifteen minutes late this morning. He wonders if that’s what Barristan wants to talk to him about.

“Relax,” Barristan says. “You’re not in trouble.”

She grabs his hand and drags him into the store because he’s walking too slowly and she’s too excited. She pulls him to men’s suits — because that’s the first priority. He already has one pretty nice one — though it needs to be tailored a little bit — but a second one, some sports coats, some slacks, and some dress shirts that he can mix and match would be a fantastic starting point for his wardrobe that he can build on over the years. She loves that his boss told him he dresses like a little kid.

Missandei asks Grey what his measurements are — and the blank hesitation that comes over his face is enough for her to smartly shove him at a female employee with a measuring tape.

Clothes shopping with him is actually not horrible. She had anticipated that it’d be really awful and he’d be cranky and would fight her on everything — that was pretty much the case with Neal. But Grey actually only pauses over the cost of things — he doesn’t seem to particularly care about how things look. He listens fairly attentively when she talks to him about mixing patterns and tie widths.
He tries on all sorts of pastel shirts when she puts the hangers in his hands. He wordlessly holds out his arms and makes it easier for her to feel fabric and tug this or that to get the stretch and the fit.

It is actually kind of amazing. It’s like playing around with a living doll.

She has her hands folded over her knees, sitting in the main room of the dressing area, talking to Marnie, the employee helping them — when he comes out wearing dark slacks and a sweater vest she picked out for him.

“Maybe one size down?” she says to Marnie.

“Definitely.”

Grey picks at the material, looking at it. “What is the point of this?” he says, in a non-judgmental tone. “There are no sleeves, so it’s not like it’s for warmth.”

“You can wear it with a suit for a layered look,” Missandei. “Or you can wear it by itself for a more casual feel. It’s versatile!”

“Is it essential?” he says, looking at her.

“Hon,” Marnie says to Grey. “You need to learn that this pretty lady is always right. It’ll be better for you in the long run.”

He raises his hand in opposition. “Actually,” he says. “She is wrong sometimes.”

Jaime puts his red hat over his wet head and drops his surfboard before he runs up to where they are. Addam, from a rickety aluminum lawn chair that he has dug into the sand with his weight, throws Jaime a beach towel. Drogo, hunched over a small portable charcoal grill in the sand, crankily gripes at Addam, telling him to watch it — don’t get sand in the food. A plastic bag with three packages of hotdogs and buns is twisted up and tied at Addam’s feet. Drogo had vetoed the hotdogs when Daven brought them — complaining that white people love hotdogs too much.

With a pair of metal tongs, Drogo flips a slab of marinated pork belly on the grill. The fat the drips off the meat causes a fiery flare-up — Addam yelps, pulling up his feet.

“What did I say about sand, man!” Drogo snaps.

“It was so scary!” Addam says.

“Fuck, it smells so good,” Daven mutters, coming up from behind Jaime, also dripping wet. “I am so hungry.” He takes the damp towel that Jaime had used, pulling it over his head.

They end up cooking the hotdogs because they are all ravenous. Or rather, Grey mans the grill. Drogo refuses to on principle. Jaime says that the dogs are dry because no one brought ketchup or mustard. Daven gets a little sore over it and dramatically says that he knows he can’t do anything right — as he cracks open another beer can.

Grey’s face down on a towel, on the warm sand, drifting off to sleep, half-listening to their conversation. They’re talking about him. They sometimes talk about him in front of his face on
purpose, because they hope it will inspire him to butt into the conversation and correct whatever misconceptions they are deliberately spewing. He generally never takes the bait.

Jaime is bitching about how he won’t agree to live together, stating that he has no good reason for it. Jaime’s saying that rent in King’s Landing is total robbery and how he’d have to go back to his dad’s house or something — if he can’t find a person to live with. Or he’s going to be homeless — he’d have to resort to prostitution on the side, if he can’t find someone to live with.

“You’re being kinda insensitive, Jaime,” Addam says. “Talking about living with another man when I’m like, sitting right here.”

Grey doesn’t really flinch or move when Jaime kicks him in the hip, shouting, “Stop playing hard-to-get, you stupid slut!”

She smiles at him from behind sunglasses, as he comes up to her and apologizes for being late. He’s only a few minutes late — and she tells him so.

She picks at her salad — spears a strawberry — before popping it into her mouth.

When he comes back, Neal tells her she looks really great, looking her over, lingering at her cleavage. She resists telling him that she gained weight. Instead, she thanks him.

He sips from his coffee and they catch up over what’s been happening over the last couple of years. He tells her that she really threw him for a loop when they ran into each other at the airport. His parents have been talking about her nonstop, saying that she’s such a nice girl and all of that. So that’s why he wanted to reach out and catch up.

When he asks her if she’s seeing someone — she is a little awkward about it. She tells him yes and no. It’s kind of complicated.

He laughs. “You like complicated.”

“I don’t!” she says, grinning. “Complicated just follows me around!”

“I’m not seeing anyone either,” he says, after a pensive pause. “We should hang out sometime. I have missed you.”

At Sandor’s going-away party, Missandei is telling Grey about the job she recently interviewed for — at this multinational marketing and public relations company headquartered in Sunspear. He asks her if it means she might be moving to Sunspear. She grins and tells him that it’s a possibility — maybe later on down the line — but for now, the position is located at the King’s Landing office. She softly pulls at the hem of his t-shirt, pulling his body toward hers. She pitches her voice down and huskily asks him if he’d miss her, if she moved away.

He casts a quick glance around the room, trying to see if anyone is watching them. Then he closes
his fist around her hand and pulls it off of his shirt, rolling his eyes. She’s always trying to fuck with his head.

He asks her how her new exercise regimen is going, which makes her groan loudly. She does a few shallow lunges in her tight jeans and heels and tells him that her legs are incredibly sore and they feel like jelly.

“See?” she says, holding onto the bar counter. “I can’t go lower than this or I will fall flat on my fat ass.”

“That ass is not fat,” Brienne says grinning, walking up with Jaime and a full glass of beer.

Missandei straightens and twists around to look at her own butt. “Bah, it’s hard to tell from this vantage point,” she says.

Brienne swats Jaime on the chest with the back of her hand. “Tell her that her butt is not fat.”

Jaime takes a sip from his glass. “I always like a little cushion for the pushing.”

“Oh really?” says Brienne, laughing, flushing a little pink.

Jaime shrugs. “Theoretically.” He directs his attention back to Missandei. “What’s your deal with your butt?”

“I’ve gained weight,” she says. “And I love that this is a conversation topic.”

“Oh, man,” Jaime says. “I feel you. Ever since school ended and we’re not constantly working out and rowing, I’ve been feeling like a real tub of lard.”

“Yeah!” Missandei exclaims, turning to Grey, slapping him hard on the chest, making him cough into his fist. “See! Jaime gets it!”

A drunk and sloppy Missandei is not his favorite version of Missandei. It never has been. He has to hand her over to Brienne hold up as he goes over and says good luck and farewell for now to Sandor. Missandei will probably be pissed at herself tomorrow that she’s not even conscious enough to properly say goodbye to her friend.

He has to carry her and dump her in the front passenger seat of her own car. He puts her in the front seat because he’s afraid that she’s going to vomit in the backseat. At least in the front seat, he has a chance of rolling open the window and shoving her face out there, as he’s driving.

He carries her, fireman style because it’s easier to walk up the stairs and open the door of her apartment. It’s like carrying a corpse — a dead weight. Other than the occasional grunting and murmuring, she feels boneless.

“Oh my God,” she says, from somewhere down below. “The blood is rushing to my head. It’s gonna pop like a pimple.”

“Do you want to walk?” he says, pausing on the stairs.

“No. I want you to keep carrying me.”
He shakes his head to himself in the dimly stairwell, grabs onto the railing, and continues pushing up the stairs.

She whines about being dizzy after he drops her on the bed roughly, panting from the exertion of dragging her stupid ass up the stairs. He goes into her kitchen space and grabs a cup, filling it with water, before he walks back to the bed and pulls her up into sitting position, shoving the glass of water into her hand.

He kind of watches in amazement as she drinks the entire glass in one continuous gulp.

“More?”

“Yes. More.”

She collapses back down on her bed after the second glass. She tells him she’s going to need to go pee a lot later. She tells him that her stomach is distended from all of the water. She lifts her white shirt, stopping shy of her bra, and she asks him if he can see her water belly. He tells her he can’t really tell any difference.

She pushes her stomach out into a mound, a small hill. “See it now?”

It makes him laugh quietly. “Yes,” he says, reaching out and pulling her shirt back down over her stomach.

She grabs his hand and pulls it to her chest, pulls it so it’s right under her neck, against her throat. He has to lean forward awkwardly. She looks at him from under droopy eyelids. She says, “Stay the night.”

He sighs — squeezing her hand lightly. He tells himself that it’s late and they’ve bunked down together before in the past, after one of them got plastered. This is their thing — their pattern. She can drive him home in the morning. He tries to ignore the uncomfortable thought that is niggling in the back of his mind. He says, “Yeah, okay. I can sleep on the floor.”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” she says.
He’s sitting on the edge of her bed and running his hands up and down his thighs nervously as the toilet flushes in the bathroom. His mind is cycling around itself frantically — it’s that sort of thing where there are too many thoughts running, so he’s painfully static and blank and frozen.

When she comes out, she not wearing her jeans. Her legs are bare as she walks over to him, stands in front of him, and puts her hands on his shoulders. He can hear their syncopated breathing. Her hands smooth down his front, touching the bottom of his shirt — her gaze on him is steady and she’s unnervingly quiet — as she pulls his shirt off.

She pushes him down onto the bed and she climbs on top of him, caging his body in with her limbs. He can smell alcohol on her breath just before her hand sneaks behind his neck — he is painfully sober — before she kisses him.

The heat emanating off of her is thick and viscous, as her body presses into his, as her body works to metabolize the booze. He opens his mouth wider, sliding his tongue against hers, slowly and thoroughly, getting lost in the feel of the flat of her hand dragging friction down his bare skin, clenching and contracting his muscles when she reaches his sensitive stomach. His hands press into the giving flesh of her ass, sneaking underneath the elastic of her panties. He grabs a tight hold of her and he pulls her down, grinds her over the zipper of his jeans.

She breaks away from the wet kiss with a gasp, throwing her head back. She anchors her hands against his chest and rises, sitting on him, straddling him, whimpering as she rubs herself against him slowly.

“I want you so badly,” she says quietly. “I have always wanted you so badly.”

“I know,” he says, equally as quietly. He runs his hands up her body, over her hips, across her stomach underneath her shirt, up and under her bra. She runs her teeth over her bottom lip as he squeezes her breasts — it has to be a little bit painful — before she reaches around to undo her bra. She pulls it and her shirt off in one motion. He lifts his hands from her body, so he can look at her properly. She has light tan lines — delicate ones from the straps of her swimsuit — swatches over the swells of her breasts. Her nipples are puckered and dark. And she is really symmetrical.

Without warning, he presses the flat of his thumb to the apex in between her legs, over her damp underwear. He slowly rotates a circle firmly over her clit. She bucks on top of him and nearly falls over.

“Jesus,” she says, screwing her eyes shut, spreading her legs out wider.

The thing is — his secret is that he has wanted her, too. He wants her badly, too. He really, really, really wants this. The last person he has had sex with, was her.
She hears him say, “Hey,” as they are both naked — really the most amazing thing to happen to her all month — kneeling on top of her bed. She reaches out to grab at him, at his erection, hearing him swear under his breath. She lightly strokes him a few times, relishing in the fact that she finally gets to do this — gets to touch him like this — and his hands go on top of her wrists as she rolls the condom on.

“Missandei,” he says, trying to get her attention.

“Yeah, yeah,” she breathes, throwing her arms around his neck, pressing her body tantalizingly against his, pushing her tongue into his mouth as she yanks him, pulling him down on top of her. Her feet mindlessly kicks some of her blankets away as she scoots up — her mouth still attached to his — as she lines up their bodies. She cannot fucking wait — she actually cannot wait a moment longer because she’s been going nuts — he’s been driving her nuts.

She is so ready. She holds him and navigates him between her legs, between her folds. Her heels bite into the back of his thighs as he groans loudly and thrusts into her.

Her nails claw into his shoulder. She hears him make a small noise of surprise. “Hold on a second there, baby,” she tells him, breathing loudly through her nose. She can feel him twitch inside of her. She just wants a moment to get used to him inside of her — kind of a moment to bask in it.

She looks up at his face — at his wonderful, familiar face. And she wants to make some sort of stupid declaration, to mark this moment. It’s not love — not yet. But it’s something. It’s been something they’ve been working toward for a long time.

He leans down and kisses her.

His whole body is shaking — trembling with adrenaline and tension. He looks down her, her lips puffy and wet from hard kisses. She lets out small little gasps every time he shoves back into her. Her expression — the way she is looking at him is so insane to him — so needy and so open and so honest.

He forces another two fast pumps in succession. And then he wants to slam his fist into the headboard. His heart is racing, but his body is slowing down. He drops his head into into her neck, a wave of nausea hitting him.

“Babe?”

“I lost it,” he says.

She’s still a little disoriented and confused when he pulls out. The mood immediately shifts — she tries to physically hold onto him for a little bit longer, her slick hands holding onto his shoulders, then his arms, then his wrists and hands as he extricates himself from her. He gets off the bed and turns his back to her. She sits up and watches as his naked form walks into her kitchen area to throw the
condom away.

He’s soft and flaccid when he turns around and walks back to her. He also looks pissed.

She rises to her knees, so they’re about the same height. She can tell that it shocks him when her face breaks into a wide smile, when she lightly laughs. She reaches out and pulls his sweaty naked body against hers. She presses a hard kiss into the side of his neck. “Don’t be so gloomy,” she says into his skin. “It happens. You’ve also been drinking tonight. We can try again later.”

He sighs. “It’s not that. It’s — I’m sorry.” He sighs again.

“Don’t be sorry!” she says, encasing her arms around him tighter.

She has to spend the next five minutes giving him a pep that that he shits all over. She tells him that he’s so hot, like, she is really into him, like really. And sex is not so boring and simple and straightforward. Sometimes there are detours. Sex isn’t always just penis in vagina. Sex is always a work in progress. They all have to go on their own sexual journey and exploration. Like pioneers.

“Missandei.” He puts his forefinger over her lips. “Shh.”

“Sleep with me,” she says against his finger, pulling him.

He resists for a moment, before he sighs and then climbs back onto the bed — which is a mess. They have made it a mess of rumpled blankets and sheets thrown and twisted all over, hanging off the mattress. She bends over nakedly and starts to straighten everything. She lays the comforter over his legs, over his lap before she pulls the edge of it over her shoulders and forces the both of them to lie down. She rolls into him and rests her head in the crook of his arm.

She feels his fingers skim the cleft of her butt, before he murmurs, “I usually don’t sleep with anyone. I mean like — actual sleeping.”

“Yeah?” she says into his chest. “Why not? Ruins your bed-them-and-leave-them street cred?”

He snorts. “I have night terrors sometimes. I think it can get kind of scary. If — if something happens or something seems off about me — you need to get out of bed right away. You should be very careful about waking me up.”

“Oh,” she says softly. “Wow.”

“Do you want me to sleep on the floor?”

“No!” she says quickly, holding onto him tightly, throwing a leg over him. “I want you to stay.”

He pushes out another sigh. “I’m sorry,” he says.

He’s already awake and staring up at her ceiling, when she opens her eyes in the morning. She sheepishly brushes the drool off of his chest and her cheek as she sits up, uncaring of her nakedness. She smiles at him and tells him good morning. He gives her a quick smile and asks her how she slept. She tells him she slept great. His expression becomes coded and guarded, when he says that he’s glad.
“Did you sleep well?”

He hesitates, pursing his lips at the ceiling. “Actually, no,” he says. “I was too paranoid to sleep. I was nervous about accidentally hurting you.” He looks at her, and she can see that he is tense and that there’s a lot of heavy crap on his mind.

“So,” she says. “Are you saying you’re too tired for morning sex?”

He tries to give her a smile — and he fails.

Unfortunately, he has to wear his clothes from the night before. She is disappointed that she can’t just watch him be naked in her apartment for hours and hours. He tries to make a case for checking out and going home right away — but she refuses to drive him home before coffee and breakfast. There’s nothing much in her fridge, but she doesn’t think he’d want to go out to breakfast — be around people.

She has bread — so she crisps up some toast and slides a jar of jam to him. He’s been quiet. She’s been making conversation — just casual things — but he’s distracted and only answers in single syllables. And she doesn’t know how to recapture the light mood of the night before — at the bar — and on her bed.

She sits on a chair across from him at her small two-person table, in her underwear and an oversized t-shirt. She usually has her laptop on this table, working from it. She usually eats on the floor.

She clears her throat, cupping the cooling cup of black coffee. “Can we talk about it?” she says.

He doesn’t answer her right away.

So she says, “I can go first? So, cards on the table — um, I really, really like you. I think you’re great and really easy to be around. I like who I am when I’m with you. And I also want to have sex with you. I’m not saying that I want us to be in this exclusive relationship — it seems that you are kind of wary of commitment. But I mean — I’m open to seeing where things go?” At the end of her speech, her voice tilts up in such a hopeful note that she just wants to kick herself over it.

“I don’t know why you like me,” he mutters, rubbing his stubble with his palm. She’s about to protest his words, but he cuts her off by shaking his head. He stares at the table — thinking — and she waits it out. “It’s probably best if we just stay friends,” he finally says.

She frowns. “You’ve said that before.”

“And I meant it before.”

“Why?”

He’s not used to so much talking — and not even mundane conversational stuff — but really talking
about such difficult things. These are things he’s never ever said out loud to another human being before — he doesn’t even know how to string the sentences together.

He tries to keep things vague and light — tells her that he thinks they should keep things simple and clean, that they shouldn’t try for more because that will be a disaster. She wants to know why he thinks it will be a disaster. He tells her that she is too good for him and he doesn’t deserve her. And it’s a statement that genuinely surprises her. She asks why. She keeps asking why — every time he tries to explain something new. And he feels himself getting in deeper and deeper. He doesn’t know what to say that will make things clear and final.

He realizes — in the course of their frustrating conversation — that he had automatically resigned himself to a certain kind of life — one where he is alone. No other alternative has ever really been realistic or has even occurred to him. This is what he struggles to explain to her, because it’s something he knows as a given, but something that is completely outside of her realm of experience.

“I know you are attracted to me,” she says more to herself than to him. “I know that.”

“Yeah, I am,” he admits.

“So what is the problem?”

She completely doesn’t understand what he’s getting at when he asks her, what is a relationship between two people that is devoid of sex?

It’s like this riddle or this puzzle.

He answers for her. He tells her that it’s a friendship. A friendship is a relationship between two people that doesn’t contain sex. That is what they are meant to have with each other — a friendship.

She stares at him blankly — hopelessly — and she asks him what that means, what he means by that.

He plainly tells her that his penis is fucked up. She shakes her head in disbelief and she asks him if he’s like, referring to last night. She tells him that it’s really not a big deal. She tells him that all guys have performance issues from time to time.

He shakes his head, clenching his fist on the table. He just insists that he doesn’t work that way — that there’s something wrong with him, that’s always been wrong with him. He tells her that he’s always been this way.

She is utterly confused. And she tells him that they have actually had sex before. With each other. So she knows that it’s possible. What is he even talking about? It doesn’t make any sense. She tells him that she actually knows he’s a big whore. She’s heard stories from his friends. So it really doesn’t make any sense.

“It’s harder when it’s with someone I care about,” he says.

“You’re not even willing to try,” she says.

“You and I already have something good,” he says. “I don’t want to fuck with it.”
“It can be better.”

“Why do you even care? You can go have sex with anyone.”

“But I want to be with you.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I do,” she insists. “I know you better than you realize. I know that your parents left you and abandoned you when you were a kid. I know you have issues because of that.”

“They didn’t leave me!” he says, slamming his hand down on the table, rattling the dishes, making her flinch in her seat. “They sold me. There is a difference.”

He rarely sees Missandei cry because she rarely cries. But he can’t even look at her as she sits across from him, as she starts sniffling and wiping her eyes. His voice is low and tight, and he doesn’t even plan ahead for what’s coming out of his mouth. He doesn’t even know what he’s going to say. He doesn’t know what his goals are — what his intent is — when he stiffly tells her that his family started out okay, but descended into poverty when the slave trade experienced a boon when he wasn’t even born yet. He was the youngest of his family, with two brothers and three sisters. And when they were starving and had really nothing left to eat, strangers ripped him from his mother — and she allowed it.

It was many, many years later until he fully understood the scope and context of it — the fact that his so-called virginity was commoditized. His parents sold him because they didn’t know any better and they already had two sons — he was expendable and he was worth more than his sisters because he was male and very, very young. He was returned to them a month later, damaged and tainted. And they muddled through, scraping by, for another year — and then his parents sold him again. Sent him to Astapor. For the same kind of shit. For good.

He tells her that is what he is made of. He tells her that he is not who she thinks he is. He tells her he’s not capable of being who she wants him to be. He tells her he regrets this — but it’s just the truth.

Missandei is utterly numb when Jhiqui calls her and squeals into her ear. She excitedly announces that Nick proposed, and they are getting married. She wants Missandei to be her maid of honor.

He has his ankles crossed and he’s reclining — slouching — on Jaime and Addam’s couch. His brain is pleasantly throbbing and time seems to move by effortlessly — but slowly. He watches Drogo shoves a messy smoke cloud out of his lungs.

“Shut up,” Grey says. “I’ll fucking live with you, okay?”

She frantically checks her voicemail when she finally grabs her mail. There are three letters from her doctor — and when she notices, a ball drops into the pit of her stomach.

It gets better. It turns out she has chlamydia. She blearily says she hasn’t noticed symptoms. They tell her that sometimes people are asymptomatic — often, women are. Her doctor’s office says they will call in a course of antibiotics to the pharmacy of her choice. Also, this is an STI that is reportable. The information will also go to public health, which will contact any sexual partners she’s had in the last 60 days to notify them to get tested — and if she hasn’t had sexual contact with anyone in the last 60 days, then whoever was her most recent sexual partner.

In a daze, Missandei tells them that she’s only had one sexual partner in the last two months.
She texts him about the chlamydia. She figures she doesn’t need to prop it on a pedestal by creating such a big ritual over telling him. It’s not a death sentence. She also figured that it’d take a while for their schedules to match up in order to meet in person — what with her starting a new job soon — and he should probably go get checked out before he goes off and bangs some girl who is not her all indiscriminately like a fucking bastard.

She texts him that she has chlamydia and he should make an appointment with his doctor. And then right after, she texts him that it’s not a joke.

He doesn’t respond to her. And after eight hours, she gets really antsy — like, she starts to think that he totally hates her for giving him chlamydia — so she follows up. She texts: Hello?


He sighs softly before he turns off his phone and pockets it.

He doesn’t really care about amenities or location or cosmetic stuff. He just wants an apartment within a price range that they can both afford. For this reason, he lets Jaime go nuts with the apartment-hunting. It’s what Jaime is good at.

They’re looking a little bit early, but Jaime says it’s worth doing so. It’s so competitive out there and places are getting snatched up left and right. They need to be sharp and prepared. Jaime is intense about finding the best deal in the best location. He gets pissy when Grey expresses reluctance over leaving work early to go look at places. He gets pissier when Grey says that he has a job — he’s not sitting around studying for the LSATs all day. Grey’s schedule is less flexible.

“It’s like you don’t care about living in a nice place,” Jaime says sullenly.

“I actually don’t care,” Grey says.

“Well, pretend.”

He goes to the clinic during his lunch break. He looks really out of place among the elderly and women with children, in his suit and tie. He’s handed a clipboard with a questionnaire and a pen. When he quickly skims over the sheet and tilts his head to the ceiling, closing his eyes.

The other day when he called to make the appointment, the person he spoke to asked him what he was seeing a doctor for. Grey said he needed to get an STD test. Brian, who is the next cube over,
popped his head over the partition between their desks to cast a quick glance at Grey — because Brian is a nosy motherfucker.

The female doctor looks over the questionnaire that he filled out. They go over certain questions. Yes, he’s only had sex with one other person in the last six months. That person was the one who told him she has chlamydia. He has never been tested for STDs before. He has had sex with men. He has had anal sex where a penis goes into his anus. He has not recently been forced to have intercourse against his will. He was born in one of those areas on the world map that is blacked out for being a hotbed for sexually transmitted infections and diseases. He has lived in another area of the map that is blacked out. He does use drugs recreationally.

There’s some light counseling — basically always use condoms. Basically stop using drugs. And if he can’t do that, then don’t share needles. Basically stop being an idiot.

After she takes a blood sample, she tells him to drop his pants and his underwear. She looks at his anus and says it looks fine. She swabs it anyway. He clenches jaw momentarily and stops himself from rolling his eyes at himself. He then turns around and holds up his penis for her, just like she asks. She asks him to help her by pulling back his foreskin. And then she sticks a swab up his dick, in his urethra. It burns and is uncomfortable going in. It makes him think of Missandei and all of the possible dangerous shit he could have exposed her to.

After a while, the swab gets pulled out and it burns then, too. It gets put into plastic vial. And she repeats the process again and again.

He’s in a shitty mood when he’s told he will get results in a few days. His shitty moods continues throughout work and after, when he has to run to catch the bus and is fifteen minutes late getting to an apartment complex to meet Jaime, who immediately jumps on his ass for the tardiness.

She sucks up her peach smoothie through a straw as they wander around the mall. It’s weird. And it’s funny because it’s an activity that they used to do all the time together. She used to lie to her grandpa, told him that she was going to meet some girls at the mall to go shop around or watch a movie. Her grandpa gave her some pocket money and everything.

In truth, she often went to the mall to meet Neal. Her grandpa disapproved of her dating so young. She used to carry on a careful schedule, putting on eyeliner and eyeshadow on the school bus, wiping it off before arriving home.

He says he wants to find his mom a nameday present and he remembers that she’s the best at picking out gifts. He keeps drifting her way, finding subtle reasons to touch her. She hasn’t yet figured out if he’s trying to recapture close feelings of nostalgic friendship — or if he’s feeling nostalgic for another reason. It’s not yet something that is imperative for her to deal with.

Grey’s text comes in while she’s having dinner with Brienne — another stint at the Cheesecake Factory. Missandei has lost eight pounds. So she thought she’d celebrate by cramming her maw with
sugary fat. It’s rude, but Missy picks up her phone to read his message really quick. She blinks rapidly a few times — doing a double-take. She hasn’t seen him since she drove him home, that morning after he spent the night. His avoidance doesn’t seem so much malicious and purposeful as it does happenstance. She believes him when he says he’s busy.

“Everything okay?” Brienne says.

Missy smacks her lips lightly, biding some time. Then she slowly says, “I think I gave someone chlamydia. Because he just texted me and was like, ‘Hey, I have chlamydia, you stupid bitch.’ Except he didn’t call me a stupid bitch. I embellished there for comedic effect.”

Brienne asks if Missy is serious. And then she raises her hands to her face and holds her warm cheeks because even talk that tangentially touches on sex embarasses Brienne a little bit. Missandei says she’s not joking. There are currently some antibiotics raging through her body, killing the little buggies. And she was a responsible adult, so she told her — she told the guy she slept with. And it turns out he has it too. So. Do they make a greeting card for this sort of thing? Sorry I gave you a sex infection. My bad for being a big ol’ slut.

“Babe,” Brienne says gently, reaching over. “You’re not a big slut. You’re a thin one. You’ve been working so hard to lose that weight.”

Missandei bursts out laughing. She asks Brienne if Brienne knows who she sounds likes.

“Oh God, no.”

“Lannister.”

“Gross.”

Missandei tells Brienne that the guy in question is actually Grey. It’s the first time Missandei’s admitted such a thing out loud. Admitting such a thing out loud makes it feel all the more real — it makes her feel accountable.

Brienne only looks mildly surprised at the reveal. Brienne says she didn’t realize that Missandei and Grey had gotten that close.

“So,” Brienne says. “Does that mean you guys are together?”

She doesn’t even have an excuse for going over to his place after work. She just texts him ten minutes before she shows up to ask if he’s home. She regrets her impulsivity when she gets there and she sees Jaime loading cardboard boxes in the dark, into the back of a humongous Range Rover.

She cinches her blazer over her body, waving him to him as she trudges over gravel. She says hi to Jaime and asks him what he’s doing. He doesn’t pause in his organizing, as he tells her that he’s taking all of Grey’s shit to the new apartment.

“What new apartment?”

“He didn’t tell you? We’re moving in together in King’s Landing.”
Jaime shoves the last box into the trunk and shuts the door closed. He gives her his arm so she doesn’t fall in her heels as they walk down the narrow walkway and steps to Grey’s front door. It’s warm and bright inside, when Jaime pushes open the door. He flips over his cap and he walks to the fridge, opening it to grab water. Grey is in sweatpants, a dirty old t-shirt with stains, and a pair of old running shoes. He’s leaning against his sink with a bowl of cereal in hand, held up to his face. He looks surprised to see her.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hi.”

“How’s the new job, Missy?” Jaime says conversationally, taking another gulp of his water before capping it.

“Fine,” she says. “It’s just my first week, so it’s mostly just onboarding and orientation stuff — a lot of forms to fill out.”

He knows that Jaime can sense that something is up, but Jaime casually prattles on about random things with Missandei as he helps Grey continue packing up his stuff, wrapping up mismatched dishware in newspaper. They actually aren’t taking certain things to the new place — those are going to be donated somewhere. But it’d just make him feel more comfortable if the dishes weren’t just strewn loosely in boxes.

Jaime has been fairly amenable to all of his mental shit — which bodes well, he supposes, for their future cohabitation. Grey hasn’t lived with anyone in years. He hasn’t really lived with anyone by choice for the longest time. When he aged out of foster care, he just figured that he wouldn’t want to live with anyone ever again — it’s too difficult. There are certain things about himself — certain habits — that are a pain to hide.

Missandei looks comically mismatched to her surroundings in her nice work clothes. He and Jaime are unshowered and started packing after a quick run. The hovel that he lives in looks drearier without his shit in it. She keeps her shoes on because Jaime told her he accidentally broke a glass earlier, and he’s not sure how well they cleaned it up because they had already packed up the vacuum. She’s awkwardly eating cereal and milk out of his last bowl — he offered it to her because he figured that she must be hungry since it is dinner time.

Jaime makes an excuse to leave after half an hour. He leans over and gives Grey a quick hug, clapping him on the back, saying that he’ll grab the keys to the apartment during the day tomorrow and they can meet up after Grey gets off work to start unloading their crap. Jaime gives Missandei a hug too, before he leaves.

She rinses her bowl and spoon out in the sink and wraps it in newspaper when it’s still wet, which is gross and not at all what he wants, but it’s okay.

There’s nowhere to sit in his place now. There’s just a mattress on the floor. He and Jaime dismantled his bed frame and loaded it in the Range Rover. He walks over to the mattress and sits down, hanging his arms off of his knees. She comes over, too, uses his shoulder to awkwardly bend in her restricting skirt. She collapses down next to him, the scent of her — flowery and kind of sweet — hits him square in the face.
“So,” she says lightly. “We have chlamydia.”

“We do.” He forces a smile, looking down at the floor. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, for all you know, I could’ve been the one to give it to you.” Her hand squeezes his bicep. “It’s like the chicken or the egg. Who’s patient zero? We may never know.”

He turns his face to look at her — kind of surprised that hers is so close. He was so relieved when his test results came back positive for chlamydia and negative for everything else. He wanted to tell her right away, that she was okay and safe from him. His phone was already turned on and in his hand — but then he realized the mountain of context that his news contained. He figures certain thoughts haven’t occurred to her yet.

She leans into him, pressing her nose into his arm, her weight causing them both to sway a little bit. “It’s so good to see you,” she whispers. “I’ve been missing you.”

His face feels warm and his stomach flips at that. He closes his eyes momentarily. She is frustratingly stubborn sometimes. She is strategic and manipulative sometimes. She says things that just make him feel awful and hopeful at the same time — things that he fixates over for hours in bed at night.

Her warm hand reaches up and grazes his jaw, before she gently holds his face in place, before she presses the front of her body to his arm and licks her lips before she kisses him. He saw it coming — and he is torn — and he ignores his doubts and reservations for a moment as he slowly kisses her back. It’s meandering and exploratory, just soft touches of his mouth to hers, of his tongue occasionally to hers.

Then he slides and wedges his hand underneath her ass, pulling her body harder against his. Then her hand on his jaw becomes this assertive thing, angling his head so she can push in deeper into his mouth. The kiss escalates, becomes frantic and desperate. Her arms wrap around his neck, helping him, as his hands push her skirt up over her hips so they don’t accidentally rip it, before he pulls her onto his lap, her thighs clenching around his body. She’s blatant in how she moves around in his lap, trying to position her hips in the right spot, trying to press every inch of her front against his body.

Her wet lips are latched to his throat and he opens his eyes to get a glimpse of his empty apartment — that’s when he realizes that they’ve gotten way carried away.

He gently pushes her back. “Hey,” he says. “We can’t.”

Her eyes are cloudy and heavy, her lipstick smeared and her lips a little swollen when she looks back at him. When his doctor told him he’s supposed to abstain from sexual activity for seven days while on the course of antibiotics, he wryly thought that it wasn’t going to be an issue for him.

“That is where you and I disagree,” she says, voice quiet and dangerous.

He squeezes her bare thigh in a comforting way, in an apologetic way as he carefully untangles himself from her, as he gives her her arms and legs back. He sets her back down beside him before he shifts on the mattress, roughly tugging at his sweatpants, adjusting himself.

She ignores his erection as she kicks off her heels and shrugs out of her blazer, figuring that he’s so skittish and tense about anything having to do with sex that it’s best for her to keep things relatively
light. There’s a big, stupid, girly part of her that almost believes that she can convince him to change his mind, if she’s on her best behavior, if she shows him that she’s not like those other girls he’s known. She can be a saint, and he will relax underneath how cool she is about everything. And then he’ll take off his clothes and open himself up to the possibility of them.

The smile he gives her as he takes her blazer from her and places it at the end of the mattress is tortured and thick with context. She has already told him she doesn’t want to just be his friend. He already knows this. She’s already told him she doesn’t buy into what he says about himself — that he is wrong.

One thing she’s getting addicted to is being around him without having to lie — about how she feels, about what he’s been through, about all the obstacles and walls that he throws up.

She pulls down her skirt back over her legs so it doesn’t get too wrinkled and lies down on the mattress, which smells like him. She holds out her hand to him, lightly wiggling her fingers. Her stomach feels a little empty and she’s still a little hungry — she’s also not tired — but she tugs his hand and he takes the hint, lying down beside her. She pushes her leg in between his and tucks her head underneath his chin. His hand comes up to push some of her hair out of his face.

“So,” she says into his neck, holding onto him. “You’re shacking up with Jaime. He finally wore you down.” Grey’s shirt actually smells clean, like cotton, even though it looks so dirty.

He sighs. “It’ll be nice to split rent. And he doesn’t seem like the worst person to live with.”

“I think you will like it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You guys can do all that stupid boy stuff that you do. Like you can stay up late playing video games. Watch sports. You can help him make his little videos and photos. You guys can cook together. You can both strip down and oil each other up and wrestle nakedly in the living room and invite me over to watch — you know, whatever feels natural. Whatever feels right.”

His arms tighten around her as his chesty laugh reverberates in her ear. She kisses him through his shirt, because she can’t stop herself from doing it.

She wants to, but she refrains from pressuring him about them, from bringing up the ongoing conversation thread about sex — though she supposes when she says sex, she really means intimacy.

She rolls onto her back and she pushes up his hand so it’s over their heads. She measures hers against his, trying to to see how much he beats her by. She talks to him about her new job and how she’s a little bit nervous about it because it’s sales and it’s partly performance-based — what if she doesn’t do well? She really doesn’t know anything about managing accounts. He tells her he had the same thoughts when he started his job — and it seems to be working out. He tells her not to worry about things until there’s actually something to be worried about.

“Do you remember a lot?” she says, keeping it purposefully vague.

“Yes and no,” he says. “I remember enough. But I think I don’t remember the worst parts.”

“It’s so horrible, what happened to you. It makes me so sad.”

“It’s okay.” He sighs. “You know, if it hadn’t happened, I probably wouldn’t be here right now, with you. We probably wouldn’t have met.”
When Addam drunkenly blurts out to everyone that Jaime is still in love with Brienne — in front of Brienne — Missy wants to say two things:

Duh.

This is super awkward.

She supposes Addam gets a free pass for being a dumbass because, well, because he always gets a free pass. Also, it’s their last night together before Addam and Daven go back west where their oppressive fathers have their futures all planned out, before Drogo moves back home for a few months to spend time with his family. She supposes there is some grace in that.

Jaime, for his part, is pretty impressively brave about being outted. He cops to it. It’s something she’s going to take inspiration from.

She looks over to Grey, plainly sipping his beer and systematically eating his fries in between gulps, sitting beside her. She had asked him if she could have some fries — and he’s really weird about any PDA. He considers sharing food PDA. She just learned this. He told her to get her own fries. It’s not the first time she thinks that he’s so lucky — that she isn’t the kind of person that feels sensitive and tender, when he’s being a bitch.

She orders nachos and makes a big deal about sharing them with everyone. Brienne is monumentally distracted — has completely retreated inward. Daven hates conflict, so he starts ordering rounds for the whole table, to alleviate the tension.

They alternate between reminiscing about the good times they’ve had together and fixating on the possibilities of the future. Addam is not optimistic about his, which is uncharacteristic for Addam. Jaime is predictably uber focused and downplaying it. Brienne shyly admits that the unknown is scary. Daven is already talking about vacation. Drogo sees it as inevitable — whatever he will do will be inevitable. And she — she says some cliche about how it’s going to be an adventure. Grey pretty much refuses to play the game.

He finds the goodbyes to be overly dramatic. They are all lingering at the bar — long after they have told one another that it’s late and it’s time to go. Addam is hanging off of Jaime and whining about how he has to go home. Daven and Drogo are mirroring each other, with their arms crossed over their chests, making casual promises to visit one another frequently. There’s a line formed around Jaime, and Grey has tried to leave, but Missandei grabs onto his sleeve in a vice grip and keeps him in place.

He gives Drogo a small smile when he walks over. Missandei drifts over to talk to Addam and Daven, giving them privacy. He exhales audibly and stands stock still with his arms at his sides.

Drogo laughs a little bit. “I can tell you’re gonna make this difficult.”

“Stop emoting all over us!” Addam calls out at him from a few feet away, arm hanging off of Missandei’s shoulders. “It embarrasses us!”
Grey kind of laughs. Then he says, “No one’s dying,” shrugging. “We’ll see each other again.”

Drogo shrugs too, ignoring most of what he said. “You were the first friend I made here,” Drogo says.

“Sure,” Grey says. “Same.”

Drogo sighs, shifting back and forth on his feet for a pensive moment. And then he sighs again, before lifting his arms and wrapping them around Grey. “You’re such a fucker,” he says, hugging tightly. “And I love you.” Drogo’s hand comes up to palm Grey’s head, lightly shaking it. “I love you, man.”

All Grey can manage to do is tepidly pat Drogo on the back a few times, grunting.
twenty-one

She knows it’s dangerous, but she sometimes talks on her phone driving the hour-long commute home from King’s Landing. The trip usually takes half an hour with the roads all clear, but it’s rough-going in rush hour traffic. He, in contrast, only has a quick ten-minute commute by bus.

They usually don’t see each other during the week because of the distance, which she finds fairly nominal — but he makes it into a bigger deal. He also says he is not comfortable with sleepovers — he’s paranoid about Jaime seeing them together. She has told him that if Jaime doesn’t already sense something is going on, Jaime also wouldn’t really care — which doesn’t really sway Grey. He says it isn’t proper, a strangely old-fashioned-sounding sentiment coming from him. She has asked him how he’d feel if Jaime brought a hypothetical girlfriend home — would that bother him? Grey flinched at the word girlfriend, before he said that of course that wouldn’t bother him. She had clamped her mouth shut — stopping herself from saying more, from pointing out his inconsistencies.

She also refrains from asking too much about why it matters — what people know. She generally trains herself to believe that it’s not because he’s ashamed or embarrassed of her. More likely, he’s just deeply uncomfortable with the idea of himself not being alone.

This is the most high-maintenance ‘friendship’ she has ever engaged in. And she’s not even getting laid for her troubles. The only person she gets to have sex with is herself, and she’s ready to break up with herself. He’s been avoidant. When they’ve managed to see each other, it’s been activity-based — a meal, a workout, a walk in the park, a movie, a show. Sometimes she feels that if it weren’t for her constant and monumental efforts at forcing herself into his life — he would just let her go, let her disappear from his life.

Sometimes, though, usually right before her frustration with him boils over, she is reminded of why she bothers.

She unlocks the door to her apartment and drops her keys and purse on the counter, with the phone still hotly glued to her ear. She’s telling him that one of her coworkers, Maya, went to the salon over the weekend and got a weave. Now her hair is down to the middle of her back, and it looks cute as hell. But then there’s this white boy in accounting Blake, who saw her hair, complimented it, but then asked her how it grew so fast since he had last seen it. And then he asked if it was real hair. And then he asked if he could touch it. And then Maya flipped out and started kind of yelling at him from her cubicle, telling him he was ignorant and she was gonna go to human resources if he touches her.

“It was so great!” Missandei says, bypassing the clothes littered all over her floor, stepping out of her heels next to her bed. “Blake was like, durr, just didn’t know what to do!”

Grey hums appreciatively in her ear, tells her that he’s glad she’s enjoying her job, tells her about how he has one coworker in particular who puts on this weird affectation whenever they talk. The guy always ends statements with, “You feel me?”

“Let me guess,” she says with her cellphone cinched between her shoulder and ear, freeing her hands so she can pull them out of her tight pencil skirt and unbutton her blouse. “You told him that you didn’t feel him. And then you stared at him with your dead face until he felt uncomfortable and walked away.”
He laughs, tells her that is pretty accurate.

She’s standing in the middle of the room in her bra and panties when she tells him that she has to go soon. It’s already late, and she has eat something, go to the gym, and then come home and hit the hay, only to repeat it all again. He tells her okay, he has to go shower anyway. Jaime showers in the morning. Grey showers at night. It’s efficient. He likes showering at night anyway.

She tells him she’s naked, which isn’t strictly true, but close enough. Her statement solicits a lengthy pause on his end. She tells him that she wishes he was with her, also naked. He continues saying nothing. She tells him she can take a picture and send it to him. He finally says that he’s not going to look at it.

She sighs and shakes her head, rolling her eyes. She tells him he’s no fun and she’ll talk to him later. He laughs in her ear and says he hopes she sleeps well.

She really does take a naked selfie and sends it to him before she changes into her gym clothes, just her top half, in the bathroom under the really unflattering and dim yellow lights. It’s not a sexy picture. She’s smiling and waving to him like a dork. She’s pretty sure he’s going to see it. He has to, even if just to delete it.

Jaime makes Grey come along to get the couch because there’s a substantial amount of cash Jaime’s carrying and the Craigslist couch lives in a bit of a shady neighborhood. He doesn’t want to get jumped and stabbed and bleed to death. It would really help if his Black friend came along. Grey had dryly told Jaime that he’s actually not that Black. He was born out of the country. And he grew up in foster care, among a bunch of lower-middle-income whiteness that just kept him around to cash checks.

The whole exchange goes off without a hitch. The sellers are actually really nice, helping them by lifting the couch into the truck that Jaime rented and everything.

The couch gets stuck where the staircase turns a corner. In the short time that he has been living with Jaime, he has learn that Jaime, for all his posturing about how cool and collected he is, is actually rather emotional and impulsive and tends to react before fully thinking things through. Jaime goes nuts — his face goes red and he’s sweating and heaving and he starts punching the shit out of the couch, screaming that he hates their new shitty couch.

“Bieber!” Grey snaps over the sound of Jaime’s tantrum. “Will you chill out?”

After he crawls over the couch to get to Jaime’s side, he says that it looks like the couch should fit through. It’s just getting a little stuck at the corner. Grey suggests they both come at the couch hard.

“Sex-ay.” Jaime mutters, positioning himself against the sofa, face still flushed and sweaty, blue snapback loosely propped up on his head.

In their apartment, Jaime fiddles around with the flap of fabric that they had ripped off the back of the
couch, when they pushed it up the stairs. Jaime says that the couch will change their lives. They'll be able to take naps in front of the TV. They'll be able to have people over and have somewhere for people to sit that is not a folding chair. They can sit back with a cocktail after Grey gets off work, and Grey can tell Jaime all about how his day went — just like real men do.

One thing Grey is going to take a while to get used to, living with another person, is how accountable he is to alleviating another person’s boredom. Jaime talks so fucking much. Whenever they are in the same room, Jaime has to say something to him, even if it’s just to say hello. They fucking sleep less than twenty feet away from each other. They are forever way past hello.

“How are the ladies treating you at work?” Jaime says, voice lilting in faux innocence. “Have you met any new cute girls?”

She kind of regrets the four-inch heels — that extra half-inch makes a huge difference — when she has to haul ass from 5th avenue to 10th. It’s mostly uphill, too, so she’s huffing and puffing when she reaches his office building. She takes the elevator up to the twentieth floor, gazing at herself through the gold-tinted mirror finish. Her red lipstick is still poppin’ and her white shoes aren’t scuffed from the walk at all. Her heart is still beating hard when she signs in at reception and tells them who she wants to see. The woman at the desk makes the call, and Missandei walks off a few feet to look at an abstract painting — mostly a swatch of a cool blue.

God, she wants to eat him when she sees him walking up to her. She hasn’t seen him in a couple weeks — only spoke to him. She smiles at him with subtext. He looks weighted down — and it makes sense, when he gets to her and apologizes for making her wait. He just got out of a long meeting.

“Ready to go?” he asks.

“Can I see where you work first?”

She sees him hesitate. It makes her wonder why. But then he nods and tells her that it’s not really anything special. She follows him as he efficiently navigates through hallways and bright open spaces. His office is fancy. There’s a lounging area and an open room devoted entirely to storing bikes, for people who commute that way, she guesses. His office is also full of women — there are gorgeous, stylish women everywhere. Several smile at him and say hi all flirty as they walk past. It all makes sense, given that the business is retail, fashion, and clothes. It also makes sense because he’s cute. And kind of special here because he’s a dude. Missandei doesn’t stand out in this office at all. At her PR firm, she sort of has a reputation for being the pretty young thing.

His work area is really neat and sparse — which is not at all surprising. There are no personal effects. He doesn’t even have post-it notes or a calendar hanging up. He holds out his arms and plainly tells her that this is where the magic happens.

“Hey, man. I thought you were going to lunch?”

“About to,” Grey says to his coworker, a white brown-haired nondescript man. Grey gestures to her awkwardly. “She just wanted to see where I work.”

The white guy smiles widely, his eyes doing a quick sweep of her body, before he shoves his hand at
her over the low cubicle wall. “Brian. Nice to meet you.”

“Missandei.”

When she rests her hand on the back of his chair to lean in and look at the drink menu with him, he breaks the casual body contact right away. She drops her hand from his chair and scoots her chair away — to give him some space — and then she says, “Seriously?”

The rest of lunch goes off without a hitch. She orders a salad with dressing on the side — because it sucks being a girl who is superficial and vain. She’s trying not to wipe her mouth on the white linen napkin in her lap because she remembers how Drogo used to bitch about how hard it was to get lipstick off of fabric. They just ended up throwing out a lot of napkins at the restaurant.

Grey walks her back to her office. It’s hell walking downhill in her heels, so he lets her hold onto his arm so she doesn’t fall flat on her face. He tells her that she should wear more practical shoes, especially on the days that she walks to grab lunch with him. She tells him she will never wear practical shoes. Because her shoes make her ass look amazing.

Brian is already back at his desk when Grey returns to the office. He has twenty minutes before his two o’clock with Selmy. He’s answering emails when Brian pops his head over the partition between them. Brian is always trying to be nice to him. It’s annoying.

“Dude, I totally get it now. I get why you’re always no thanks to the ladies propositioning you. Your girl is smokin’.”

Grey may be judicious about taking the bus to come visit her, but Neal always jumps at the chance to see her. Sometimes they have dinner together. He was a big part of her life, and there are still lots of things about him that she likes. She has already told him that she’s not looking to date — she has a lot on her plate. But she supposes that that’s one of those statements that people tend to be skeptical of. Neal has told her he’s totally fine with how things are. He’s okay with being friends.

It makes her think about how she has said the same thing to herself before, repeatedly, about Grey.

“You look gorgeous tonight,” he says, sipping from his wine glass.

She grins at him. They’re having after-work drinks. “You look pretty dapper yourself.”

“Aren’t we a pair?”
She starved herself all day so that she could go wedding cake-tasting with Jhiqui and really just go balls-out with it. Do it proper. Jhiqui is leaning toward the red velvet, but Missy doesn’t even get it because it’s just a chocolate cake that doesn’t have the cojones to be a chocolate cake, with a bunch of red food dye. She really likes the almond cake with the dark chocolate buttercream. It’s like, kind of unexpected. She also likes the lemon. And then plain white sour cream — a dense one — with the vanilla buttercream. She tells Jhiqui she knows it’s kind of like, maybe seems boring? But holy shit, they do white cake right.

She’s raising a finger and asking if she can taste the mocha and malt cake again when Jhiqui says, “So, Nick has this friend —”

“Nope.” Missandei shakes her head, stabbing the cake sample with her fork. “Not interested.”

“He’s really nice!” Jhiqui says. “And he owns his own house!”

“Babe, just because you’re all domestic and in love doesn’t mean that everyone wants that,” Missandei says, a smile tugging at her sugary lips. “I mean, who wants that kind of happiness? Ick. No thanks.”

“Agh! I already told him you’re single! I already showed him your picture! I already told him you’re slutty!”

Missandei laughs. “Stop pimping me out!”

Jhiqui suddenly shifts and speaks seriously, with this gravity. She tells Missandei that she really loves Missandei — they’re family. Jhiqui says she’s watched Missandei chase after some stupid boy who used her and discarded her because he didn’t see her for the amazing, gorgeous person she is, inside and out. Jhiqui asks Missy if that’s happening again — is she wasting her time again in a non-relationship with some self-serving boy who just doesn’t get it? Jhiqui says, “You deserve something real.”

Jaime and Brienne are hanging out on the couch and watching a movie about aliens when he gets home. They’re on opposite ends of the couch, which makes Grey stare at Jaime blankly when Jaime tells him that they’ve only just started the movie — does he want to join them? He wants to ask Jaime if Jaime intends for him to awkwardly sit in that two feet of space in between them.

There are dirty dishes in the sink — just a couple — and Grey takes off his suit jacket, unbuttons his cuffs, and rolls up his sleeves before he turns on the faucet and wets a sponge.

He catches Jaime taking a picture of him. “Bieber,” he says, warningly. “Will you stop?”

“Your fans have been hounding me for an update, though,” Jaime mumbles, face oriented down at his phone, pressing buttons and probably filtering the photo before he posts it. “Gotta give the people what they want, ya know?” Jaime holds out his phone and quickly shows Grey a picture of his back and butt, standing over the sink, cast in the harsh kitchen light. “I was thinking the caption should be something like, ‘Being a domestic god isn’t always a glamorous calling, but someone has to heroically take up the mantle.’ Hashtag clean living. Hashtag dat ass. Hashtag Grey probz.”
He throws a wet rag at Jaime, who catches it in mid-air, closing his eyes as a bit of water hits his face. Jaime laughs before depositing the rag back in the sink, running away before Grey can hit him.

“Yo, Brienne,” he says in the other room. “Check out my latest ‘gram.”

He understands why she’s upset and angry, when he cancels on her over the phone to work late. She asks if he has to work late. He always tries to be as truthful with her as he can manage — so he tells her that he doesn’t have to work late. It’s not required, but the rest of the team is putting in the hours. It would be weird if he is the only one who leaves.

She tells him that it’s Friday. He says that he knows. She tells him that she’s barely seen him in the last month — and all the times she has seen him have not been substantial. He says he knows. She asks him if he gets why she’s pissed off. He tells her he gets it. And then it feels like there’s nothing else left to say. They basically understand each other. And he tells her that he’s sorry, but he finds this difficult — being so obligated to someone else.

She snaps and tells him she’s not supposed to be an obligation. He tells her he didn’t mean it like that. A big part of him knows that friends do not have these kinds of fights. Never once has Jaime responded like this when he misses dinner to work late.

Her voice is strangled and frustrated, when she asks him what they are even doing anymore.

He doesn’t know how to answer that.

With that same hard voice, she asks him if he wants to keep doing this — because he doesn’t have to if he doesn’t want to. She tells him that she’s been thinking a lot lately — and Jhiqui is always trying to get her to go on blind dates and Neal is always hinting that they give it another go. Missandei says she wants to know if Grey’s just afraid to tell her that he’s done with her.

“God, I’m sorry,” he says. He hears her shuddering breath on the other end. “I mean, I’m sorry that I can’t really talk about this right now,” he clarifies. “I have to go. But I’ll call you when I finish up, okay?”

She sighs. And she tells him not to bother.

Doreah was the one who told her that spinning elicits the same rush as sex. Doreah is an idiot and is completely wrong. Missandei rubs her face with her towel as she leaves class. She throws a zip-up over her sports bra and walks across the street to a fast food joint. She figures that it’s Friday. She worked hard all week. She’s going to treat herself. She orders a cheeseburger and fries. And she eats it alone in the restaurant, with a bare leg thrown up an empty chair.

The burger isn’t really satisfying. The fantasy of it was better than the reality of it. She clenches her fist and lightly hits the table, thinking to herself that she’s being too on-the-nose.

She takes her time getting home, trying to elongate the night so she doesn’t end up a loser that goes
to bed at nine p.m. on a Friday. It honestly does not seem like that long ago when she was staying up until three in the morning partying, only to get up for an eight a.m. class. What the hell happened to her social life?

He scares the shit out of her, when she exits her car. She clutches her chest and she says, “Fuck! What are you doing here?”

“Trying to salvage the night,” he says. “Can I come up?”

She figures they’re going to talk around their fight and then maybe sit around and play Monopoly or Scrabble together for a bit before they shake hands and he goes home.

But after she closes and locks the door to her apartment and toes off her shoes in the middle of the room, he comes up behind her and places his hands on her hips, resting them there for a moment before they circle her waist. She frowns and closes her eyes, raising her hand to touch his face, pressing herself backward, deeper into the hug.

She’s about to tell him he’s forgiven when his mouth touches down on her neck, kissing her softly. Her skin breaks out in tingles and goosebumps — she swallows the lump in her throat. She looks down in amazement as his hand reaches up and unzips her hoodie. He pulls it off her shoulders and lets it drop to the floor, among the rest of her discarded clothes. His breath is hot on her skin — his teeth smooth and gentle — as he pushes his hand down her shorts, into her underwear, fingers quickly swiping her inelegantly from front to back, smearing her arousal, making her legs turn to jelly. He holds her up with an arm wrapped tightly around her stomach — as he slips a finger inside her. It goes in easily and painlessly. Because she is so fucking turned on.

She says, “Damn,” pulling in lots of air, as he adds another finger.

She turns her head and sees that his face is serious and scrutinizing, after she comes down from the orgasm. He pushes her forward, toward the bed. She’s staring at a wall, at her rumpled blankets, as he digs his thumbs in the waistband of her shorts and underwear and drags both down her legs, nudging her to step out of them. He stands back up and runs his hand up her back, pulling off her damp, elastic sports bra with her help. With her arms still raised over her head, he cups her breasts, squeezes them, rolling her nipples between his fingers. She moans, trying to give back, trying to blindly find the front of his pants so she can put her hands there. She’s doing all of this talking, mindlessly so aroused, talking this needy half-nonsense, telling him that she thinks about fucking him all the time.

When her palm brushes against him, hard underneath smooth fabric, he roughly bends her over and pushes her forward so she nearly falls face-down on the bed. His grabs her neck lightly, in a chokehold as he digs his thumbs into between her tense shoulders, on either side of her spine. She cries out as the feelings skim the edge between what hurts and what feels good. He reaches forward and efficiently moves her arms and body, adjusts her position bent over the bed. He grabs her hips and he pulls her backward a little bit. Her bare ass brushes against his suit. Her sensitive breasts drag
against the bed. Her breath stutters as she asks him, “What are you doing?”

He says, “Don’t move.”

Her limbs are shaky. Her whole body is trembling. She’s a little nervous. He yanks a pillow off of her bed and she can hear him get to his knees. She absently thinks that she’s so glad she recently got waxed. She also thinks that she’s been sweating a lot and she’s probably ripe down there. She knows that he knows. She groans loudly in surprise when his teeth bite down hard on the fleshy part of her ass, as a warning. His hands grab onto her thighs. She gasps and fists her blanket, tells him, “You’re such a filthy motherfucker. And it’s really doing it for me. You’ve really got that going for you.”

Her mind just blanks out in this pure whiteness, when his hot mouth covers her. There’s no lead-in, no prelude. It’s just immediately rough and hard, with consistent pressure. She’s just registers sounds — the wet sound of his mouth and tongue and teeth — and the sound of her high-pitched wailing and gasping and begging — and she registers all of these desperate feelings. He’s aggressive and confident — sometimes pressing too hard over the concentration of nerves, making her unconsciously try to jolt her body away from his mouth. He holds her in place in a vice grip, nails digging into her skin, and she cries, because it’s too much, but also so, so good.

When the flat of his hands spread her ass and he pulls his mouth off her, she shudders because it’s drafty and cold. She says, “Oh, fuck,” because she can predict where this is going. She whines, “Baby — baby, please,” when she feels his warm breath over her most intimate of places. She doesn’t even have the words ready, to ask him how the fuck they got to here. She doesn’t have the vocabulary to tell him this is something new for her.

Her eyes screw shut. And then there is heat, and there is him, his mouth and his hand and his fingers moving inside her. And then her legs give out — she automatically thinks that she messed up and she broke his rule by moving — and she muffles her scream into the bed, fists clutching blanket, as she comes apart in pieces.

He pulls her limp, sweaty naked body into his lap after it’s done. He kisses her shoulder, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. Her body suddenly jerks and shudders. Her eyes are closed and she mumbles, “Aftershock.”

She kisses him slowly and deeply, her hands framing his face. After they break apart, she touches her mouth and she says, “I can taste myself on you.”

He grabs her wrist right as her hand presses against the front of his pants, as she grabs him. “No,” he says. “Not tonight.”

“Baby, come on,” she says softly. “I’m good at sex stuff, too.”

He thinks about it. He says, “Not tonight. But some other time, okay?”
He walks through the door in yesterday’s wrinkled suit, shirt carelessly buttoned and untucked, tie peeking out of a jacket pocket. His eyes are dry, his body feels greasy, and his movements are imprecise and sluggish. He’s exhausted. He’s planning to go into his bedroom to just crash for a few hours.

He has difficulty sleeping soundly when he’s in the same bed as Missandei. He told her he had to go home to change, and she just suggested that he keep some clothes at her place, like it is the easiest thing in the world. He bit a girl clean through the skin once, when he was about twelve years old. He woke up to her screaming and crying and with blood in his mouth. His foster mother didn’t buy that it was accidental or that he had been sleeping. She made him lie down on the ground and punished him for his Godlessness.

The thought of being unconscious around Missandei makes him feel anxious. It makes him feel that rare tug of fear. He would kill himself if he hurt her. But — he thinks — it’s okay if he goes a night here and there without sleep. He knows that she really likes it when they co-sleep. They can orient the nights they are together to weekends.

“Morning there, buddy.”

He hadn’t seen Jaime standing in the kitchen, making coffee. Jaime couldn’t have woken up very long ago. His hair is lopsided and he hasn’t put on a shirt or shaved yet. He also has the most fucking annoying face and the most fucking annoying smile on the face of the earth.

“You look like you’ve had some good ol’ clean, wholesome fun,” Jaime says, leaning back against the kitchen counter, folding his arms behind his back, face so fucking smug. “What were you up to last night?”

Before Grey can snipe at him, Jaime whips his arm out from behind his back and snaps a photo of Grey with his phone, cackling like a fucking douchebag. Jaime immediately puts out his other hand, as if to block Grey from advancing on him. “It’s already in the cloud!” Jaime says, grinning. “It’s already synced!”

Grey walks into his bedroom and slams the door.

After he takes off his clothes and separates them for laundry, steaming, and dry-cleaning, he kneels down on the ground and shoves his hand between his mattress and the box spring, feeling around. He bypasses the syringes and just goes for the bag.

He doesn’t have the time nor the energy to fuck with plugging, so he breaks a morphine tablet in half with his teeth and dry-swallows it — as the door to his bedroom slowly opens. He keeps his
movements slow and calm, lightly keeping the plastic baggy of white pills swinging in his hand.

“Dude,” Jaime says, poking his head in. “I’m sorry for barging in, but are you okay?” Jaime enters the room, leaving the door open behind him. His eyes drift down to the plastic baggie, slightly narrowing.

“Aspirin,” Grey says, reaching behind him to drop the bag on his side table. “And I’m fine.”

“You have a headache?” Jaime says neutrally.

“Yeah, a little.”

Jaime gives him a pensive stare for a beat before he exhales loudly, releasing the tension. Jaime jerks his head, gesturing to the living room. “I’m about to make some breakfast. Do you want some?”

Grey tells Jaime that he’s not hungry, trying to close down the talking. Jaime doesn’t take the hint and continues prodding, asking what Grey’s plans are for the rest of the day. Grey says he’s thinking of going for a run later, before it gets too hot mid-afternoon. He also told Missandei he’d meet her for dinner, but he refrains from telling Jaime this. Jaime says that he’d be down for a run — maybe they can go together? Grey hates running with another person — he hates having to pace with another person — but he doesn’t have the energy to fight Jaime on this, so he says sure, maybe. He tells Jaime he’ll probably go in a few hours, after a nap. Jaime curiously asks him why he’s so tired — seriously, what the hell happened last night? Grey tells Jaime that he was just up late.

She changes outfits three times. She forces herself not to overdo it. She’s just meeting him at a run-of-the-mill sushi place in a strip mall. She settles on skinny gray jeans and a threadbare, loose deep-v t-shirt that people can see her black bra through — that’s why she bought it. She really overthinks everything. She decides that the outfit is in the normal realm of her wardrobe choices for this time of year for this kind of activity.

She was distracted all morning, running her errands. Her mind keeps drifting back to him — and them — and last night. Actually, when she thinks of last night, she mostly does a full body flush in a kind of mishmash of embarrassment and desire that she hadn’t known she is capable of. Her mind has been working overtime not to let itself get so fucking excited, not to let itself feel so fucking happy because the extremity of such things are unrealistic and can’t be trusted. She’s been trying — and failing — at moderating her enthusiasm and all of the feelings that make the innards of her chest seize up all tight.

She used to have this theory — this misapprehension that she operated under. She figured that she just needed to get him out of her system. She thought that he was hot when she first met him. That was it. And then she thought he was mysterious and playing hard-to-get, and she figured it was some put-upon act to seem cool on his part — and she was game for the chase, to draw out and prolong the crush. And then they fucked in her car, and he was very sweet — but the sex blew — she kept remembering fragments of so many conversations she’s had with her girl friends, the consensus being that good sex is important and bad sex is not worth having — and she had been looking forward to putting a bunch of the distractions behind them. She was looking forward to being friends.

But he got to her — with his depth and his complexity and his knack for making her so interested in
every stupid crumb about himself that he drops, his knack for making her think that he’s so fucking wonderful. She can’t fathom how a person who has been through what he’s been through — how he can be so kind. It’s something that is humbling.

And the sex can be so fucking mind-numbingly good. For both of them. She knows this now. With everything she’s got, she knows this.

When he walks through the door of the sushi joint, her gushy smile suddenly falters — because she didn’t expect Jaime.

It’s very weird-looking and bizarre, when she stands up to greet and hug Jaime, when she tosses Grey a low wave, from a distance. Jaime slides into the other side of the booth as Grey tells them that he has to go pee real quick.

Jaime ducks his head low to the table after Grey leaves and manages to look a little bit sheepish when he says, “Dude, my bad. I totally didn’t realize that you guys had a date. I’ve been fucking with him all day by being clingy, and he told me — well, he told me was going here for dinner when I invited myself along.”

“It’s not a date,” she says. Of all the things she could’ve responded to. “And it’s cool. It’s good to see you. It’s been a while.”

He visibly relaxes, laughing lightly, reclining back in his seat. “You should come by our place sometime. You’re always welcomed there.”

“Oh, sure,” she says.

When Grey comes back from the restroom, there’s an awkward moment where he stands at the edge of the table, unsure of which side of the booth to take. She’s about to put him out of his misery by telling him to just go sit with his boyfriend, when he slides in next to her. His hip bumps against hers accidentally before he scoots away. She can immediately feel his body heat — maybe she’s imagining it — but she feels warm.

Both of her hands are on the table when she flags down the server for some sake.

When they are naked, in Summer Tongue, with a knowing asymmetrical smile on his face, he tells her to sit on his face. She bursts out laughing, arms and hands and legs holding onto his bare, sweaty body so tightly. She laughs because the translation is too direct and completely literal — stripped of its context and connotation when transferred to Summer Tongue. It sounds goofy.

She presses her laughing face into his chest, alternating between listening for his heartbeat and licking the salt off of his skin. He palms her ribcage, runs his hand into the dip at the bottom of her spine.

She’s constantly vigilant about not popping out of her bikini top and losing her sunglasses, as she
runs hard over the damp sand, squealing as her feet hit water, her hands coming out to clamp down on the day-glo orange frisbee mid-air. Her feet stutter to a stop with a few little hops, in the frothy waves, before she turns and walks toward Brienne in awe.

Missy drops the frisbee to the ground and pumps her fists in the air, as Brienne runs over and throws her arms around Missandei, jumping up and down. “We are so good at this!” Missandei shouts, grabbing onto Brienne’s bare back, jumping.

“I know! We have such great eye-hand coordination!”

Brienne’s boyfriend and his attractive friend slowly walk up to them, both amused and grinning — and claiming that they let the girls win out of chivalry. Missandei sees Brienne’s boyfriend whisper into her ear, making her blush high on her cheeks before she lightly laughs and tugs his hand. She shouts to Missandei, tells Missy that she needs to reload on the sunscreen — she’s getting pink.

When Missandei met them at the beach, she was shocked to see Brienne in a dark brown, fairly modest two-piece swimsuit. But still. A two-piece.

“So, what do you do?”

She turns to the friend, Stefan. “You mean for a living?”

“Yes!” He is all dimples and friendliness.

She asks him if he likes to look at her body, when his hands are on her ankles, when they are on her bed. He pauses, sitting back, asks her what sort of question is that. His fingers tighten around her bones and he yanks her down, toward his body, closer to this face. She sees the muscles in his back clench and compress, as he crouches over, down to the mattress. He runs the flat of his tongue against her leg, as he pulls one over his shoulder. She laughs like a lunatic — because this is unreal — as the back of her foot hits his spine.

She exhales into a moan, when he lifts up her hips and lowers his face, lightly blowing his warm, humid breath on her throbbing wet skin.

She has collected a bunch of new information about him. He is fantastic at oral — at getting her off, whether it’s swiftly and roughly in a bone-shattering way, or in a torturous and slow and delayed and frighteningly comprehensive way. She has learned that he’s really creative in bed — he just comes up with the craziest shit sometimes, and he has a manner that always elicits her enthusiastic buy-in. She also knows that when he looks at her, with his dark eyes, with the gears grinding away in his head — it makes her gulp and makes her feverish body break out into a sweat immediately.

She’s also learned that he refuses to engage in dirty talk — so she doesn’t know if he’s even any good at it. He is unnervingly quiet during sex stuff — and it’s not just because his mouth is often occupied. It’s because he just doesn’t talk. She’s also learned that he has a lot of innocuous hard limits — and when she thinks about them, she always wants to cry. He doesn’t like it when she goes anywhere near his butt. He doesn’t like it when she touches her fingers to his mouth. He doesn’t like it when she falls asleep touching him — she knows this because he’s always lying far away, with his back to her whenever she wakes up. He has light scars on his back — they’re very subtle against his dark skin, and it took a while for her to notice — and he doesn’t like it when her eyes linger too long
on any part of his body. And above all — he is very skittish and reluctant to let her anywhere near his penis.

He’s all contrast. He’s admirably unfazed by nudity — every bit of it — every part of the body. But he’s also wound up and tense. He has a hard time letting go. And she’s been patient — because it scares her to find out — what it might mean about him.

“Baby,” she says, looking down at him between her legs — tears pushing out of her eyes. She releases a halting breath. “Babe, I — I’m close,” she says, blinking, feeling the tears roll down the sides of her face. “Baby, please.” She means please look at her.

His face tilts up incrementally. The view is crazy and lurid and familiar and sexual and comforting. She can clearly see the whites of his eyes in the barest bit of light filtering through her window. He’s staring back at her, and she is so, so needy for him.

He suddenly sucks down hard on her clit, and she drops her head back, grinding out, “Oh my fucking God,” as the orgasm rips through her body.

He opens his desk drawer at work and grabs the foil wrap. He tears off a few pieces in one-foot chunks before putting the wrap away. When he was refilling his coffee, he noticed that there were a bunch of bagels sandwiches left out in the break room — leftovers from an exec meeting probably.

He’s wrapping up a pumpernickel and ham combo when Jasmin from marketing crosses his path.

“What are you doing?”

One thing he doesn’t love about white people is that they love to enforce rules and be fucking busybodies. They love to get into other people’s business and tell them what can and cannot be done. They always feel entitled to information that have nothing to do with them. “I’m wrapping up these bagel sandwiches in foil,” he tells her.

“For what purpose?”

He refrains from sighing in annoyance. “So that the sandwich doesn’t fall apart when I put it in my bag.”

“You’re talking these home?”

Obviously. He stares at her.

“Are you supposed to do that?”

Jaime’s Skyping with Daven shirtless at the dinner table when Grey gets home. He thinks it’s a little weird, but it’s not something that he comments on. Instead, he bypasses Jaime and walks into their kitchen with his laptop bag. He opens the fridge and throws four foil-wrapped bundles onto a shelf,
saving two.

He drops them on the dinner table, next to Jaime’s law books, before leaning over to look at Jaime’s laptop screen. Jaime reaches for a foil lump and starts peeling back the wrapper, looking down his nose, scrutinizing the bagel sandwich.

“Hey there, Fabio,” Daven says to Grey from his side of the screen. Daven tries to give him shit about the suit and tie get-up he has to sport for work, but Daven's burns are oddly dated and kind of nonsensical. Daven suddenly holds up a curly-haired brown dog — young — still a baby. “I got a puppy!” he announces.

It actually looks a lot like Momo did.

“What? You don’t like dogs?” Daven shakes his head in mock exasperation, before holding the dog up to his face to kiss the side of its face. “He’s such a wittle sweetheart. Not potty trained at all, though.”

“Ugh!” Jaime says in disgust, picking apart the layers of the bagel sandwich. “This is dry! There’s no mayo or mustard!”

It’s dry because Grey didn’t want the bagels to get soggy. They have mayo and mustard at home. He goes back into the kitchen to retrieve the squeeze bottles — also grabbing a couple glasses of water with ice before walking back to the table with his hands full. Jaime has already bitten into the bagel. Grey wordlessly picks the sandwich out of Jaime’s hand and plucks a paper napkin from the center of their table. He flips open the sandwich and squirts mayo and mustard on either side of the ham.

“Not too much mustard, boo,” Jaime says. “I like a ratio of two to one, mayo to mustard.”

Grey slaps the two halves back together and slides the bagel and napkin, along with the water glass, to Jaime. Jaime scoots a chair over so that it’s right next to him, as Grey squirts mayo and mustard on his own bagel. Then he sits down next to Jaime, eating his bagel sandwich and watching Daven play with his new dog on the screen.

He thinks, as she straddles his lap on the chair and tilts his chin up so she can kiss him more thoroughly, with more tongue and more body heat — he thinks that he’s put this off for long enough and she will no longer be deferred. That’s why he doesn’t resist or block her when she slides off of him and kneels on the floor, looking up at him with such raw want. All of their clothes are still on, which is why he feels marginally protected, when she presses her warm hand over his hard-on, cupping him through his jeans. It’s a foreign and bewildering feeling — his dread that her leaving is this foregone conclusion — one he’s always trying to puzzle out, into delaying.

She tells him to relax, and he tries to breathe slowly. She tells him she will take care of him, and he kind of struggles to smile at her, because the sentiment is nice. She tells him she wants to make him feel good, and he doesn’t know how to respond to that. He just grips the seat of the chair tightly as she unzips his pants and carefully pulls them down, handling him with such consideration and reverence that he already regrets so much.

He softly gasps and leans forward a little bit, when she closes her mouth around him. He touches her face — her cheek — as he clenches his teeth — and he thinks that she is so beautiful and so full of
hope.

He starts to tremble, first his jaw — and then in his hands. This is the one area in his life that he
cannot fake. He’s been forced to pretend that he enjoyed the things that were being done to him too
many times as a child that he has no capacity in his adult life to do it. He has no capacity in his adult
life to glean pleasure. He just feels sick in his head. He can’t stop himself — he can’t stop his mind
from remembering being kept in a dark room and perpetually waiting for it open, whether for food or
because it — he was told — was time to play. He can’t stop himself from remembering how his
mother just let go of him.

He’s done. It’s just gone. He wasn’t even close.

Missandei sighs in empathy, rubbing her hands up and down his bare thighs. “Baby?” she says softly
— carefully — looking up at him, her lips shiny and wet and red.

He bends over. He cups her face, kisses her forehead. He quietly thanks her for trying.

The call from Mossador comes in the morning, and by noon, she already has her flight booked to
Myr early the next day. She’s too distracted to work, so she talks to her boss and asks if she can
leave a few hours early. She tells her boss that her grandmother suffered a fall and is being taken to
the hospital. She texts Grey on her way to her car, telling him what happened, telling him she has to
fly home over the weekend, telling him that she needs to borrow his suitcase because the zipper
broke on hers.

His apartment is only ten minutes away from work so she decides to swing by and see if Jaime’s
home — so she can grab the suitcase.

The timing ends up being perfect — Jaime’s just locking the door behind him when she runs up in
her heels. She’s frazzled and emotional — he can tell right away, and he asks her if she’s okay. She
nods and vaguely tells him that her grandma is in the hospital and she flying home — she just came
by for Grey’s suitcase.

Jaime says, “Of course,” as he unlocks the door, pushing it open and holding it for her. He tells her
he has to run to a group study session at school, but she can just lock the door knob when she leaves.
She doesn’t have to worry about the deadbolt.

She tears through Grey’s closet in a hurry, barely registering that she’s messing up how he organizes
it. The suitcase isn’t in the closet. She scans his bedroom. And then she drops to her knees, onto the
plush carpet, and she flips over the edge of his comforter to look under his bed.

He rushed home after work to go grab his suitcase and cart it over to her place — and he’s surprised
when he twists his key in the lock and finds that Jaime didn’t lock the door at all. He opens the door
in alarm — quickly looking into the apartment to see if anything is amiss — if something happened
to Jaime. But everything is perfectly normal and mundane — quiet — and just as he left it in the
morning.
When he enters his bedroom, he finds her sitting on his bed. He says, “Hey,” softly. He says, “Are you okay?” Her face is turned down — and he looks at her hands. And he finally notices that she’s holding his syringes and his bag of morphine.
Missy finds Grey's drugs

They don’t say anything for a long time. He’s just standing there, staring at the paraphernalia in her lap. She’s similarly frozen, her hands clenching open and close as they lie on either side of her lap. She’s been sitting on his bed, numb, for the last forty minutes as she waited for him to get home — furiously despising herself for allowing herself to be derailed when she should be thinking only about her grandma.

His voice is low and quiet, floating on tension. He says, “You were looking through my things?”

Something immediately snaps inside her. She is burning and hot tears flood her eyes. She opens her mouth and shouts at him. She says, “You know how my brother died! How could you do this to me!” She throws the bag and syringes at him as hard as she can before she gets to her feet. The bag hits him in the chest before it falls to the ground, like lead.

He grabs her forearm as she tries to push past him. She snaps her face up to him in disbelief — because she doesn’t think she knows this person at all. He grips her arm tighter. He coldly says, “This has nothing to do with you. This is none of your business.”

She shakes her head before ripping her arm back. She gives him one hard shove, to move him out of the way so she can storm through the open doorway. She can’t believe it. She can’t believe she let this shit happen to her. She can’t believe she was the idiot who constantly defended him and put her life on hold for him. She can’t believe she is the worst judge of character.

Her hand is on the front door and she has it three inches open when it suddenly snaps closed with a bang. Fresh tears bloom in her eyes and she recoils, stepping backwards — away from him.

“Missandei,” he says, reaching out for her.

“Don’t!”

He tells her that he thinks they should talk — and she loses it. She goes ballistic, and she sarcastically screams, “OH, NOW YOU WANT TO TALK!” She paces in front of the door and she tells him that he better not touch her again. She will scream murder, and she has pepper spray in her purse. Her arms feel numb and her legs are shaky. She uses the wall to balance with as she steps out of her heels, crying angrily.

“Babe,” he says. “Can you calm down?”

She points her finger at him and she viciously tells him to shut the fuck up. She tells him that he never calls her anything but Missandei. She tells him that he is manipulative and a liar — and it’s something that lands — it’s something that bothers him. She sees his body tense under his suit before
he darkly tells her that he has never lied to her.

At some point, it hits her. It hits her that this is a break-up. They are breaking up. And with the realization, she starts crying hysterically and starts screaming why. He looks angry and tortured and confused, pacing the living room with his hands on his head.

Something broke inside of her when Melaku burst through the front door of their house during dinner time. Their grandpa initially rose from the table to tell him to get out because Melaku was not welcomed around the family if he was going to keep using. And she had been the first one to notice. She ran up to Melaku, screaming that he was bleeding, putting her hands over his chest trying to stop the flow of blood. She screamed through her sobs as Marselen called for an ambulance. She had to be ripped from his unconscious body, with his blood on her hands, so that he could be moved. And then he died less than a day later.

He has never seen her like this before — he has never seen her not well-put together and poised and easy-going. And as if she plucked the thought right out from his brain, he hears her bitterly say, “Surprise, I’m actually a fucking crazy emotional bitch.” She releases a shaky breath. “Just like what you were afraid of.”

He quietly tells her, “I need it.”

“Spoken like a true fucking loser junkie,” she spits.

He shoves out a disbelieving breath. “Fuck you,” he says.

“No, Grey!” she snaps back. “Fuck you, bro. Fuck you forever!”

He knows that this needs to end. For good. He knows this is why he never thought it was a good idea to date her. He knew that this was how it was going to end. He tells her that she’s just a needy mess who would put up with an emotional cripple because she doesn’t have the balls to go out and find something real. Her face falls, and it looks like he just punched her. And he wants to just fucking die over this. He almost loses his resolve when she crosses her hands protectively over her chest and starts rubbing her arms, as if cold. He almost tells her he’s lying now. But he’s no good for her, so he shouts at her and tells her to stop crying, because her crying is irritating. He tells her that he is bored, and he is so done. He tells her that she’s vapid and superficial, and she’s not smart.

He didn’t know Astapor was raided because he was locked in a room. He pushed himself into a dark corner when the door opened. At that point, he had never seen anyone from Westeros before in his life — he was terrified and pressed himself to the wall, trying to melt into it. It’s with hindsight that he realized that the pale man who picked him up and held down his thrashing arms and legs in a tight compressed hug was telling him that he was safe, that he was going to be safe.

He wishes he could undo time. He would go back and learn a language that is actually useful. He would learn High Valyrian. He would never have known her. And this would not be happening to her.

In response to his words, she stares despondently ahead — looking at his couch, but really looking at nothing. She says, “I loved you, you know. I loved being in a shitty half-relationship with an emotional cripple. Did you know that?”
He has to sit down.

She clicks on her phone, and she’s shocked at how much time has passed. She has five hours to pack and sleep before she needs to get up to go to the airport. Her face feels like a swollen mess and it kind of hurts — it’s kind of sore. Her hands are sticky and tacky from wiping away her tears. She bends forward, sitting on the floor, trying to gather her shoes and her purse. She gets to her feet and adjusts her pencil skirt. She tiredly tells him she has to go — she has to go fucking pack and get her shit together because she has to go home to see if her grandmother is fucking dying or not.

His voice is hoarse when he asks her if she still wants to use his suitcase. He tells she can actually just have it. She laughs cruelly — tells him that she hears him loud and clear — he doesn’t want to see her again.

She slowly trails behind him as he goes back into his bedroom, her jaw quivering when she spots the baggie and the syringes on the ground. Life must be difficult for him to deal with. He must feel ashamed, if he hides it.

Grey picks up the drugs and the syringes really quickly, dropping them on his desk, before he walks to his closet, opens it, and reaches up to slide a plastic bin out of the way. Tucked in the dark corner on the top shelf is his suitcase.

She starts crying again when he hands it to her. The adrenaline that was coursing through her has died down substantially. She’s teetering on her heels when she tells him doesn’t want to end things between them on such a horrible note. She says, “Can I get a hug goodbye?”

“No,” he says thickly. “Of course.”

His body tingles and his chest expands hotly when her breasts press against it, when he smells her perfume and feels her hands on his back — when she sobs into his shirt. His arms come around her, squeezing her as tightly as he can, muffling her crying. If this is the last night, he’s going to make himself remember it. He feels like shit. He consoles himself with the fact that he got more out of this than he ever expected to get. He reminds himself that it’s better for her this way.

She shakes her head and digs her nails into his back, when he tries to let go. She says, “No,” her warm damp breath on his chest. She shakes her head again. She says, “No,” and then she yanks his head down, and she slides her mouth over his.

He can’t get her clothes off fast enough. His hands are shaking and he’s frantic and he feels like he’s going to burn out of his skin at any moment if she’s not naked and tightly pressed up against him. It’s no feeling that he’s ever known. He’s only known sex to be calculated and cerebral and planned out.
He hears her skirt rip and he pulls back, he mumbles that he’s sorry. She quickly closes the distance again, pitching her face forward and recapturing his lips, sliding her tongue back into his mouth. Their hands clash as he grabs her ass and squeezes it hard, as her fingers tries to find the clasp of her skirt.

She trips and she takes him down with her, onto the bed. She starts taking off her shoes, but he growls at her and tells her to keep them on. Her eyes darken at that and his face is on fire when her cold hand sneaks into his unzipped pants, as she strokes him up and down, biting his lower lip, making his arms collapse spontaneously. He falls down on top of her, trapping her hand in between their bodies.

She lightly digs the heel of her shoe into his calf. She tells him to get off of her. And he thinks that he has done something wrong or that he’s hurt her, so he scrambles to his hands and knees — he worriedly asks her if she’s okay. And her eyes soften, and she palms his cheek. And she cries. And she tells him to lie down on his back.

He watches her dumbly — almost in a trance state — as she slowly sinks down over his dick. He gasps and he holds her in place — and she moans and breathes heavily — and he tells her that they’re not using a condom — and she looks down her nose at him and her voice is raspy and choked up, when she asks him if they really need it, when she grinds down on him, sucking him in deeper into her tight, wet heat. He forgets to breathe. His fingers dig into the firm flesh of her ass. And he maneuvers her with his hands, makes her do it again. Both of their shoes are still on. Her bra is still on. Her skirt is fucked. His shirt is only half-unbuttoned. And he finds that he needs this so badly.

Her pace is punishing. She anchors her hands against her chest, raises herself up, almost letting him slip out of her — before she slams back down, making him jerk up involuntarily. He bites down hard on his teeth. She tells him that she loves watching his face like this. She tells him that he can’t hide himself here. She whispers that she sees him.

He grunts, and he stutters. He tries to get her attention with his hand on her hip. He straining to hold it back when he says, “Hey, hey.”

She guesses what he’s trying to say. She slaps his hand off her hip and she roughly smears their pelvic bones together. She says, “It’s okay. Let go.”

“Oh, fuck.” He jerks his head up and bites down hard on her breast, over the cup of her bra. She yelps in surprise and pain as he shudders, as his hot, sweaty body vibrates, as every thought he’s ever held in his mind gets obliterated, as he loses it inside of her.

He understands why people are obsessed with sex now. This is his first thought after he comes back down.

She collapses down beside him on the bed, keeping her damp legs open to air out the remnants of the fucking break-up sex they just had. The room smells musty — and now it’s very quiet. He says her name — gently and quietly. He reaches over to touch the teeth marks that he left on her chest. He makes an apologetic sound in the back of his throat, his thumb softly skimming over her tender skin. She blankly stares up at his ceiling. She tells him that she’s on birth control now. She started it last week. Because she figured that it’d be convenient for them. She tells him that it takes a week to kick
in, so they should be good.

He asks her what she’s doing when she suddenly sits up and grabs her shirt at the foot of the bed, buttoning it quickly. She examines the frayed slit of her skirt, before deciding that it’s not too horrible. She hops off the bed, and he asks her where she’s going. She tells him she’s going to the bathroom to clean up.

Semen is dripping down her thighs — this viscous, sticky oddity that she would have been throwing a fucking party over, had this happened just one day ago. As it is, she numbly props her leg on the toilet and wipes herself up with toilet paper. She can smell him — it’s a new smell. She now knows what his jizz smells like. She idiotically wonders if she can now pick him out of a line-up, in this way.

His bedroom still smells like sex, and he’s changed out of his suit when she comes back into the room. There’s a blanket and pillow on the floor next to the bed. There’s also a folded t-shirt and a pair of boxers lying on the bed.

“Stay the night,” he says. “We can wake up a little early to go get your stuff tomorrow. And I can drive you to the airport.”

“Why do you say you need it?” Her voice floats down in the dark, down to where he is on the floor.

“It’s the only way that I can feel happy — just for a little bit,” he says. “Or it was the only thing.” He sighs. “I don’t know how to articulate it.”

“Well try.”

“I used to use it to forget the past for a moment. I used to use it to uh, have penetrative sex — to prove to myself that I was a man. Stupid shit that idiots do. And I sometimes use it to lessen anxiety whenever there are a lot of people around.”

“Were you on it just now? When we —”

“No.”

He’s still sleeping when she wakes up. She’s never really seen him sleep before. He’s on the floor, on his back, and his mouth is slightly open, his dark lashes resting against his skin. His face is smooth and clear — devoid of the tension that he holds when he is awake. She’s staring too much, and she’s careful and quiet so she doesn’t wake him, when she climbs off the bed to go use the toilet.

When she comes back into the room, she stoops down into a squat and hovers over him. She knows he told her to never wake him up when he’s having a bad dream, but she’s not sure what the rules are, when he’s just sleeping. She reaches down and places her hand on his chest, feeling around for his heartbeat. It’s a chilly morning, and she tells herself that she doesn’t have to know everything right now.
She jumps back when he wakes up suddenly. She pretends she hadn’t just been examining him in his sleep. He’s groggy and quiet and soft, when he leads her back into the bathroom and hands her a new toothbrush. He suppresses a yawn as he tells her he’ll start some coffee and he’ll get dressed.

He’s buried in sweats when she comes out of the bathroom, fiddling around with the coffee machine. The hood of his thick navy sweatshirt is pulled over his head, nearly swallowing it. He leads her back into the bedroom and he gives her a zip-up that goes down to mid-thigh. He gives her a pair of flip flops that are at least three sizes too big. He throws her heels and her work clothes into his suitcase, as she steps into a pair of his basketball shorts and cinches the tie at the waist.

He hands her a thermos of coffee — with milk and a lot of sugar, like how she always drinks it — and he drags the suitcase and holds the handle of her purse in his hand, as he opens the front door for her.

He asks her if she’s going to change out of his clothes right before they leave her apartment for the airport. She asks why. He tells her she looks kind of ridiculous. She shrugs and says that it’s a seven-hour flight — she’s going to be comfortable for it, not cute.

Neither of them had dinner because they were busy fighting — and then they were busy fucking — and then they were busy sleeping. Her stomach feels a little upset and clenchy when he takes them through a drive-thru on the way to the airport. She tells him she doesn’t have much of an appetite but he orders three breakfast sandwiches anyways. He hands the bag to her and tells her to try.

When they near the airport, he tells her that he can pick her up late Sunday — unless she delays her flight home. She tells him thank you — tells him that he should borrow her car for the weekend — do whatever he wants with it — run some errands.

She’s always had such a confidence in how attracted he is to her — but she has a poor reading of how he actually feels about her. It feels entirely too vulnerable to ask him if he really thinks she’s boring, if he really thinks she’s not that smart. She thinks about her dignity and preserving it — maybe in a way that she was unable to do with Neal. Maybe with this one, she won’t linger so long past the end.

She gets out of the car and hears her trunk unlatch. She gives him a small wave. She says, “Thanks for the ride.” And then she thinks about what she just said — gets this mental flash of his naked face, when he was underneath her — and she laughs uncomfortably and nervously. “You know what I mean.”

He gives her a small smile, nodding. “I do know what you mean.” He pauses. “I really hope everything is okay with your grandma. Um, feel free to call if you want to talk.”

Jaime is flipping channels aimlessly on TV when Grey arrives back home. Grey claps the greasy paper bag containing the last breakfast sandwich over Jaime’s chest, dropping it and letting it slide down into Jaime’s lap. “You get Missy to the airport alright?” Jaime asks. Grey hears the paper
crinkle as Jaime peeks inside. “Oh, thanks,” Jaime says. “You’re so good to me.”

Grey sinks down on the couch next to Jaime, right after Jaime pulls his feet off the far right cushion. Grey’s tired but his brain is too wired to let himself relax enough to go back to sleep. He picks up the remote and he asks Jaime if it’s alright if he changes it to the golf channel. Jaime snorts, but agrees.

Grey’s zoning out — watching a commercial about erectile dysfunction medication — kind of thinking that the timing is so great. He thinks about how fucking amazing it felt to be inside of her. He thinks about how it’s this stunning and insane revelation to him. He thinks about every mistake he’s ever made with her. And he thinks that so much of what he has known has been fucking backwards in his head.

“Dude,” Jaime says, sighing. “Brienne is moving away for a job. And it’s fucking killing me.”
She goes straight to the hospital after getting off the plane. She leaves the suitcase in the trunk of her rental and she runs up to the front desk and gives her grandmother’s name. The woman glances at her outfit, and it’s not even the first time this trip that Missandei is reminded that her non-attractive self gets treated differently than her pretty self. The car rental guy laughed at none of her jokes when he was setting her up.

Her body just about folds in on itself when she gets to the hospital room and sees her family — her brothers, their wives, and all of the grandchildren — crowded around her grandma in bed, who is awake, alert, and smiling. They’re all chuckling over something when she walks in.

Mossador is closest to the door. He hugs her and in Low Valyrian, he reminds her that they told her not to come, that she shouldn’t compromise her job. She tells the whole room that she didn’t compromise her job — her immediate boss is understanding. It’s only her big boss that’s overbearing.

She has to hold her grandmother’s hands to be sure — she squeezes both of them tightly and smiles down at the woman who raised her. Her grandma is in good spirits — she feels sturdy and strong — and she tells Missandei that there’s such a fuss being made over a dizzy spell and a fall. She tells Missandei she’s more embarrassed than anything else, because the men who drove the ambulance saw her in her nightgown.

Her grandma smooths her hand down Missandei’s face and tells Missandei that she looks older — and there are unattractive bags underneath her eyes.

She didn’t have time to buy anything before leaving, so she had blindly dug through the cabinets in her studio for stuff to bring for her nieces, nephews, and sisters-in-law. The haul is paltry and pathetic-looking — something that she apologizes for. She hands over a few unopened tubes of whitening toothpaste that she had hoarded because they were on sale, some lotion bottles, some cans of tomato sauce, some chocolate bars, and an open bag of high-fructose gummy candy — they have sugared preserved fruit candy here at the local markets — but her nieces and nephews have developed a taste for the novelty of processed and dyed Westerosi candy. They are not swayed no matter how many times she tells them she gets homesick for the kind of stuff they have access to everyday.

Grey hadn’t commented when she started loading up the stuff into the suitcase. Her clothes comprise less than half the space.

She spends most of Saturday sitting in her grandmother’s hospital room, chatting and trading stories with her sisters-in-law — both of them think Missandei should find a man and get married before she becomes old and ugly and is stuck being alone and unloved forever — while grandma sleeps. They massage grandma’s hands and feet when grandma is awake. The doctor says that their grandma is anemic and they’re running tests to see what the cause of it might be. Grandma also hit her head on
the way down, on a kitchen chair, so they’re watching that, too. Missandei has to leave the room to talk to a woman in thick glasses about billing and cost of care. It will be something Missandei will cover.

Marselen gets off work after six. Missandei is reading on her phone and their gran is sleeping when he shows up. He taps her knee, jerking his chin at her bare face, her tied-up hair, and her drawstring pants. He says, “Dang, you lookin’ rough, Lil’ Miss.” He tells her he’s there to relieve her of her duties for the night — the siblings had decided that one of them should always be with grandma because one of them needs to be around to translate for grandma. Mars tells her to go home and shower and rest up. It’s something that strikes her — the fact that he still refers to it as home — even now, years after they left that house.

It’s very odd since she never feels the urge to clean when she’s at her apartment — but she needs to burn off the anxiety, so she starts straightening things in grandma’s house. A part of her thinks that if she can reduce some of the stuff — then there’s less chance of their grandmother tripping and falling over something. Grandma is very clean and neat — but not minimalistic. Missandei clears out old magazines that are over a decade old and some of her old toys from childhood. She thinks that maybe the bedrooms don’t have to be frozen shrines to dead people and absent kin. Maybe they can convert them into guest bedrooms or maybe even a place for a roommate or a live-in caretaker, when it comes to that sort of thing.

Missandei pets Lucy’s head, which is laying on her lap, as she sifts through the mail on the couch. There’s a whole stack of it and she wants to be sure that she picks out all of the bills before she leaves and makes sure that they are paid.

She finds an odd-looking series of envelopes — letters — grouped together with a rubber band. She does a doubletake when she sees her parents’ names in the top left corner of the mailings. She and her brothers are the addressees. She pulls off the band and peels out a letter, begins reading it, noting that the date is from a year ago.

Grandma is discharged Sunday. She has an iron deficiency, something that Missandei hypothesized was brought on by the change in her grandma’s diet — her switch to a very simple vegetarian diet. Missandei explains that their grandma cooks vegetarian food for their grandfather’s alter — a fact that the doctor isn’t especially interested in. A nurse gives them the name and dosage of an iron supplement and a nutritionist. They are told to schedule an appointment with her family doctor to keep an eye on that iron level.

When grandma sees the house, she complains that Missandei moved things around, before grandma gingerly bends down to pick up Lucy, who is going nuts and wagging her tail.
Missandei tells her brothers she wants to talk to them before she leaves. They walk her out to her rental car, standing in the dusty gravel driveway. Missandei pulls an envelope out of her purse and hands it to Mossador. He looks at it quizzically and opens it, showing Marselen. “What the hell?” he says, flashing the money at her.

“Take it. It’s for grandma’s medicines and care — and just whatever you need. I’d like to set something up where I send you guys money on a monthly basis for her.”

“We don’t need to take money from our baby sister,” Mossador says tightly.

This is something she understands on an intellectual level, but not emotionally. She doesn’t really intimately know the pride of being a man and the head of a household. She doesn’t know the shame that comes from accepting money from a much younger female. But what she does know — what she does remember are the nights she laid awake in bed — tense and scared that her grandparents were going to rip her away from Neal and marry her off to a strange Naathi boy. Back then, being apart from Neal was her foremost concern. Her brothers both had a broader, more mature viewpoint. She remembers lying in bed with her door purposely cracked open, listening to her grandparents argue with Moss and Mars about sending her to college.

“You have families,” she says. “You have children. I have no responsibilities to anyone but myself. Please take it. Let me do this for grandma.”

She hugs both of her brothers goodbye. She tells them she loves them. She tells them she will be home again soon.

She stops by Melaku and her grandfather’s gravesites before she heads to the airport.

She loads the suitcase into the trunk of her car, after he pops it. It’s substantially lighter after she unloaded all of the stuff for her family. She climbs into the passenger seat and says hello to him. She thanks him for picking her up. She asks him how his weekend went.

“It was fine,” he says. “How is your grandmother?”

“She’s fine.”

She’s currently entirely too emotionally and physically drained to give many fucks about the state of their thing — whatever it’s called — their relationship. She closes her eyes and rests her head against the rest, listening to the sound of the road underneath. He drives them back to his apartment — and that’s where she thanks him again. Before she says bye, he looks at her in such a heavy and loaded way — and she is exhausted.

Jaime holds up his wine glass. He makes a short and overly sentimental speech. He says horribly awkward things like how he likes that they are friends who live together and how he learns so much from Grey all the time and how Grey actually inspires him to be a better man. At that, Grey looks at
Jaime with this withering and vaguely angry stare. He mutters that Jaime doesn’t have to work so hard for dinner. He mutters that Jaime has already won — Jaime has already worn him down. They are having a ridiculously overpriced dinner together on his fake nameday — a dinner he is paying for because Jaime is poor — the nameday given to him when he was pulled out of Astapor and “saved” and processed at a port in Slaver’s Bay before he was flown to Westeros, where his only supposed living relative was — his aunt.

Jaime says, “I’m glad you were born, man.”

“That makes one of us,” Grey says. And it’s supposed to be a joke — but it results in this pensive silence and this reflective mood.

The tasting menu — with its billions of courses and wine pairings — is nothing he’s ever experienced before. He supposes that this is Jaime’s point — Jaime’s goal. He sits tense and hyper-aware that he is an imposter, for the first few courses. Jaime has to guide him and show him what to do, how to eat — as if eating isn’t something that’s innate and natural to him. For the first few courses, he sits with the thick knowledge that he doesn’t belong in this world at all — he was not made for this world — he is not meant for this world. The thought isn’t even revelatory enough to make him feel the pull of anger or bitterness. This is something he has always known about himself.

“Dude, can I give you some unsolicited advice?” Jaime says. “What is your deal with Missy?”

“That’s not unsolicited advice,” Grey mutters. “That’s just a question.”

Jaime rolls his eyes. “Look, I hate getting all up in people’s personal bizness because it’s annoying as fuck when people tell me how to feel and shit — but dude, it must suck to be fighting with your girl all the time. It must suck to never have the make-up sex that comes after the kind of fighting you’ve guys been doing. And — all of your meanass loud shit is really fucking with my studying. That’s really no bueno.”

Grey stares back at Jaime and he decides to himself that Jaime doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about.

They are silent as their plates get shuffled around, as crumbs get scraped off the table, as their wine glasses are pulled off and replaced with new, clean glasses. The server explains the wine and the dish to them, and it’s something that’s entirely out of his realm of expertise. Jaime looks at the guy in rapt attention, like a fucking pretentious dipshit. And after the whole show, Grey spears a mushroom, smears it in sauce, and shoves it in his mouth.

“Dude, slow down,” Jaime says. “Enjoy it. Jesus. No one is going to yank your food away.”

Grey’s about to snarl at Jaime over the shitty bullshit comment, but then Jaime one-ups himself by saying:

“Dude, it’s hard to have been a victim. It’s hard to have needed to develop crazy survival mechanisms. It’s hard to have experienced rape. All of this during childhood.”

Grey drops his fork.

“I’m sorry I’m ruining our romantic dinner,” Jaime continues. “Look. You fucking win. What you have lived through — is fucking insane. I cannot even imagine. I’m not going to even say that my shit even comes close to touching your shit. But God. Bro. How long are you gonna punish yourself over stuff that wasn’t even fucking your fault? Forever?”
His aunt was very nice. She told him that she and his father were siblings. It had been their plan to leave the Summer Isles together before it became illegal to, but his father had an about-face at the last moment. Maybe when faced with leaving everything he’s ever known to try again in a foreign place — maybe he found that he wasn’t as brave as he purported to be. Grey could have been born on another land, had things turned out differently.

The year that he lived with his aunt was very nice. He had a nice bed all to himself that he was continuously wetting because he was plagued with nightmares, but she was really very patient with all of his accidents. She put him in school, where he was mercilessly bullied because he was malnourished — sickly looking and incredibly skinny — and prone to panic attacks — lights flipping on or off suddenly sent him into a paralyzing fear-based tailspin, so used he was to darkness. But he became healthier in that year. He learned English in that year — in halting stops and stutters — in whisper-speak because he was afraid to talk. He couldn’t stand to be touched by anyone — he couldn’t even stand the feel of clothes on his body. But she steadily told him he’d be okay and that he was safe. That became this myth that he started really buying into, because he was young and so broken — he couldn’t help but reach out to that bit of light, that bit of hope.

And then she suddenly died — while at work.

And then he had no one left — no living relatives who would claim him. He got bounced around in foster care, some homes better than others. They called him mentally disabled. His peers called him psychotic or retarded. Everyone was so ill-equipped to deal with him so they just resorted to punishing him — and it wasn’t anything that was shocking to him. After all, it fit very much in line with how he expected to be treated.

It’s been said that emotional numbness is a coping mechanism. What he knows is that sex is a mechanical act. It’s something that his body is pushed into doing — whether pushed by himself or pushed by others — and it’s something that he puts up with because — he doesn’t know why. He supposes there’s no other alternative. He has this gauge of normalcy, based on observation. He can measure how far off-center he is. He has always believed that she deserves so much more than someone who is dead inside.

Grey quietly drops his wine glass back to the table. Then into his plate of beef, he tells Jaime, “I can’t. I just might not be made that way.”

Jaime smiles. As if he has won. “You can,” Jaime says. “You are. Because you are capable of loving me.”

Grey’s jaw drops — before his mouth curls into a smile, before he spontaneously laughs. He says, “I don’t love you!”

“Shut up. You fucking love me so much — you can’t even handle it.”

Brienne is such a girl when it comes to break-ups. There’s something to be said about carrying on and moving onward and upward, but Brienne, as always, is incapacitated for a few days — which is why Missy shows up at her house. This time, she’s old friends with Brienne’s folks. She gives them
a quick hug and a quick update on her life before she crosses the living room and peeks in Brienne’s bedroom. She kicks off her heels and pulls back Brienne’s blanket, shifting a bunch of soiled tissues in the process. It’s okay — as a girl who is a slob, Missy is unfazed by bodily fluids and stuff like that.

She lies down in Brienne’s bed, beside Brienne.

“I’m so gross and disgusting,” Brienne says, voice nasal because of her red stuffy nose. “Don’t look at me,” she says, rolling over, giving Missandei her back.

“It’s okay, hun,” Missandei says, burrowing closer into her friend’s back. “I think we can both use the cuddle. And I like being big spoon anyway. Now tell me, what did that big bad horrible man do to you?”

Brienne releases a shaky breath. “Oberyn was so great. He was so good to me.”

“But?”

“I don’t know. He’s just wasn’t Jaime. Is that a shitty thing to say?”

Missandei lightly laughs into Brienne’s hair. “Naw,” she says. “The truth is never a shitty thing to say.” Missandei pauses. “Unless you say the truth in a really mean way. Then I guess that’s shitty. But ah, whatever. You should have a legit conversation with Jaime before you leave.”

Jaime insists on throwing a going-away party for Brienne. They’re using that term loosely because it’s a party with four guests. And he also uses the term guests loosely because he and Jaime probably can’t be guests in their own home. And he’s in the ninth circle of hell because the main activity consists of watching Jaime and Brienne make bedroom eyes at each other while nursing their beers on the couch.

These kinds of hang outs were always easier when he was high.

Jaime bought Brienne a cake. So Grey goes into the kitchen to cut it after everyone appropriately ooh’ed and ahh’ed over it like they had never seen a fucking cake before in their lives.

His fingers brush up against Missandei’s when he hands her a plate of cake and a fork.

He’s going to drink until he dies or falls asleep. Whichever comes first.

She is kind of disgusted by their disgusting love because she is bitter that she is so alone and so unloved because she probably has a shitty personality and is dumb as a bag of rocks or whatever.

She doesn’t want to be subjected to Jaime and Brienne’s adoration of each other. She doesn’t want to watch them flirt-talk about fucking cake flavors. She wants to scream-barf all over Brienne’s face when Jaime reaches out to swipe frosting on Brienne’s nose.
She also doesn’t want to be subjected to the constant sight of her drug-dependent former-fuck-friend, all sitting there and acting like they didn’t do butt stuff with each other. Grey’s been so nice to her, and it’s pretty disheartening and depressing. It just serves to remind her that they were hitting it with great frequency — before they quit it.

She picks at a hanging thread on the hem of her tank dress. When she put it on and looked at her body in the mirror, looked at her boobs all pulled up and pressed into one another — she wondered what sort of outfits not-vapid girls wear to casual dinner parties — right before she said, “Oh, fuck you, Grey,” to her mirror.

“I’m going to grab another beer. Anyone else need a refill?”

She looks up at him, standing in the doorway of the kitchen, looking at her expectantly. She holds up two fingers to him. “I would like to double-fist that shit.”

“God, the mouth on you,” Jaime says. “Say, do you guys feel like playing a game?”

“I hate your fucking games, Bieber,” Grey says, suddenly reappearing with four beers. He hands two to her and he keeps two for himself.

He only participates in the game because Brienne wants to play. He doesn’t really listen as Jaime explains the rules because Jaime’s a dipshit and his face is stupid and pale and his hair is stupid and pale. Grey doesn’t want to draw shit. He doesn’t want to guess shit, either. He doesn’t want to stand up. He doesn’t want to look at things. He doesn’t even want to flip the timer over.

They stick her on a team with the dead weight. Jaime says he wants to divide the teams racially, darks versus lights. She looks at Brienne, face flushed pink, and Missandei says, “Why are you friends with him?”

“It’s a cry for attention,” Brienne says, patting Jaime on the arm. “And he’s mentally ill.”

He’s watching Jaime’s red face yelp out this guttural whoop before he slaps Brienne’s hand in a really violent high-five. Because it’s not enough for Jaime to win. He has to win by six points. And Grey wants to drown this fucker in a bucket of his own urine.
Missy throws the black marker to the ground and rips the sheet of paper so hard that she sends the big pad and the chair that was holding it up to the floor. She’s the youngest child in her family. She grew up crying some serious bitch tears whenever her big brothers creamed her in games — so much so that her grandfather made her brothers let her win every now and then so he could get a reprieve from her shrieking. Old habits are hard to kick. And she’s drunk.

She calls Jaime and Brienne a couple of fuckers. She tells them she hates their guts. She is demanding a rematch because the last game was fucked up because the cards weren’t mixed that well. She whirls on Grey and tells him to stop being such a fucking sullen slut who is too cool for school that he refuses to play a fucking simple game.

Jaime’s eyes are wide and round. He’s trying not to laugh. He says, “Oh em gee, you’re terrifying. I love it.”

Grey stands up with a beer in his hand and goes to pick up the pad and chair, giving her a sardonic smile, lightly shaking his head as he sets up for the start of a new round.

Jaime says the girls are too drunk to drive home — so he tells them to bunk down in Grey’s room because his bed is waaay cleaner. There’s a traffic jam at the bathroom as four people try to empty their pulsating bladders at the same time. Grey’s dizzy, and Jaime’s hands are on his shoulders, leading Grey into his dark bedroom. Jaime shoves him onto the bed and tells him to sleep tight, before he walks back into the living room to rejoin the girls.

He snaps awake when Jaime’s fat arm falls on his face, hitting him right in the teeth. The morning sun is awful and his head is throbbing. Jaime’s lying stomach-down and Jaime’s face is right there, right next to his shoulder. Grey’s hot, and his legs are mindlessly thrashing against the bed covers. Jaime groans in pain as Grey socks him in the shoulder to get him to roll over and off of Grey. They both reek of alcohol, and it makes him want to gag.

“When did you take off my clothes?” Grey says, voice scratchy and barely above a whisper, lifting his brick-like head to look down at his body, only clad in his boxers.

“When I touched you in the middle of the night and found that you were sweaty as fuck,” Jaime mumbles from beside him, eyes still closed, throwing his arm over his face to block the light. “Will you wash my sheets for me today? You do it so much better than I do.”

Grey sighs. Jaime’s not wrong. He does laundry like a silver-spoonfed idiot. “Yeah, okay. Only if you strip the bed yourself.”

“Deal. Thank you, boo.”
He catches her trying to sneak out, as she’s putting on her shoes. He blinks against the noon sun and holds his hand up to block it from his face, grimacing. He’s not wearing clothes. It inspires her to straighten her spine, with only one heel on. She smiles in spite of herself and she teasingly says, “Oh, so you have a hard time sleeping naked with me. But with Jaime, it’s no problem?”

“The difference is that I don’t give a shit if I strangle Jaime in his sleep,” he mutters carelessly, dragging his hands down his face, rubbing the sleep out of it. He probably doesn’t realize that he just said something really sweet. “You leaving?” he asks, when his face reappears. “Let me walk you down to your car. Give me thirty seconds.”

Her other shoe is on and her purse is hanging between her hands when he reappears — having borrowed a shirt and a pair of pants from Jaime. He stifles a yawn as he swipes his house keys from the dining table and steps barefoot into his running shoes by the door. He asks her if she’s hungover at all. She tells him she feels like hot garbage. He laughs softly as he hits the elevator button down to the lobby.

Her car is parked a couple blocks away. The daylight seems inordinately bright and harsh. They make some small talk. She tells him she’s really sick of her commute — she’s changing apartments soon. He tells her to feel free to give him a shout if she needs some muscle, in moving her shit. He can rope Jaime into helping, too. They’ll get it done fast.

He looks so sleepy and so physically drained, standing next to her car in the middle of the afternoon. It’s like, the cutest thing ever. He’s still the fucking cutest thing ever.

She’s stunned when he reaches out to give her a quick, tight hug before saying bye, before trudging sluggishly back to his apartment.
He runs into Brienne coming out of the elevator on the way back to the apartment. His body feels damp and clammy and nauseous, as he quietly tells her good morning. Her eyes curve down in sympathy, and she tells him hangovers suck. He gives her a weak smile before the elevator door closes.

Jaime is by the coffee machine, holding a cup, when Grey walks back into their place. Jaime calls out, “Yo, dude, do you want —”

“I need to take a shit, Bieber,” Grey says, hitting their bathroom door open with a hard smack of his palm.

After he flushes the toilet, washes up, and brushes his teeth, his trembling hand wrenches open the bathroom door. He wordlessly walks into his bedroom — which still manages to smell girly and perfumed even as it smells pretty boozy. He opens his desk drawer and pulls out his syringes and his bag of morphine. He clutches it in his fist as he stomps back out into the main room. He drops the stuff on the coffee table, facing Jaime. And then he crooks his forefinger to Bieber, signaling him to come over.

Jaime has this air of detached curiosity as he brings his coffee cup over and sits on the couch. He looks at the drugs and the syringes without touching them.

“I’m going through withdrawals,” Grey says, still standing, looking down at Jaime, blinking mindlessly.

“Okay,” Jaime says, looking up at him, face serious.

“I need to titrate off,” Grey says.

Jaime’s eyes shift real quickly to the side, before he refocuses on Grey. “Okay.”

“I’m giving that to you to be in charge of.” He swallows the lump in his throat. He holds onto his stomach, his rolling gut, with his hands.

“Oh,” Jaime says, leaning over to pick up the bag. He examines a tablet through the plastic. He opens the bag — it snaps open with a zip — and he carefully picks out a small white circle. “One?” he asks.

“I can do half.”

Jaime disappears into the kitchen for less than a minute. Grey hears the fridge open. When Jaime comes back into the living room, he places a cut tablet into Grey’s palm and a glass of water.
Grey feels marginally better by the time there’s a knock on their door. Jaime springs up from the couch, flipping a second layer of blanket on Grey’s lap. Grey can hear the door open. He can hear Jaime say, “Thanks for being so quick, lil man.”

“Well, ya know,” Jaime’s brother drawls from the doorway. “I live for pharmaceutical consultations.”

Jaime flips his hat around his head, sitting back down on the couch next to Grey as Tyrion drops a plastic grocery bag onto the coffee table. Grey leans forward, reaches out to Tyrion’s proffered hand, giving it a quick clap and squeeze.

“How you doin’, man? What’s the good word?” Tyrion says as he takes Grey’s morphine baggie from Jaime, examining it in the light.

Grey smiles before he dryly says, “Oh, you know. Just hoping my bowels don’t drop some liquid shit on y’all.”

Tyrion chuckles. “I actually got you something for that.” He reaches into his plastic bag, rummages around, and pulls out a box of Immodium. “Ta-da!” He lightly tosses the box to Grey. “I’d pound that — liberally — to control the runs.”

“What,” Jamie says. “You didn’t bring me a present?”

Tyrion climbs into the arm chair and they talk about Grey’s whole drug history, mostly because Jaime’s interested and asked. It feels deeply personal to talk about. But he tells them he started on morphine by stealing his foster mom’s medication when he was about 13 years old or so. And it was great. It made him feel amazing. And then she found out he was stealing from her and she was really pissed and beat the crap out of him. So he went through a period where he was trying to get high with anything else — huffing keyboard cleaners at the office supply store — glue. He was getting in so much trouble that he got kicked out that house, moved to another. It was when he got a minimum wage job at age 15 that he was able to really sustain the habit through to the present day. He’s gone through lots of period where he takes it very sparingly to stave off the worst of withdrawals — when he couldn’t source it or he was saving money or he was all freaked out because he bleeding out of his ass — but he’s never been completely off of it. He’s only not been high.

Tyrion tells Grey about his own stint with cocaine and how he got off of it after a few half-hearted attempts because his girlfriend left him for a bit. But then she came back and he had stopped. Also, the coke fucked with his dick. He couldn’t get hard.

Tyrion says withdrawals are the pits. He says that there’s a holiday coming up. It will probably take ten days to get to the other side, once he’s completely off the morphine. It would be good to take some days off of work during the holiday week so Grey doesn’t have to worry about meeting that responsibility while he’s cleaning himself up. Leading up to the full stop, during titration, he’d have to be really diligent about being as healthy as possible — because that will help. That means exercise and healthy eating. That means he can’t drink and battle hangovers on top of withdrawal symptoms — that’s just fucking dumb.

Tyrion waves his hand in the air, thinking. He says the first four days will be the worst. He picks out an orange prescription bottle out of his bag and gives it to Jaime, who immediately examines the

“For the first four days. Start off with a high dose and then taper down to nothing,” Tyrion says. “Hopefully we can get you to sleep some of it away.” Then he pulls out additional bottles of B vitamins and various supplements — for when Grey completely loses his appetite — also handing them to Jaime.

Grey digs himself deeper into the couch cushions. He feels Jaime’s clap him on the ankle. Jaime says, “How are you feeling about all of this, man?”

He worries about what kind of person he will be off drugs. He was a child when he started. He’s never been an adult who didn’t take drugs. He worries that he will be a monster — just a horrible person off drugs. “I feel nervous,” Grey says.

“You’ll be alright, man,” Tyrion says. “Trust in the system.”

She kind of feels sheepish inviting so many people to help her move out of her studio, but she honestly didn’t think they’d all actually show up. She only has a fifty percent show rate, when people ask for her help moving.

The very best part was when Neal eagerly introduced himself to Grey and Jaime and started prattling on about what he does for a living as Grey and Jaime stared silently at him. Grey knows who Neal is to her, but Neal doesn’t know who Grey is to her.

Actually, the best part was when Jhiqui — after cracking open the bottle of wine she brought and guzzled half a glass of — coldly looked both Grey and Neal up and down and snorted derisively.

No, actually, the best part was when Nick — a banker and former musical theater geek — insisted on helping Grey and Jaime move her shrink-wrapped chest of drawers — still full of clothes — and hurt his back in the process.

Actually — truly — the best part was when Doreah was cleaning out her bathroom and purposely shouted at Missandei in the kitchen, asking whether she wanted her condoms packed up or left out.

Jaime and Grey are both sweaty and breathing hard when they come back from loading furniture in the moving truck — Grey significantly more so than Jaime. Grey is actually profusely sweating. He’s been quiet all day, which she supposes isn’t something new. But he’s been extra quiet.

She watches as Jaime fills a glass of water at her fridge before bringing it to Grey. Jaime swings an arm over Grey’s shoulders and gives him a squeeze before leaning in to sniff his ear. Grey does a full-body flinch and gives Jaime a quick glare as he continues drinking water. “Aw,” Jaime says, reaching over to wipe some sweat off Grey’s temple with his hand. “So cranky.” Jaime takes the empty glass away with Grey finishes.

Grey wasn’t fucking kidding when he said that they work fast. She doesn’t know if there’s something sympatico or innate about them together — or if it comes from years of rowing together — but they really complement each other. Jaime will not shut up as they dismantle her bed, but he’s not even talking about dismantling the bed. He’s talking about Brienne and how she’s settling in Yin.
And Jaime doesn’t miss a beat in the conversation as he catches the socket wrench that Grey wordlessly chalks at him in mid-air. It makes her stomach lurch in panic every time they throw hand tools back and forth at each other’s heads. She’s asked them to stop it — to just hand stuff to each other — but they have ignored her.

Grey is already out of the room, carrying her headboard and footboard down the flights of stairs, his wet shirt sticking to his back. She catches Jaime’s attention before he takes the legs and frame down. She puts her hand on his sweaty arm, and she says, “Hey, is he okay?”

“Ah, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about that,” Jaime says, straining to balance the metal and wood in his arms. “Chat later?”

“Sure,” she says.

After the mattress and boxspring disappear down the stairs, Grey taps her on the shoulder. He says, “Hey, we’re heading out.”

She’s surprised. She says, “I just ordered lunch, though.”

“Sorry,” he says. “But Jaime has to get back to studying. We can meet you guys real quick later in King’s Landing, though — to carry the bed and stuff into your new place.”

She almost blurts out that she can drive him home later, if he wants to stay — but she’s struck by a sudden sense of shyness. She tells him not to worry about the bed and chest — Nick and Neal can probably handle the heavy stuff. And she doesn’t even believe it — as she says it. She really means that she, Doreah, and Jhiqui can handle the chest and bed.

She’s given two sweaty hugs — one from Jaime and one from Grey — before they disappear down the stairs.

Before Jaime pulls the Range Rover in reverse, he pats Grey on the knee. Grey has his eyes closed. If he can’t see the world — then it can’t jerk around violently. “And to think,” Jaime says lightly. “The best is yet to come.” After a pause, Jaime’s tone dips into somber territory. He says, “You’ve got this, baby.”

Grey hears Jaime clear his throat. He feels the car moving.

“Dude, that Neal guy is such a dillweed,” Jaime says. “And I’m not just saying that because he’s trying to get all up in Missy’s bizness. You should shut that shit down, by the way.”

“Yeah. I guess I can puke all over him the next time I see him,” Grey mutters miserably into the window. “Or shit hot diarrhea into his mouth.”

It’s dark and she only turns on the pendant lights in her new kitchen before she pulls out takeout containers from her fridge and reheats the boxes in the microwave. She digs in a box marked kitchen,
pulling out two glass tumblers. She shrugs lightly and smiles as she pours some leftover wine into the tumblers. She bends over her new kitchen island — she has a kitchen island now! — and slides the wine over to Neal.

She’s digging steaming noodles out of a container when he comes back in, after taking a quick call on her patio. She on alert when he moves behind her, when his hands come down on her shoulders. His fingers and thumbs lightly dig into her sore muscles.

“You’re so tense,” he says, his breath skimming her ear.

She smiles uncomfortably. She says, “Yeah, well, it’s been a long day. And work’s been a bit much.”

“Oh yeah? What’s going on? Tell me about it.”

She grunts as his thumbs hit a knot in her back, gripping the counter tightly with her hands. She says, “Oh, you know. Just standard Black tax bullshit. I can present a great idea, but nobody wants to hear it. But white Johnny presents the same idea and everybody goes apeshit over what a genius he is.”

His hands glide to her neck. “Now, I’m just playing devil’s advocate here —”

“Well don’t,” she interrupts, voice immediately getting hard.

His hands freeze on her skin. “Missy,” he says.

She extricates herself from his hands. She turns around and walks backwards, putting a good distance between them. She holds out her hand in the space between them, to lay down the truth. She says, “I don’t need for you to tell me that it’s possible that what I’m experiencing has nothing to do with my skin color or the fact that I’m female. I don’t need for you to explain to me that sometimes bosses just suck. I don’t need to hear bullshit — again — about how sometimes perception creates reality and how I should just rise above.”

“Missy,” Neal says helplessly. “You’re getting all worked up, and I haven’t even said anything bad.”

Missandei grabs a sponge from her sink and starts vigorously scrubbing the countertop with it — just so her hands have something to do. “Don’t be acting like I’m irrational and crazy and female right now. Because I’m not trippin’. Why would you even bring up the devil’s advocate thing?”

“Well, sometimes it gets real tiring to always hear white people this, white people that. I get it. White people are the source of all evil,” Neal says sarcastically.

She looks at him through narrowed eyes. “Bro, you did not just say that to me.”

Right when Neal opens his mouth to respond, her phone rings. Missy flips it over on the counter and reads the caller ID.

“I gotta take this,” she tells Neal, already holding the phone up to her ear, walking across her living to the patio, arms squeezed tightly over her chest to ward off the chilly night breeze.

After Jaime opens the door, she pushes past him without saying hi and heads straight to Grey’s room.
His table light is on and she can see him curled up into the fetal position under his blanket. She peels the blanket back and touches his t-shirt-covered back, which is soaking wet.

He rolls over. “Hey,” he says softly. “How’s it going?”

She frowns, touching his face. “Baby,” she says. “What are you doing to yourself?”

“Just trying something. It’s good to see you,” he says. “The only thing that would beat seeing you is thirty milligrams of morphine.”

“God, you’re hilarious,” she says, shifting her hips so she can sit on the edge of his bed. She asks him where he’s at. He tells her he’s at two days. She tells him it will get a little worse — she remembers Melaku’s stints with getting clean — but then after that, it will be better. Grey says that is the general consensus. He tells her that his aching muscles are fucking killing him. He tells her that he’s taken his dose of Valium, but he can’t sleep. He feels loopy and sluggish and tired — and his lower back really hurts — and he can’t sleep. It’s so frustrating.

She asks him if he can sit up, if he can walk. He tells her he can — he’s not an invalid. She tells him they are going to walk to the bathroom.

Jaime is hovering nearby when they exit the bedroom. She hands a whoozy Grey over to Jaime because Jaime is taller and stronger. She runs ahead into the bathroom and turns the tap on, dipping her fingers under the water to test the temperature. She plugs the tub when it’s hot, as Jaime gingerly helps Grey sit down over the closed toilet seat. She tells Jaime that they are going to take off Grey’s clothes and put him in the tub. That will hopefully relieve the RLS enough for him to fall asleep for a bit.

Jaime is unfazed. He pulls off Grey’s shirt wordlessly and stoops over to grab at the waistband of his sweats.

“Sometimes, I think we’re too close,” Grey mumbles, grabbing onto Jaime’s back to balance, grimacing in pain as his pants go down.

“Step out of your undies already, dude,” Jaime says. “I have a Skype date with Brienne in ten minutes that I do not want to be late for. Oh, dude — I forgot to tell you. I was talking to Drogo earlier today, and I was telling him about your drug problem and — guess what! — he already kinda knew about it. Well, not the extent of it, I guess. But I was like, what the hell, D? Thanks for saying something. He says you are an extremely high-functioning addict. And I was like, word. But long story short, he says hello. He also wishes you luck with the detoxing. He says he believes in you. He says he’s gonna drive down here tomorrow morning to babysit your sorry ass while I’m at school and work ‘cause he has nothing going on because of the holiday. He also told me to maybe make you a weed tea and maybe try to get you to sleep that way, but I was like, dude, Drogo, I have blasted him with diazepam —”

“Jaime,” Missandei says. “Shut up.”

She aimlessly plays with his wet hand, all wrinkled and stranded on the edge of the tub. She’s picking up and dropping his individual fingers as she sits on the floor next to the tub, facing him, her back uncomfortably anchored against the toilet bowl. She asks him if the hot water is helping with
The muscle aches. He says that it is. He tells her that he should spend the entire detox in the tub. She says that’s an idea — but she’d be worried that he’ll accidentally drown because he’s doped up on Valium, when no one is there to watch him.

She asks him if he’s quitting for her. He lightly shrugs. He tells her that he kind of is, but it’s probably just about time, too. He tells her he just wants her to be happy — and he knows that this aspect of him really upsets her.

She tells him that he deserves happiness, too. She tells him that he should want happiness for himself, too.

“Yes. Sure,” he says softly, sinking down further, sloshing the water against the sides of the tub.

The thing was — it was impossible for Melaku to kick the habit. He was young and she was younger — but she remembers how their grandparents and older brothers tried everything — from tying him to the bed in, calling it tough love, to crying and pleading with him. He’d be okay for a while — one time for three months — but he invariably fell off the wagon and started using again. Her grandpa used to say that that boy was born with gold in his eyes. Melaku was charismatic, artistic, handsome, and fun-loving. He wasn’t studious. He didn’t have the tolerance for hard, long, sustained work. He was a schemer. He was always looking to get rich quick.

She checks her phone. There are three missed calls from Neal, and it’s very late. She has to go home and sleep because she has to work in the morning.

She bends over him, encasing his entire sleeping head in her arm, getting her elbow wet. She squeezes his head against her chest, presses her lips hard against his damp cheekbone, holding it there for long seconds. He only wakes up a little bit, only groaning softly. She quietly tells him that he will be okay.

In the living room, she interrupts Jaime’s Skype session with Brienne to tell him that Grey is actually sleeping in the tub — and he should check in on the guy every now and then to be sure that he’s still breathing. Jaime salutes her and says, “Got it, boss.” Missandei bends over and waves to Brienne, making promises to call and catch up soon. Before she leaves, she tells Jaime she will come by after work tomorrow. She asks him for occasional text updates.

Over the course of the night, he woke up in small pockets of time. He woke up a little bit when Missandei left. He woke up a little bit to help Jaime pull his body out of the tub. He woke up in feverish pain every now and then, each time opening his eyes to see that the room was still dark.

When he wakes up for real, with a gasp — because his muscles are in pure agony — he feels tears springing to his eyes. He immediately starts trembling from the pain. His eyes are blurry, but he can tell it’s daytime. He feels hands on his back, pushing him up into sitting position. He feels a lukewarm cup pressed into his shaky hand.

He blinks. The water drops from his eyes.
“Hey,” Grey says, lightly coughing due to his parched throat.

“Hey, man. Bieber wasn’t kidding. You really look like shit.” Drogo smiles, sitting on the bed. He unfolds Grey’s free hand and drops diazepam into it, which Grey immediately throws back and swallows, washing it down with warm water.
He insists on going with Drogo to the drug store. He thinks that the trip will serve as a distraction from how fucking shitty he feels. Plus, Tyrion said that the sooner he can start exercising and being active again, the faster he will be back to normal.

Back at home, he takes off his shirt and pants — he’s pretty used to his friends seeing him in various stages of undress; they’ve showered together and have changed in front of each other for years — and he has Drogo wrap the heat packs to his limbs and lower back as tightly as Drogo feels comfortable with. The bandage gets stretched and pulled against his bare skin, as Drogo tells him grisly stories about programs he’s watched about people whose limbs die because tourniquets are tied too tightly, cutting off life-giving blood. Drogo says the directions say not to put the heat packs directly on skin because they can burn. Grey tells Drogo he really doesn’t give a fuck. He would gladly deal with a piercing pain, if only to get some reprieve from the mind-numbing constant ache.

Grey looks like lumpy mummy, wrapped in white-people flesh-toned bandages, after all is said and done. He and Drogo chill on the couch and watch Netflix for a few hours — Drogo forces him to eat bananas for the potassium — and he asks Drogo to occasionally sock him hard in the arm or the back. Like, it hurts — but it’s also nice.

He has Drogo microwave the heat packs again and strap them back onto his body, after they become lukewarm.

He's loopy and delirious, drunk off numbing pain and sleep deprivation. They’re watching some reality series about cake decorating. He alternates between being intensively pissed off at how hysterical white people get about cake and fondant — and just wanting to cry because he fucking wants a hit of morphine so fucking badly that he just wants to fucking die.

He has to run to the bathroom to puke up a bunch of bananas into the toilet. He physically expends tears as he continues dry-heaving into the bowl, Drogo holding him up by grasping his upper arms from behind.

“Tell me about your father,” Grey says after he's done, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, dripping sweat, propping himself up with a hand to the toilet bowl. He reaches over and flushes the toilet.

“He was an alcoholic who beat the shit out of my mom in front my sisters whenever he bothered to show up,” Drogo says. “What else do you want to know?”

“What made him leave for good?”

“I stabbed him with a kitchen knife. And I told him I’d kill him if he ever came back.”
She anticipates that she’ll be at his place for rest of the night, so she forces herself to stop off at home to change out of her work clothes, into some comfortable casual wear. She has no idea what he’s been able to eat, but she packs the chicken soup that she had bought for him on her lunch break anyway.

She meets Jaime in front of the building — she’s been texting Jaime all day, making concrete plans pivoting around Grey for the rest of the week. She’s been juggling that activity in between her actual job and planning Jhiqui’s bachelorette party and wedding shower.

Jaime swipes his key card to open the front door of the building, the one that leads into the lobby. He mentions to her that he’s tired as hell, between watching after Grey, staying up late to talk to Brienne on Skype, his job at the nonprofit, and his law classes — he’s barely been sleeping. He tells her he’s excited for the moment when life gets easy.

The sight that she and Jaime are treated to when he unlocks the door to the apartment and opens it is one of Drogo slamming a smooth wooden stick into Grey’s hand, making him cry out sharply in pain, dropping his own stick before sinking to his knees. Grey crouches over on the floor, holding his hand, groaning as he rocks back and forth. He’s mostly undressed — he’s wrapped up in bandages in a really bizarre fashion.

She puts the container of soup on the ground at the entrance before she rushes over to him, dropping to her knees, pressing her hand to his hot, sweaty cheek. “What the fuck, Drogo!” she shouts.

“Don’t be mad at him,” Grey says, panting, clutching his hand. “We were just messing around. We were sword fighting. It was my idea.”

Jaime stoops down and picks up Grey’s discarded stick, weighing it in his hand. “Nice. The broom handle.”

After Drogo and Jaime leave for dinner, she gives Grey his next dose of diazepam that Drogo had left for her. And then she leads him into his bedroom, dragging her shoulder bag along, swaying it near the ground. In his room, as she unwinds the bandages from his body, he tells her that he didn’t want to sit in the bath all day so he came up with the idea of strapping heat packs to his body. She mutters that he’s really creative, pressing her fingers into his flesh in the places where he is lightly burned from the heat packs. His skin is dual-colored from the bindings. He tells her that the aching is relentless. He tells her he can barely get away from it. He can’t sleep because his body hurts too much. He can’t distract himself with anything because all he thinks about is how much he hates his body. He tells her that he convinced Drogo to hit him because the sharp bursts of pain give his mind something else to hold onto. He tells her that he’s sorry that they fought, that he said cruel things to her.

She straddles him, sitting on his butt, her knees resting against the sides of his ribcage. She uncaps the jar of tiger balm and dips her fingers in, stretching her face as the menthol scent hits her eyes and
her nose. She scoops out a big gooey lump of the stuff and she slaps it on his back, between his shoulder blades. Her palms smooth up and down the full length of his bare back, pulling and smearing the oily balm over his skin. And maybe it’s the strong smell or the way it burns her eyes and nasal passages on each inhale — but she finds herself getting emotional as she digs her fingers into his muscles, pressing hard so that it has to hurt.

Being the baby of her family, she had been stupidly naive when it came to her brother. It’s something silly and minor — it would make more sense had it been something epic and sweeping and horrible — but she was 12 years old, and she idolized him. He promised to take her to get her ears pierced after their grandparents refused to. Melaku’s proposed defiance was something thrilling, a secret they were going to share, at least for a little while. She waited for him for hours. And then fell asleep crying. And every one of his subsequent failures — when he borrowed money from her and then didn’t pay her back, when he outright stole money from her patent leather pink wallet, when he fed them all these bizarre, fantastical lies — everything that followed mirrored that very first disappointment.

At some point in her adolescence, when a lot of her peers were experimenting — she had promised herself that she would never touch that crap. And she would never put up with it from anyone. She would never put up with a liar. She would never put up with a user. She would never let herself love someone so self-destructive. That is a pain she already knows.

She gets to her knees, her hands sticky. She hovers over him, and she tells him to flip over.

He tells her that he can actually do his own front. It’s well within reach.

She tells him that it’s fine. She tells him to relax. She sits on his stomach and she puts her hands on his shoulders. There’s a crease in between his eyes, as he slightly frowns up at her, schooling his features into indifference as she drags her hands down his body, over smooth ridges and bumps. At this point, she knows him well enough. She can see the minuscule flickers of emotion that seep out of his eyes.

Tyrion was right. Grey wakes up on day six feeling better than he has in a while. He wakes up early enough to go on a quick run with Drogo before Drogo has to head out. They run around a man-made lake near the apartment complex — about three miles in circumference. They go at a slow enough pace to carry on a conversation. He tells Drogo that he’s light-headed and still pretty nauseous, but the running and the fresh air against his face and the impact of his feet hitting the ground feels so fucking good.

Later, next to Drogo’s dusty car, Drogo grabs the back of Grey’s head and touches their foreheads together. Drogo tells him to call every once in awhile, fucking Jesus. Drogo tells him that if it weren’t for Jaime, Drogo would never know what’s going in his life.

Grey raises his closed fist to his mouth, pushing back a wave of nausea, nodding as his eyes water. And then he grins, drops his hand, bends his knees, and leans forward to slap the front of Drogo’s pants.

“Fucking ow!” Drogo growls, body slamming his car sideways. “You hit me in the fucking balls! What the fuck, man!” Drogo lunges at him, right hand aimed at Grey’s dick.
Grey hops away, laughing, twisting his body so Drogo’s fingers only scrape his butt.

“You fucker!” Drogo says, laughing back, ducking to push his shoulder into Grey’s solar plexus, hands on the back of his legs, lifting him a few inches off the ground before he loses his footing and they stumble around on the sidewalk, noisily bumping into the glass window of a coffee shop, scaring a guy on his laptop.

Neal asks her if she wants to take a walk after dinner. He puts his jacket over her shoulders before they even leave the restaurant. He guides her through the door with his hand on her hip.

They reminisce about old times — about that time his parents caught them with wine coolers in the basement, the camping trip when she stepped on a wasp and her foot blew up, the one time she confused the gas for the brake. She laughs and says that her grandpa was so pissed when she explained to him why he had to replace the neighbor’s mailbox. Fun times

Neal puts his hand on her arm, halting her. She looks at him.

“We’ve had a lot of good times together,” he says.

She nods, digging her hands into the pockets of his jacket, feeling the receipts and scratch paper that he left. “Yeah,” she says. “Lots of memories.”

“I think my biggest regret is letting you go,” he says. “I should have kept you. But I was dumb and young and I just thought — I just —”

“Wanted to try new experiences,” she finishes.

“Yeah.”

They start walking again, her heels clicking on the ground. He talks about them — about what makes them so good together. She thinks about how sad and kind of devastated she was — the first time he broke up with her — and then again, the second time, when he left her. She thinks about how she used to fantasize about this moment — a moment in some ambiguous future where they’ve worked out all of their doubts and their baggage and they come back together — and it’ll stick. It’ll work out.

He leads them to a massive abstract statue in between a row of looming trees, bathed in yellow streetlights. He asks, “Do you still ever think about us? You and me together again?”

“Yeah, of course,” she says honestly. “I think it’s natural to wonder.”

“I love you, Missy.”

She’s trying to explain to Jhiqui’s wonderbread coworker what a donkey punch is — with the aid of hand gestures — but the words coming out of her mouth keep mashing into one another in a jumbled
Missy runs her neon green thumbnail over the wad of ones in her hand, smelling it — smelling the germs — before she lightly hits it across the face of Wonderbread. Or Camille.

“What the!"

Missy presses her fingers over Camille’s mouth. “Shh, honey. It’s better when you don’t talk.”

Across the . . . pit . . . Jhiqui’s tiara is winking underneath the pulsating lights. Jhiqui’s laughing uncontrollably as she gets a lap dance from a perky blond. Missandei is not ‘bout that noise. She kind of got a free lap dance an hour ago — and all she could do with herself was sit drunkenly and uncomfortably, rudely screaming, “Where are your parents!” at the stripper. And then she got a face-full of really nice-smelling, really soft tits and an eye-full of waxed vagina.

The athleticism of these girls is really impressive. They have amazing upper body strength. They can also pick up folded money using kegel muscles alone.

Missandei stands up, messily swaying side to side on her heels, flicking a few bills into the pit, making it rain, whooping loudly over the sex music, idly wondering if most of the girls are happy with their career choice — wondering if any of them are in nursing school.

He pauses the movie and quizzically looks at the time on his phone before he gets up to answer the door.

He almost doesn’t catch her when she spills into the apartment, wearing a skin-tight strapless silver mini-dress. He realizes she is drunk, right away. He can smell it on her. And she’s a mess.

“Ah, good,” she says. “You’re home.”

“How did you get into the building?” he asks, helping her get up to her feet. “Did you drive?”

“Relax. I took a cab. And one of your neighbors let me in.”

“Well, they’re not supposed to do that,” he says.

She kicks off her heels haphazardly before she stumbles into the living room. Grey immediately bends down and picks up her warm shoes, letting them dangle from his fingers as he opens the coat closet door. He sets them down in a corner, lining them up next to his and Jaime’s running shoes. He walks into the kitchen to grab her a bottle of water.

“Well, I don’t think they saw little ol’ me as a threat,” she calls out, walking over to the couch to peer at the TV. The screen is paused on a sweeping mountain scene. “What are you watching? Looks boring.”

He cracks open the bottle and then tries to hand it to her. She bats him away, saying, “No thanks.”

“No, I insist,” he says.

“Remember when you waterboarded me?” she says suddenly. “Good times.”
He blinks, still holding the cold bottle out to her. “Yeah,” he says slowly. “I remember.”

He sees her scanning him — his body — up and down. He looks down at himself — oldass t-shirt and gray sweatpants — before he looks back her. Her face is shiny and her makeup was probably once all precise, but now it is smeared and her bright eyes are peeking out from under thick fake lashes and a bunch of dark eye shadow. She licks her lips. She says, “You look good.”

He lightly scoffs.

“Since I last saw you,” she elaborates. “You have color in your face again. You’re so alert and alive-looking.”

He grins wryly. “Will you just take this!” he says, laughing, pushing the bottle of water into her hand. “I’m still not one-hundred percent. Apparently some of the effects can last for months,” he says. “But yeah, I feel pretty close to normal again.”

She tilts her head back and gulps down a stream of water, her smooth throat bobbing up and down — still watching him. After she finishes drinking, she pulls the mouth of the bottle out from her lips with a pop. “So what’s it like? How does it feel? Being totally drug-free?”

He shrugs. “It’s fine. I feel . . . less cloudy on the whole. I think I’m more irritable sometimes.” He laughs softly. “Probably because I’m not tuning people out as much anymore. I’m actually listening to them. People are annoying.” He watches her as she drifts to the dining room table, setting the bottle of water down, flipping through his and Jaime’s mail.

“Babe, I hate to break it to you,” she says, “but you’ve always been pretty irritable.”

“Missandei,” he says, with this air of patience. “What are you doing here?”

She shrugs, running her hand across the backs of the dining chairs, circling the table. “Jhiqui had her bachelorette party tonight. She’s passed out right now. I didn’t feel like going home. I wanted to see you.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “You always seek me out when you’re drunk.”

“Not always,” she drawls, still circling the dining table. “I’m drunk a lot. I don’t see you a lot. At least, not anymore.” She gives him a meaningful look, her eyes shining in a smile. “Where’s Jaime?”

“At the library? I dunno.”

She catches him off guard. One moment, they’re talking about strippers and then, before he knows it, her arms are around his neck and the front of her body is glued to his, and he gets hit in the face with a haze of alcohol before she presses a wet, sloppy kiss onto his unsuspecting mouth.

His hands come up to reach her wrists behind his neck. He pulls his head back, twisting his face to the side. Her mouth lands on his cheek. He gently extricates himself from her limbs.

She laughs maniacally, uncomfortably. “Of course,” she says. “God. So I guess the drug-free version of you doesn’t want me.”
He sighs. “That’s not a very nice thing to say.”

She snorts, rolling her eyes at the same time. “Well, sorry. But I don’t deal very well with rejection. Because I’m not used to receiving it. On account of being universally loved and adored,” she says bitterly.

He walks over to the table and picks up her bottle of water. He hands it back to her, waiting expectantly until she relents and takes it. She sighs before she drinks from it.

He waits for her to finish the rest of the bottle, before he says, “I don’t want you to want me just because you’re drunk or lonely.”

She crunches the empty plastic bottle in her fist. “I always — always — want you,” she says. “I’m just stupidly brave when I’m plastered.”

She’s still very drunk as his hands smooth themselves over her overly sensitive skin, over her shoulders as he turns her to find the zipper on her dress. She tells him that she feels like a sausage in this dress. It’s a dress she bought years ago, and her body’s not exactly the same anymore. She had to use the jaws of life and a lot of spanx to get herself into the dress. She asks him if he knows what spanx is — because he’s about to find out. She hears him laughing softly behind her. He tells her that he knows what spanx is. The zipper goes down and the dress puddles to the ground. She steps out of it.

And then she’s cracking up, and her face is getting hot and sweaty as they both wrestle the spanx off of her body, as she holds onto his shoulders for balance.

He unsnaps her bra with this practiced familiarity, pulling it off of her arms. He’s already told her that they will not be having sex tonight — he’s already taken it off the table. He said really stupid stuff about it — about how he’s been thinking a lot and about how he wants to do things differently. She’s already rubbed her body against his stationary one, to make a case for the sex. She already told him that she hasn’t gotten laid since the last time he . . . laid her. He had held back a smile. He had responded by telling her that he believes that the last time . . . she had actually laid him.

She raises her arms and lets him put a t-shirt that smells like him over her head. He asks her if she wants to go pantless. She tells him she’s a lady, so she will take the pants. He pulls on a pair of his boxers over her legs. She finds this whole dressing her thing because she’s such a drunk mess to be so freaking endearing.

She tells him not to be stingy — as she sits on the kitchen counter and watches him, lightly swinging her bare legs — she tells him she wants way more chocolate chips in her pancakes. He shoots her an unimpressed look before he reaches into the bag, grabs a handful, and then drops a lump of it in the middle of the cooking batter.

“No, babe. You’re doing it all wrong. You have to sprinkle it on evenly.”
They’re chilling in his room, on his bed — she’s rifling through a small stack of business cards he collected from a networking event, that he had pulled out of one of his suit jacket pockets. She holds up one, shows it to him, and tells him that Albert Dunlap is a really nice dude — she worked with him on a recent e-campaign for his company’s launch of a new service line. She tells Grey Albert speaks High Valyrian. They bonded over that.

She’s yawning. She tells him she should go home soon. He tells her, sure. He tells her he can pack the leftover pancakes for her to take before she leaves. She thinks to herself that she’s so fucking in love with him that it’s crazy. She immediately reminds herself to slow down, to be careful. She reminds herself that his sobriety is something very tender and new.

She wakes up because her bladder is screaming for release. She wakes up bleary and disoriented. She looks over at him — he feels all deliciously warm beside her — and he’s sleeping. She looks at him in amazement.

She holds onto her stomach as she makes a silent run for the bathroom.

Peeing like — feels so good.

Jaime is awake and in the kitchen. She smells coffee — life-giving coffee.

“Good morning, beautiful,” Jaime says with his back to her. “Do you want a mayonnaise sandwich? Because that’s what I’m making.”

Her hungover stomach rolls at the thought.

“Oh shit!” Jaime jerks in surprise when he turns around and sees her. “Hey.” She can see his mind working — see the commentary running in his head. “Hey,” he repeats, grinning slyly.

“Got coffee?”
Jaime snaps the lid to the coffee machine shut. He tells her that the coffee is on its way. She gingerly climbs on one of the stools that flank the kitchen pass-through, pulling Grey’s t-shirt over her thighs, even though Jaime can’t see her legs from his vantage point.

“You really don’t want a mayo sandwich?” Jaime says. “Like, for real?” His face splits into a bright grin. “We’re so out of lunch meat,” he explains.

“That sounds really disgusting, Jaime,” she says delicately.

She looks like a goddamn freak show. She saw her mascara streaked face and her lopsided hair when she was washing her hands in the bathroom. She caught a whiff of her armpits — the strip club was hot, and she was sweating up a storm in there because her moves are so fresh. And Jaime is currently mocking her by being beautiful and freshly showered, his skin tinted a little bit pink from . . . being clean or whatever. She pushes her hair off her face and tries to focus on what he’s saying as they make small talk about work.

“He’s still sleeping,” she blurts.

“Aw snap,” Jaime say, leering. “Well then. Good job?”

He’s just too much. She shakes her head. “Oh, no. It’s not like that. Not exactly, anyway.” Her hands reach out and cradle the really hot coffee cup he puts in front of her. He asks her if she wants milk or sugar. She doesn’t want to make him retrieve the stuff, so she tells him she’s fine with just black coffee. She inhales the aroma — and she feels marginally less embarrassed. She supposes that for all of her sexual forwardness — she’s actually never been with someone in her adult life in a way that was transparent and open. She’s only had these hidden relationships — including the one with Grey.

The bright light of domesticity, sitting around drinking coffee with his roommate, is actually really weird.

“What if he’s never going to be okay?” she asks Jaime quietly.

“He’s going to be okay,” Jaime whispers back.

“How can you be sure?”

He shrugs. “He’s so resilient. He’s a survivor. He’s the strongest person I know. He’s not going to be broken by this one little thing.”

She presses her words into the counter. She tells Jaime that she understands what he’s saying, but to her, this thing — the drug use — it isn’t so little. It’s something that scares the shit out of her. She tells him she keeps picturing these scenarios in which he relapses and she doesn’t know about it until it’s way too late and she’s in too deep and attached to him. Jaime gently tells her that she’s already in deep — she’s already attached. Jaime tells her that his therapist says that anxiety — worries about
future unknowns — is a thief that robs them of the present. She confesses to him that she feels a little embarrassed that he caught her coming out of Grey’s room. She didn’t mean to sleep over. She and Grey were just talking, and they must’ve nodded off or something. Jaime raises up his hand, and he tells her that she really doesn’t have to explain.

They’re still in the middle of their conversation when Jaime suddenly straightens, looking behind her. He pours a third cup of coffee and holds it out. She feels Grey’s hand on her back as he leans forward to take the cup from Jaime.

“You hungry, boo?”

“No,” Grey says, his tone clipped as he carefully sips the hot coffee, standing beside her.

Jaime looks at her and shakes his head. “God, such a morning person.”

“How are you feeling?” Grey says to her, looking ahead at Jaime’s turned back, voice deep and rough still from sleep.

She squeezes her bare thighs together as she lightly swings her body to face him a little bit. She feels kind of shy, because she remembers a lot of things about last night — mostly how she threw herself at him and then tried to kiss him and then offered him sex — multiple times — and then passed out on his bed. She says, “I feel just about as good as I look right now — which is great. I feel great.” She grins at him.

He smiles back at her as he ducks his head down, looking at the floor, or her knees.

They hear the sound of a shutter clicking.

“Do not post that!” Grey immediately shouts at Jaime. “Don’t you dare post that!”

“You’re not the boss of me,” Jaime mumbles, rapidly swiping over his phone screen with his thumb. “I do what I want.”

He offers to let her shower at his and Jaime’s place — which she supposes is really magnanimous of him. But she tells him that all of her hair stuff is at her place. She has a lot of hair stuff. And it’s also a whole process. She doesn’t just wake up and look the way she does. She tells him that beauty takes time and effort and commitment. At that, he hands her her eyelashes. She crumples them in her hand and tells him they are disposable.

Jaime is being a douche and is watching them from the living room when she goes to leave. Grey had put her dress, her shoes, and some pancakes, wrapped in foil, in a plastic bag. He lightly ties it off and hands it to her when she tells him that her Uber is downstairs. She thanks him for putting up with her drunk ass — again.

She grabs onto his arms with her hands as they encircle her head. She presses her face into him. She feels him — rather than hears him — laugh. His voice in his lungs vibrate against her chest, when he says, “Anytime.” It makes her heart throb insistently in her throat.
“That was a sexy hug, dude. Lotta pelvis,” Jaime says, when Grey walks past him to go into the kitchen, after changing into shorts and a cutoff shirt. “How come you never hug me like that?”

Grey ignores him, snapping the lid of a water bottle shut. Grey sets the bottle down on the ground as he opens the closet to pull out his running shoes.

He finds that being completely off drugs makes the world seem more intense and immediate — as he simultaneously feels less paranoid and more peaceful. He goes through his days relieved that there’s nothing in his life that he has to constantly hide and be hyper vigilant about. He still wakes up in a panic sometimes. He still sometimes wakes up feeling awful about what he has done — sometimes about who he is. These are aspects of himself that he’s figuring out how to deal with — because there’s nothing there to take the edge off. Sometimes, he feels like he’s in the process of mourning a loss.

He hasn’t run with intent or purpose in years. He had pulled out his old watch from a tin — it’s pretty out-dated and he should spring for a new one. After a quick warm-up, he sets his watch and runs easy for two miles. He’s been lax over the years and let bad habits settle in. He tends to run into the ground rather than on top of it. At two miles, he kicks off and speeds his pace up to 90 seconds per 400 meters.

The workshop with the project manager, solution architects, software developers, test managers, and service managers goes nearly half an hour over because the client is in a bit of a mood. He’s heading back to his desk to drop off documentation when Barristan intercepts him.

“You taking lunch?” Barristan asks.

“No, sir,” Grey says.

Barristan gestures to him, jerking his head to an exit. “Come on. Let’s grab a bite, shall we?”

He never eats with the boss, so he is dumbfounded when Barristan asks him what he feels like noshing on. His paralysis results in them being seated in front of a teppanyaki grill, in a kitschy red room that smells like stale grease and meat. The place is nearly dead. Maybe it’s late and they’ve missed the lunch rush.

“Do you like shrimp?” Barristan says, hands folded in front of him on the table, leaning forward to watch the chef lightly scrape a spatula against the clean grill.

“Um, shrimp is fine.” Grey touches a bit of condensation on his water glass, straightening in his seat, adjusting his tie. He remembers that the last time he was blindsided by his boss, his boss ended up telling him that they certainly pay him enough not to look like a child wearing his older brother’s hand-me-downs.
“What about octopus, squid, and other tentacled things? Do you eat those?”

“Yes, sir. I do.”

Barristan laugh is a loud burst of energy and sound, startling Grey. “You’re going to talk my ear off, if I’m not careful. I can tell.”

Grey lightly laughs, too. “Sorry,” he says. “I’m just . . . a bit bewildered. Um, why are we having lunch together?”

Barristan laughs again, throwing his head back. “That’s why I like you. You’re very direct.”

At the urging of his boss, Grey uncomfortably opens his mouth so that the chef can swat a piece of shrimp into his throat. Barristan asks him if he’s having fun, as Barristan leisurely tips back a very light lager in a small beer glass. Grey tells Barristan that he’s having so much fun, which makes his boss laugh and tell him to at least try and relax.

Barristan tells him that a position has opened up internally in biz dev that he would like Grey to apply for. More responsibilities, more experiences, more pressure, more stress, more money, more glory. He says that Grey is excellent at crunching through spreadsheets of data and traceability matrices — but his interpersonal, soft skills are not as good. They’re not bad by any means — most people find him fairly pleasant to work with — but fairly pleasant isn’t what makes a leader or a visionary.

Grey cinches up his shoulders in a self-deprecating laugh. He says he’s a data cruncher.

“Look,” Barristan says. “I’m not here to stroke your ego and fluff you up and tell you that I believe in you. If you think it’s not a good fit, then maybe it’s not a good fit. But if you are interested, then we can keep having this conversation.”

“I’m interested.”

Missandei tells Doreah and Clea that she no longer has a plus one to Jhiqui’s wedding while they are getting their nails done. Doreah blows a raspberry and says good riddance. Neal is dull, and he also sucks. She didn’t want to hang around him all night anyway. Clea, who has never met Neal, asks Doreah if he’s really as bad Jhiqui says. Missandei rolls her eyes and says that Jhiqui is kind of a bitch sometimes.

“What happened?” Doreah asks. “He sick or something?”

“Oh, no,” Missandei says, “We kind of had a falling out recently.”

“Oh yeah? Did you wake up and finally realize that he’s dull?”

“So, are you going stag?” Clea asks.
“Yeah, I think so,” Missy says.

“We’re going to have a hole at our table,” Doreah murmurs. “We can all share the entree! We should get the vegetarian option to try it!”

Tanja, from marketing, pushes her glossy black hair behind her shoulder and leans in, so she can hear him better. He rolls the stem of his wine glass in between his fingers, and over the lounge music, he tells her that he’s never been skiing or snowboarding. She smiles, flashing him a row of white teeth, and says he looks like he’s an athlete — she imagines that he could pick up either fairly quickly. He lightly shrugs, sipping from his glass. He asks her if snowboarding is at all like skateboarding or surfing, because he has experience with those things. She purses her lips together and looks at him, amused, and she says that she doesn’t know. She doesn’t skateboard or surf.

A waiter passes by and tells them that it’s last call for happy hour — it ends at six. Grey waves and says he’s okay. He looks at Tanja. “Are you good?”

“Yeah,” she says, raising her cocktail to the waiter. “I’m fine.” After the waiter leaves, over the music, Tanja pitches her voice forward. She says, “I’m surprised to see you here. You don’t normally come out to happy hour with us.”

“Well, just thought I’d finally check it out. See what I was missing.”

She nods, bobbing her head up and down. After a short pause, she leans in again. “I hear you have a really pretty girlfriend.” Upon his look of surprise, she says, “Brian told us.” And then she grins, showing her dimples. “You’re so mysterious! So we gossip about you a lot! Is that creepy?”

He shakes his head no, giving her a small smile.

“Do you have a picture?”

“Huh?”

“Of your girlfriend.”

He lamely pulls his phone out of his jacket pocket and turns it on, flicking to his gallery. He scrolls really fast and stops on a random picture of Missandei — and it’s the naked one, shit, not that one — he scrolls back up and finds a picture of her and Jaime talking outside of a bar, leaning against a brick wall. He hands his phone to Tanja.

“Oh, she’s so pretty! Aw!” she says. “And whoa, hello. Is your friend single?”

She sits on the arm of her couch, picking at the neck of her cotton top as it droops down over her shoulder. Then she rips open the envelope and pulls out the letter. Every inch of space on the single sheet, front and back, is covered in words — covered in Low Valyrian. She sits there and devours every bit of it — not even capable of savoring the gravity of the moment. She just feels hungry for
He calls her when he’s on the late night bus, standing and leaning against a pole even though the bus is nearly empty. He doesn’t want to sit down in the wrong seat and get the aroma of a raving homeless man on his suit. Not for the first time, he thinks to himself that he should probably get a car at some point.

She picks up on the fifth ring, sounding breathless. It makes him ask her if he caught her at a good time, if she’s busy. She tells him that she was just getting ready for bed and didn’t hear the phone ring at first. She asks him what’s up — she tells him that she hasn’t heard from him in a while, though her voice is devoid of condemnation.

He apologizes for dropping off. He asks her if it’s actually okay if he stops by for a little bit.

There’s a pause on her end. He can hear a soft hum. And then she tells him to text her when he gets to her place. She’ll buzz him in.

Grey has actually spent very little time in her King’s Landing apartment. So the sight of him in it is a little disorienting. The sight of him in his suit when it’s dark out is also something she’s not used to. She asks him why he’s still dressed up. He tells her that he came from happy hour with his coworkers. And her mind automatically jumps to this paranoid train of thought — after all, he used to party the hardest when he was tripping. And then her mind jumps to the complete opposite end of the spectrum. She thinks that now that he’s clean, he has capably jumpstarted his life and is adding all sorts of new people into it so that they will eventually displace her.

“Wow,” she says lightly, walking to her couch and sitting down on it, pulling her knees up to her chest. “Brand new you.”

He elegantly unbuttons his suit jacket and tugs up his pants a little bit before he sits down next to her. It makes her wonder who taught him such things. This is the same guy that used to procure his shirts from the garbage.

“So.” She nervously picks at her big toe. “What did you want to talk to me about? What couldn’t wait?”

He looks nervous, too. He’s running his hands up and down his thighs, as he stares ahead, through the dark windows. He expels a breath. It freaks her out. Because his behavior is so out of character. She starts wondering if he’s okay. Maybe he really did relapse, and he’s gearing himself up to confess to her. Maybe he’s dying. Maybe he’s leaving the country forever. Maybe he met someone new.

“Oh my God, just spit it out,” she says.

“This is so dumb,” he mutters, tilting his face up to the ceiling. “I’m making this into a bigger deal than it is.”
“Grey?”

He laughs nervously. “So I was wondering if you — do you have plans for Saturday night? Because if you don’t, I would like to take you to dinner.” He throws her a quick glance.

“Like, a date?” she asks hopefully.

He winces, just a little bit, at the word. And then he says, “Yeah. Like that.”

Her heart is cutting off her air supply because it’s throbbing in her throat. God, he’s so fucking adorable. Her fingers are tingly. And she stutters, starting and stopping sentences before she finally chokes out, “I’m busy this Saturday.”

His shoulders sag slightly. “Oh.”

“With Jhiqui’s wedding!” she adds quickly.

“Oh.”

“Do you want to come to that? With me?”

He turns and faces her. “Jhiqui kind of hates me.”

She struggles through a laugh. “Which is why you should totally come. It’ll be a blast.”

He gives her a small smile. “Okay,” he says.

“Okay,” she repeats. She swallows.

She feels like an idiot, over how jittery and jumpy she is around him. She keeps furtively watching him as they ride down the elevator. She insists on driving him home. He only lives ten minutes away. She keeps sneaking glances at him and then doing a full body flush whenever he catches her staring. She’s acting as if this guy has never stuck his dick inside of her.

She’s trying to keep her breathing even as she leads him to her car in the underground garage.

On the way to his place, she wants to ask him about sex rules, but she refrains. She wants to know if he’s going to put out on the first date — if so, she would like to be prepared for it. If not, she wants to know if they can still do some below the waist stuff. This is new territory for them — she invited Neal to the wedding as friends in the first place because she anticipated that Grey would flat-out tell her no if she had asked him back when she got the RSVP — so she wants to know how she’s supposed to introduce him and if casual touching in public is still off limits. She also wants to know what color and pattern tie he’s planning to wear because she doesn’t want to be matchy-matchy with him. Matchy-matchy is disgusting and vomitous and not cute.

She sets her car in park and leaves it running when they arrive at his apartment complex. She faces him. “What inspired you to ask me out?” she says.

“Honestly? When you showed up drunk at my place and asked me if I remember waterboarding you.” He chuckles to himself. “I do remember that. I remember the look on your face after you asked me why I hadn’t asked you out, when I told you that I just wanted to be friends.” He inhales. “I was
lying.”

She stares at him. Her jaw feels like it has unhinged itself, and she is *aching*. She squeezes her legs together tightly. Her hand slowly reaches out to touch him, to fist into the front of his nicely pressed shirt, to yank his face to hers so she can cram her tongue down his throat and maybe get fucked by him in her car again.

“Okay, bye,” he says, abruptly opening the passenger door and getting out. “Thanks for the ride, Missandei.” He pokes his head back in to grin knowingly at her. “I’ll see you Saturday.”

“Ugh! I hate you!” she shouts after him, as he laughs at her and shuts the door.
It’s six in the morning. He’s suited up and is dumping a couple handfuls of raw steel cut oats into the blender on top of strawberries, a chopped up banana, spinach, unsweetened yogurt, and unsweetened soymilk. He caps the blender and flips the switch, letting it whir by itself on the counter as he opens the fridge door and pulls out a hefty plastic container of skinless salmon, veggies sauteed in coconut oil, wilted kale, cooked lentils, beans, and quinoa — sprinkled with flax seeds. There are ten identical containers stacked in the fridge that he prepares for himself and Jaime on Sunday nights.

Jaime’s lunches have yellow lids. That’s because Jaime’s food has a fistful of butter and nice extra dose of salt added. Jaime refuses to eat what he calls Grey’s girl-with-low-self-esteem food as-is. Sometimes Jaime goes out to lunch anyway and ends up bringing the food home — which kind of drives Grey a little nuts — only because if Jaime doesn’t eat the stuff, then it either goes to waste or Grey has to bring himself to eat Jaime’s version, which fucks with his diet, which affects his training.

Grey shoves his food container, two apples, a banana, four hard-boiled eggs, and a substantial bag of mixed nuts and dried fruit into his lunch bag, this large black neoprene thing. He grabs his mason jar smoothie and caps it, setting it on the counter. He leaves it out because he makes himself drink most of it on the bus ride into work. He’s really sick and tired of constantly shoving food into his mouth — eating has become a joyless chore — but he’s been burning a shit ton of calories. He’s already pretty lean. He doesn’t want to lose anymore weight. He’s already lost some when he was detoxing and couldn’t keep much down.

It’s all a bizarre first world, white people problem that he never thought he’d have.

When he gets home, Jaime has all of his books and two computers — his laptop and a Chromebook — scattered all over the dinner table. Jaime is hunched over the table, face down, reading a thick text using the bill of his hat to hold up his head. Grey sets his leather shoulder bag down on a dining chair and he tells Jaime that sitting that way is really bad for his back and nervous system. He asks Jaime how long he’s been chained to the table. Jaime sullenly says he’s in hour six of hell.

Grey has his easy run today. Six miles, about eight and a half minutes per. He tells Jaime to go get changed and to put on shoes. They’re going to hit the pavement for a bit.
The first three miles are quiet and serene. Jaime settles in next to him quickly and plugs in earbuds. They run Grey’s pre-mapped route, to an adjacent neighborhood. It takes them away from the busy hustle and bustle near the city center and pulls them up a big hill where a bunch of expensive houses sit on a crest.

At around the mile-three point, he gestures for Jaime to take out his earbuds. Jaime winds them around his neck, wearing them like a scarf. Jaime smiles at him tiredly, breathing a little heavy due to the hill, and he says, “You’re a machine, dude.”

Naturally occurring endorphins in the brain are groups of opiate proteins, designed to kick in with their pain-relieving and mood-lifting properties when the body is under physical stress. Endorphins are chemically similar to morphine. When he does hit that feeling of lift and peace and euphoria — of his mind splitting apart from his body — it’s always on long runs of two hours or more.

Grey began running with purpose again with mixed feelings. He has told Jaime he wonders if he’s just forever going to be some junkie chasing a hit. Jaime had laughed and sardonically told him that there’s a huge fucking difference between long-distance running and fucking shoving morphine up his ass.

Jaime asks Grey what distance his long run is on Sunday. Grey tells him it’s 13 miles. After a comfortable bit of silence, Grey says, “It’s gonna be a rough one, I think.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh yeah, for real?” Jaime says. “That’s great, man. And Missy’s a really understanding person — I think she’d be cool with you not getting plastered and partying ‘til three a.m. Did you tell her you’re training?”

“No yet.”

“Ah,” Jaime says. “Is Jhiqui’s wedding gonna be a Dothraki wedding or a white people wedding?”

“I don’t know.”

“I bet it’s gonna be a Dothraki wedding, man. Women are in charge of the wedding stuff. And Jhiqui is all blah blah Dothraki pride blah blah female sisterhood blah,” Jaime says, huffing out a quick laugh. “Fuck, I’m jealous you get to go. It’s gonna get turnt. You know how Dothrakis roll. All them cousins. All that XO.”

“I’ve never been to a wedding before, white or otherwise. So I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about.”

Jaime smirks. “Man! How fucking crazy is it that I’m Blacker than you are? Me! A little blond boy who grew up on the streets of a gated community that has its own nine hole and arboretum!”

It’s a purposeful, baiting comment. And Grey treats it as such. “You’re an idiot,” he says to Jaime.
She feels awkward and apologetic when she calls him to let him know that the wedding ceremony is at Jhiqui’s parents’ house — three hours away. They live just outside of Bitterbridge in a Little Vaes Dothrak, an enclave where a lot of Dothrakis have settled and put down roots. Jhiqui’s parents live on a farm. There’s a lot of land, so a lot of the wedding guests from out of town are actually camping out in a field on the property. Missandei sheepishly tells him that she has to get there pretty early in the morning to help Jhiqui with dress and makeup and hair — also Missandei’s been designated Jhiqui’s personal bathroom attendant, being the maid of honor and all. Jhiqui needs someone to pull up and hold the skirt of her dress and help Jhiqui pull down her underwear so she can pee without having to strip.

Grey tells her that it sounds like a really important responsibility.

“Do you mind being there super early? I know it’s going to be awkward. Some of the other guys are planning to go out to lunch with Nick and stuff. I’m pretty sure they’d let you tag along.”

He laughs softly. He asks her if he can be honest with her.

It gets her heart going. She scrapes her teeth over her bottom lip and mentally steels herself, in the event that he’s backing out and has decided that she’s way too high maintenance to date. She says, “Of course.”

He tells her that this sort of thing was exactly the sort of the thing that used to send him right to his bag of morphine. He tells her he’s not very good with people. Situations where he has to potentially talk about himself make him very anxious and uncomfortable. He tells her that he’s probably not going to be very good company or very fun to be around.

She realizes that he’s giving her an out — to uninvite him if she wants. She realizes that he’s not trying to ditch her. He’s trying to warn her.

“Bro,” she says. “Real talk. Is sex on the table for Saturday or what?”

He tells her to be serious.

“I am being serious. I want to know which pair of underwear I should wear on Saturday.”

When she pulls up in front of the apartment complex, she immediately gets out of the car. There’s a turquoise scarf tied all around her head, covering her hair, and she’s wearing a plain t-shirt and denim shorts. He tosses his suit, on top of her dress, into the backseat. He walks around the car and watches for traffic, before stepping into the street and getting into the driver’s side of her car. Missandei flounces into the passenger seat, already vibrating and giddy with energy. She lifts a cup of coffee from her console and tells him it’s for him. She also tells him that it’s sort of their first little road trip together, so she has some really cool mixes for them to listen to. She splays out a handful of CDs, like they are playing cards. She tells him to pick his poison.

Her CD names are not at all descriptive. He runs his fingers over the labels. Bombass mix. Bombass

“What’s WPM?” he asks.

She drops her jaw, and with an air of condescension, she says, “White people mix. Duh.”

“What’s the funeral mix? Sad songs?”

She smiles. “No, silly. Though I get why you’d think that. It’s songs that I’d want played at my funeral. They’re not all necessarily sad songs. See, I approach making mixes like I approach life. You can’t just keep it steady. You can’t have a bunch of fist pumpers in a row. You can’t just have a bunch of gentle ballads all in a row, either. You need variation, ups and downs. I want people to listen to my mixes and be like — wow, I didn’t see that coming!”

He plainly tells her that he didn’t expect that she’d want so much Pitbull to be played at her funeral. She tells him it was only two songs, and she also made the mix when she was 18. And the mix was hot and she was a really cool 18-year-old. He asks her what she was like, when she was 18.

She barks out a laugh, raising her bare feet to lay them on the dash. She tells him she was actually really depressed and sad all the time. Because that was the year that her grandpa died suddenly. She had scarcely moved beyond her brother’s death, at that time. Her grandma was devastated and Missandei was all that she had — because her brothers were already out of the house and had their own lives. She tried really hard to be okay for her grandma’s sake. That’s why she tends to force happiness and pretend that everything is okay.

She asks him what he was like, when he was 18.

He tells her that he was kicked out of the fifth foster home he’s been in, though it was something he was prepared for. He had plenty of warning. He started renting a room in some family’s house so that he could finish high school. And then when he graduated, he just got the fuck out of there and started wandering around, sort of in a homeless fashion, for a few fun months before college started.

“Hey, girrrl! I cannot wait to see your new hurrr!” Jhiqui says, hugging Missandei at the front door. She’s wearing a satin robe, with rollers on her head. Jhiqui looks at Grey. “Hello, you!” she shouts, throwing her arms around him.

Grey looks stunned and awkwardly pats Jhiqui on the back. He thanks her for letting him be present on her big day. She jerks her head back comically, with her hands holding onto his forearms as she mock-glares at him skeptically before her face breaks out into a smile. She tells him that she’s glad he’s around so Missandei doesn’t have to dance by herself like a sad little thing. “You do dance, right?” Jhiqui says.

“Um.”
“Well, whatever your hang-up is all about, get over it,” she says, flicking her long nails in front of his face. “It’s my wedding day. I better see dat bootie bounce.” She cocks her hip and looks him up and down. “Have you lost weight?”

“Actually, yeah,” he says, avoiding direct eye contact. “A little bit.”

“Hm, yeah,” Jhiqui says. “I see it in the face.”

“Yeah?” he says. “I’m trying to gain it back.”

“No, don’t do that. You look real good,” Jhiqui says, reaching out to squeeze his bicep, over his t-shirt sleeve. “Like, damn, like real good. I saw how you moved Missy’s bed. I mean like, when she was changing apartments. God, you’re real solid. Your body is like, masculine.” Then she smiles up at him. “Sorry, I cannot stop this mouth from ho’ing today, ’cause I’m getting hitched and I am panicking over the fact that I’m gonna be boning the same guy until I die. It’s like, bah! It this fucking for real?” She laughs a little unevenly. “Nick can’t even change a flat tire! Is he even a real man? I dunno!”

“Um.” Missandei clears her throat. “Is it too early to start makeup?”

“Probably,” Jhiqui says. “But you can rub lotion all over my body.” She grabs Missandei’s hand. “Leggo.” To Grey, she says, “The boys and my dad are out back on the patio! You should go be social and make new friends! Maybe you can teach my husband-to-be how to use a wrench!”

“Okay,” Grey says softly, watching Missandei helplessly get dragged away by the bride. “Awesome.” He sighs and rubs both of his hands over his face.

He pushes the sliding glass door open, and he quietly walks out onto the large concrete patio that overlooks a massive field with large, robust trees and a few freestanding buildings. Behind a fenced swatch of land are horses.

“Eh-oh!” calls out a deep, gruff voice. A heavily tattooed Dothraki guy in a basketball jersey waves at him. “Beer’s over here, man.” Without waiting for a response, the guy flicks open a cooler, digs through the ice, grabs a bottle, and tears off the cap on the plastic table in front of him. The beer is still emitting vapor when he holds it out toward Grey.

There are at least three dozen men sitting around on various patio furniture, lawn chairs, and camping chairs. A fire pit is burning in the middle — even though it’s a warm day. A bunch of people shift seats, opening up a space for him on a bench. Grey spots Nick nearby, who strangely looks relieved to see him. Grey counts seven white people, not including Nick. Grey sits in the vacant spot, next to a grizzly Dothraki elder, with a graying beard and a shaved head. He quietly says hello. And he takes the beer, awkwardly holding it in his hands.

“Hey, Grey!” Nick says, leaning forward to shake his hand. “Good to see you here.”

“Hi. How are you?”

“Excited.” Nick nods. “A little impatient for it to start.”

Grey doesn’t know what else to do besides nod at that. There are a bunch of small skewers of meat
on the plastic table, next to the fire pit — skewers of what looks like chicken hearts and kidneys.

He learns that the Dothraki guy that handed him the beer is Makani, one of Jhiqui’s brothers. He learns that the seven white people sitting fairly close to each other are Nick’s dad, Nick’s grandfather, Nick’s brother, and some of Nick’s groomsmen. He learns that Jhiqui’s parents breed horses. He learns everyone else who is not white is either a relative, a distant relative, a family friend of Jhiqui’s parents, or a plus-one, like him. There are so many of them that they’ve divided up into subgroups, all loudly talking over one another. Most of them are already drunk.

One of the cousins asks him what he is. He hesitates for a split second — figuring out what is really being asked — before he tells them all that he’s an Islander. The cousin laughs, says, “No shit!” and tells Grey that he doesn’t do water, making a show of shuddering. He says he never learned how to swim.

Makani asks him who he came with. Nick actually answers for him, saying that he’s with Missandei. Makani hums in approval and from thereon, the Dothrakis that can’t remember his name call him Missy’s man, to get his attention. To be fair, he can’t remember half of the names he’s told.

Grey learns that he was right about the food, when Makani forces him to take a skewer, stating that it’s more pleasant to drink with something salty on the tongue. Grey coughs because the meat sets the inside of his mouth on fire. He quickly guzzles his beer for a bit of relief.

Makani is already reaching for another bottle in the cooler when Grey stops him, saying that he’s okay for a while.

“What’s wrong with you?” Makani says. “You don’t drink?”

“No, I do. But just not right now.” Upon all the aggressive looks pointed at him, he says, “I’m training for a half-marathon.”

“Shit, man!” calls out a guy named Tua. “I ran a half two years ago. And I wasn’t in the shape you’re in, brother. You’ll be fine!”

Grey smiles awkwardly. “I want to finish sub-one-thirty.”

“Oh, fuck!” Tua says. “Man, I was two hours and some change. Sub-one-thirty is fast, man.”

“So you get it,” Grey says.

Tua stares at him, face blank for a second, before he bursts out laughing, shaking his head. “Nah, man! You ain’t training today! Today we celebrate! Get the man another beer!”

She feels guilty for leaving him stranded right when they got to the house, so she sneaks out of the stuffy bedroom crammed full of bridesmaids and aunties and quickly walks through the maze of a house barefoot to check on him. It takes a bit to spot him in the crowd of men, but she finally sees him next to Makani.

When she pulls open the sliding glass door, there’s an immediate eruption of whooping, whistling, and cat-calling. She mouths thank you, thank you, thank you — as she models her t-shirt and denim shorts for a few short seconds before walking toward them. She’s quickly forgotten about by the majority of people. She grabs onto the back of Makani’s chair and looks down at Grey, smiling. She
sees him holding a beer. “You don’t have to drink if you don’t want to,” she says, eliciting a chorus of groans and jeers. How the tide turns. “He’s training for a half-marathon!” she shouts at them. “Don’t peer pressure him!”

“He a big boy,” Makani says. “And you his woman, not his mother.”

Missy rolls her eyes. “Whatever. Sexist.” To Grey, she says, “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

She leads him to the side of the house, next to the shed for some privacy. It’s an area where grass grows over gravel on the dirt ground — and she regrets not putting on shoes. She tells him she has nothing to talk to him about. She just thought he could use a little bit of a break. She asks him how many beers he’s had. He tells her more than he wanted to have, but it’s hard to say no. She laughs lightly and reminds him that he doesn’t find it so hard to say no to her. Her laugh turns self-conscious, and she says to him, “Is this the best date or what? Are you just having the best time, or what? Do you regret asking me out, or what?”

He smiles. She watches him as he raises his forefinger up to her face and slowly presses it into the middle of her forehead, near her hairline. He leaves tingles and a line of heat in his wake, as he drags his finger down between her eyes, the slope of her nose, the plush curves of her lips, down her chin, her sensitive neck, over her shirt, her sternum — she swallows, finding her throat sticky and dry — between her breasts, down her stomach — making her body jerk a little bit — dipping into her belly button — stopping right when he reaches the waistband of her shorts.

“So that is a no?” she says breathlessly.

“That’s a no,” he says, before he leans in and kisses her, only touching her with his open mouth, tongue lightly licking as his lips tug and pull at hers. Her hand reaches out to grab at the bottom of his t-shirt — mostly to keep her balance because she’s got the jelly legs — when he pulls away and breaks the kiss with an audible and wet bit of suction.

Her eyes feel hot and suspiciously wet as she looks up at him. She can get addicted to the way he’s looking at her.

His hand comes up again — but this time, he lifts a lock of hair from her shoulder and holds it in his fingers, rubbing his thumb up and down the smooth tresses.

“Would you believe that Jhiqui asked me to straighten my hair for the sake of her wedding pictures?”

“Are you serious?” he says.

“I mean, I’ve worn my hair like this before — when I was younger.”

He tilts his head a little bit, his eyes flickering over her whole head. “You look different,” he finally says.

“Is that why you kissed me? Because I look different?” She meant it as a joke, but he actually looks a little offended, and she immediately regrets.

“No,” he says, frowning.
She frowns a little bit, too, before she steps forward and wraps her arms around his waist. She presses her mouth to his neck. She tells him that she’s really glad he came to this wedding with her.
Jhiqui suddenly snaps at her mother in Dothraki, as eye shadow gets painted on her lids with a brush. They loudly squabble back and forth for a bit, Jhiqui banging her hand on her knee repeatedly to emphasize her point. Her mother gesticulates wildly with her hands and arms, rattling her whole tiny body in the process. A bunch of aunties join the fray, shouting over one another, hands flying to grasp one another’s forearms.

Missy’s Dothraki is not perfect, but it’s conversational. She leans over to Clea, who looks shell-shocked, and tells her that Jhiqui is pissed because her mom is making her look like a drag queen. And Jhiqui’s mom is pissed because she wants the wedding photos to look nice and everyone knows that the camera takes away ten pounds of make-up.

One of the older aunties leans over and presses down on Jhiqui’s mother’s leg, which she is unconsciously bouncing up and down. The auntie tells Jhiqui’s mom that she’s going to shake out the good luck.

Nick’s mom is sitting next to Jhiqui, wearing a pink pastel pantsuit, with a bewildered and overly polite smile plastered on her face.

The sliding glass door abruptly slides open and an old Dothraki lady with her gray hair in a bun pokes her head out before she loudly yells in rapid-fire Dothraki. Jhiqui’s father raises his hand and makes some placating noises of agreement before he brings his cigarette back to his mouth. The sliding glass door shuts and, with the cigarette still in his mouth, Jhiqui’s dad calls out Makani’s name and several others.

Makani and several of the men speak to one another in Dothraki — then, they suddenly burst out in peals of laughter, leaning back in their chairs, holding onto their stomachs. And then there’s more Dothraki stuff. And then Makani finishes his beer and drops it in an empty cardboard container before he rises from his seat. He beckons Grey, Nick and his groomsmen, and a few others to follow him and Tua as he walks into the field. Nick looks perplex, and Grey already knows they are about to be punked.

Makani leads the six of them to a nearby chicken coop, in full view of the patio. He tells them that it’s a tradition for the family of the bride to bring offerings that symbolize wealth to the groom’s
family, to start the union off auspiciously — among these offerings is food that has been blessed by their god before being killed and drained of its blood on their land.

Makani and Tua simultaneously fold their arms over their chests and they both smile at the group. Tua said that grandma just asked for three chickens to prepare for the afternoon wedding meal and offering.

“Dude,” says one of the groomsmen, a red head, holding up his hands. “I am a vegetarian. I don’t think so.”

“Is this for real?” Nick says. “You’re not fucking with us, are you?”

“It’s part of our culture, man!” Makani says, swinging his hand out, voice cracking passionately. “Traditionally, the males of bride’s family are supposed to kill the animal. And it’s used to be like, a boar or a steer. And you had to go hunt it. We’ve modernized and adapted it some. It’s just little chickens. In their pen. This is an honor, man! I know our customs might seem strange to you —”

“No, no,” Nick says quickly. “I didn’t — sorry — it’s just that Jhiqui didn’t mention this to me.” He looks at the coop and hesitantly takes a step forward.

“She must’ve forgotten to tell y’all,” Tua says, shrugging. “Brain probably all scattered on too many wedding things.”

Grey’s mouth twitches into a small smile These fuckers.

“So how does this work?” Nick says, eyeing clucking white chickens, dread written all over his face. “Like, are you going to walk us through this?”

“It’s not rocket science, man!” Makani says. “You just get in there, grab one with your hands, break its neck, then cut it open and drain it into this bucket here.” Makani lightly kicks a five-gallon plastic white bucket. “We make sausages with the blood. This bucket needs to be washed, though.”

When one of Nick’s groomsmen — the software engineer — asks if they get some gloves or aprons to cover themselves with, Makani and Tua laugh, shouting in Dothraki at the patio, likely repeating the guy’s question. The patio titters, and Makani tells them that real men don’t give a shit about getting their clothes dirty. Just get naked if preserving frivolous shit is so important.

After all’s said and done, only Nick — with his manic desperation to fit in with Jhiqui’s family — is game to enter the coop. He nervously pulls off his light sweater and t-shirt and hands it over to Tua. He unbuttons his plaid shorts and steps out of them, tripping a little bit, also handing them to Tua. There’s enthusiastic applauding from the patio.

Grey’s shoulder gets knocked forward. He turns to Makani.

“Hey, island boy, don’t touch nothing but fish? Don’t kill nothing without a bow? You folks don’t like to lay hands on the dying, do you?”

Grey says nothing. He just watches Nick cover his pale body with his arms self-consciousness, teetering back and forth on his feet waiting for some sort of signal from Makani.
“You know,” Makani says conversationally. “When you first walked out, I wouldn’t have pegged you for an Islander. You’re pretty light-skinned for an Islander, brother.”

Grey lightly scoffs, smiling without humor. He glances at Makani. He says, “This really the path you wanna go down, brother?”

Makani chuckles in appreciation, holding up his hands. “Okay, okay,” he says. “I get it. You won’t be pushed.”

He actually feels bad for Nick, as he stands among Nick’s friends, who are all uncomfortably laughing as Nick runs around trying to catch a chicken. It seems that he didn’t expect for them to run away from him, so he doesn’t have much of a hustle. He keeps holding his hands out and following the chickens around, like, coaxing them. He’s like, asking them to let him catch them.

Grey hears laughing from the patio. And he hears Tua and Makani talking to each other in Dothraki, joyfully and enthusiastically. They are probably lightly making fun of how white and soft Nick is.

Jhiqui’s cousin Hana bursts into the room and, in dazed amazement, announces that the uncles are all watching Nick try to kill a chicken.

Jhiqui shoots to her feet. “What!” she says, gathering up her robe and cinching it around her waist before she pushes her way out of the room.

Grey knows he’s going to get a little dirty, and he’s going to smell like chicken shit, but he silently opens the door to the coop and walks in anyway. Nick is sweaty, and his chest is rising and falling as he stares back at Grey. Nick says, “Hey, man,” kind of bewildered, but mostly very grateful. His shoulders sink in relief and he looks hopefully at Grey for some sort of direction.

“So,” Grey says softly. “We have to move fast. And let’s go for these bigger hens.” Grey points out one next to his feet. He bends and snaps his arm down simultaneously and grabs the chicken by the neck before he flips it, as it thrashes and flaps its wings wildly. He grabs its feet. He holds up the distressed chicken upside-down, trying to escape his hand. “If you hold it like this, it can’t peck you or get away. Here.”

Grey hands the chicken over to Nick, who shudders and muffles a whine as he holds the feet, like Grey had showed him.

Then Grey leads him out of the coop and over to the cone, attached to fence post and positioned over the cleaned bucket. Grey has Nick put the chicken head-first into the cone, tells Nick that the cone stops the chicken from flapping its wings. He tells Nick that the most humane way of killing a
chicken is to bleed it out as fast as possible. Grey grabs a long knife sitting on a tree stump and drags it over a honing stone a few times, the sharp and metallic sound making Nick flinch. Grey reaches out and pulls the chicken’s head down, through the bottom opening of the cone. He shows Nick the throat. He tries to hand Nick the knife.

“No,” Nick says, looking down, frowning at the chicken. “Wow. I just — I really can’t, man.”

Grey looks at him. “You don’t have to.” He pauses. “I’m going to slit both sides — here and here. It’s going to be dead pretty quickly, but it’s going to keep on twitching and stuff.”

Grey slices the blade of the knife quickly and deeply across the throat of the chicken as it continues to twitch and spasm. He repeats the cut on the other side as blood thickly drips into the bucket.

“Baby!” Jhiqui says, running up to Nick and grabbing his hands, visually inspecting him for wounds. He quickly tells her that he’s fine. And then she turns to Makani and hits him hard on his bare arm as he loses it in a giggle fit. “You motherfucker! That wasn’t funny!”

“No harm, no foul,” Nick says, rubbing his hand up and down his face, hand freezing on his face when he realizes he just punned. “Ha! Get it? Fowl?”

Missandei watches as Grey walks up with three dead chickens, holding them in his red hands, standing awkwardly, waiting as Jhiqui alternates between kissing Nick’s face and yelling at her brother. Her brother is telling her to relax, her fiance is not traumatized. Nick assures her that he really isn’t traumatized.

Missy walks over and nudges Grey’s hand, before grabbing a chicken carcass by its head. “Here,” she says. “Let me take these off your hands.”

With a smile, he asks her if he smells like chicken shit, when he walks up to her dressed in his suit and tie. She angles her head back slightly so she can look at his face, before she reaches out to tug on his lapels, pulling him to her. She sniffs at the collar of his shirt. She tells him that he does not smell like chicken shit. She tells him that it was really sweet of him to kill again just to spare Nick some embarrassment.

“You know, when you have a talent. . . .” He shrugs.

“You know what’s something I like about you?” she says, smiling to herself, smoothing her palms up and down his lapels, over his warm chest. “You’re full of surprises. You always keep me on my toes.”

He places his fingers underneath her chin and lifts it up. She sees his smile. He says, “Same to you.”

He drops his hand off of her and immediately takes a step back when a Dothraki elder crosses the living room.
Jhiqui’s eyes are wet, and Missy is rapidly fanning her face with a magazine, trying to dry the tears so Jhiqui doesn’t ruin her make-up. In the small bathroom, Jhiqui exclaims that Nick’s family — especially his mother — is so upset and angry over the whole chicken debacle. Nick’s running interference, but his family is uptight and never fight because they never say what’s truly on their minds, so Nick’s reassurances that the chicken stuff was all in good fun is not landing. Jhiqui tells Missy that, with resentment in her eyes, Nick’s grandmother actually asked her why they couldn’t just have a normal and proper wedding. Jhiqui says Nick’s grandma can go fuck herself, because Jhiqui’s not sacrificing hundreds of years of tradition and culture just to do some touchy-feely shit inspired by a fucking Pinterest board just because some people are ignorant.

Missandei pulls up Jhiqui’s red and gold embroidered skirt, lifting it over Jhiqui’s stomach. Jhiqui tells Missy that Nick’s parents ask her to pray with them sometimes, and it’s so awkward and horrible when she declines. She’s pretty sure they don’t like her and wishes Nick was with someone else. Jhiqui tells Missy that Nick asks her why her parents want to go on vacations with them and why she’s actually considering letting them. Jhiqui tells Missy that Nick said that his parents feel left out of the wedding stuff, and that’s been hard for them. Jhiqui tells Missy that she sort of tries to empathize and care — but she honestly just doesn’t. Her family’s beliefs trumps theirs — it just does. Theirs is a generation old, maybe two. Theirs is shit they just make up. Theirs is shit based on fucking commercialism, on fucking advertising. And they dare ask her to supplant some of her culture for their superficial bullshit? And she’s supposed to compromise on this?

“When I was a little girl, I honestly never pictured myself marrying a white boy,” Jhiqui says, sitting on the toilet and peeing. “Sometimes I wonder what the hell we’re doing — if this is all some big mistake. We’re so different.”

“You know, the difference between Nick and Neal,” Missandei says, “is that Nick always tries so fucking hard to understand where you come from. He’s great. And you love him.”

“I really do,” Jhiqui says.

Tons of people spill into the house and siphon out to the back. Hundreds of people. The rest of Nick’s extended family and friends show up. The whole town shows up.

The Dothraki ceremony takes forever. There are a lot of rituals, and it’s devoid of sentimentality. They all stand around as Jhiqui and Nick, in traditional Dothraki wedding garb, kneel in the open field out back as an elder drones on and on in Dothraki and occasionally startles everyone by unpredictably banging on a drum. Water is thrown. A boiled chicken is cut open. A knife is exchanged. A bunch of shit revolving around horses happen. Jhiqui and Nick stand up for a while and walk around a horse. And then they kneel again. More drumming. Some chanting. And then a million people take turns giving speeches in Dothraki.

He takes his cues from Tua, next to him. Kneeling when Tue kneels, curving over the ground when Tua curves over the ground. Echoing syllables as best as he can when Tua does. Ritual is something Grey understands, even as his time with his parents was cut short. He still remembers a lot of ritual
before they killed animals to eat. He remembers rituals when the sun came up — with the shifting seasons. He remembers some of the death rites. He remembers symbolic sacrifices at temple. He remembers his older brothers explaining these things to him, joking around, asking him if he will remember to honor their family when he is a man. At that point, the concept of his manhood was this far-off and impossible thing to conceive.

And when he lived with his aunt — he also learned her rituals — their rituals, which she had adapted and modified so that it could fit better in a new place that was strange and unfamiliar. She used to tell him it was so important to retain who they are, in the face of such oppressiveness.

“Longest wedding ever!” one of Nick’s groomsmen, Brad, says smiling, with his face tilted up against the sun.

“Man, you don’t even know,” Tua says, pointing his plastic fork at Brad. “Back in the day, there was a bunch of other shit, and it lasted even longer. But none of us want to watch our cousin and Nick have sex in a field.” Tua clears his throat. “We’ve modernized a little.”

“Yeah?” Brad says teasingly, spearing a hunk of meat with his fork. “You no longer send the groom out to kill animals?”

Tua takes a swig of his beer. “I still maintain that was hilarious. Did you see how he chased the chickens? Stripped down to his skivs and errthang.” Tua chuckles, his laugh melodic and sly, before he leans back, bracing his weight with a hand on Grey’s shoulder. He paws as a passing woman, says something to her in Dothraki. The women tilts her head back and snaps at him before walking away. “My wife,” he explains to them, when he goes back to his food. “She’s breastfeeding, and I was reminding her to pump before she starts drinking.”

She loudly collapses down on the picnic bench, straddling it, on his other side, her red and gold dress reflecting the bright sunlight. She leans in, facing his shoulder, and rests a hand on his stomach before she sniffs his shoulder. She didn’t anticipate how much time they’d spend apart, with all of her duties and all of the time spent posing for photos — all of the time spent ensuring the bride doesn’t have a complete meltdown. So far, this wedding is not shaking out to be the kind of date she had envisioned. And she’s been missing him.

“You’ve been drinking,” he says, making a pile of lentils with his fork, before scooping some up and shoveling it into his mouth.

“You know it. It’s hard to keep up with the bride,” Missandei says, laughing a little bit, sitting up straighter so she can give him a soft kiss on the cheek, in full view of everyone else at the table.

He’s still chewing his food as he turns his head to her, to give her look of warning.

“Oh, don’t give me that cranky face,” she says, running the flat of her hand back and forth over his stomach, making him clench up. She decides for the both of them that sex is most definitely on the table.
“We have some ground to cover,” Tua says from Grey’s other side, raising his beer, “if we want to catch up to the ladies.”

She has a rolled-up blanket underneath her arm, and her other hand is dragging him along behind her, as she leads them into the field where a lot of other guests are relaxing and loitering. Some are kicking soccer balls around. There’s two hours before the sun starts going down and the nighttime reception starts. Jhiqui is spending the time with her family and Nick’s family, releasing Missy for a bit.

She unrolls and unfolds the blanket, laying it down when she finds a semi-private patch of ground that she likes. She flops down on top of it, still in the Dothraki garb. She flips over onto her back, blinking at the sun, at his shadowed face, before she reaches her hand out to him.

They lie shoulder to shoulder, looking up at the sky for a bit. She tells him she’s exhausted and she needs a freaking nap. He tells her to go ahead and sleep. She squeezes his hand in between their bodies, and she tells him he should sleep, too. She tilts her head into his shoulder. He lifts his arm up, letting her roll into his body before he brings his arm back down, cradling her to him.

“I love you,” she quietly says into him. “Present tense. And I’m not expecting you to say it back. I just want you to know.”
He lets her pull him into one of the house’s four bathrooms, locking the door behind them under the pretense of needing his help with a fussy zipper. She drapes her night dress over the closed lid of the toilet — he runs his hand down her spine, over the zipper — before she turns back to him to frame his face with her hands, palms over cheeks, pulling his face toward hers. He meets her halfway, winding an arm around her waist and cinching her against his body, pushing hard into her mouth, angling her head back. The kiss is inelegant — frantic and messy — all tongue and wide, open mouths.

Her small hands make quick work of undoing his belt and trousers. Her hand is cool and dry as she sneaks in the slit of his boxers and starts softly working him.

He pulls his lips from hers, carelessly leaving a wet trail down her chin before he lands on her bare shoulder. “What the fuck,” he says, reaching behind them to hold onto a flimsy towel bar because he doesn’t trust his legs to hold the both of them up. She smells amazing. What she’s doing feels amazing.

Her hand stills. “What is that?” she mutters.

He freezes. A cold wave of dread just hits him in the center of his chest.

“Is that —” Missandei untangles her limbs from him and gently pushes him out of her way. She leans over the vanity sink and examines two clear dispensers, one with a blue gel and one white and opaque. “Is that lotion?” she says, reaching out and pumping the white stuff. She holds it her nose to smell it, her fingers rubbing it into her palm. She turns on the tap and runs her hand underneath to see if it lathers.

Her smile at him when she discovers it doesn’t is maniacal and devious. She gives the lotion dispenser three hearty pumps into her hand and then she stalks the short distance back to him.

He’s gone soft. The disorientation of not knowing what she was saying or meaning just sucked up all of the arousal in him. He steadies himself with a big breath in, trying to disperse some of the tension coiled in his body. He unconsciously holds out a hand to stop her, to block her from getting too close.

It does the trick. She stills and an expression flickers in the back of her eyes — a dawning realization.

He raises his hand to his head, smoothing over his scalp. He says, “I’m sorry.” He blinks at the bright overhead light of the bathroom. “It’s been more difficult without anything . . . in my system.” Upon her sharp look, he quickly clarifies, “With myself, by myself.” He sighs. “I haven’t been with anyone else,” he says softly.

She looks relieved and gives him a small smile. “And here I was hoping that you being off drugs would magically solve all the sex-related stuff.”

He gives her a half-smile. “I was kinda hoping the same thing, too,” he says.
She reaches over the edge of the sink and quietly scrapes the lotion off of her palm. And then she asks him if she can just help him relax. He feels like a dipshit, so of course he agrees to it. He looks at her tiredly — because he’s tired of how difficult sex has to be and the constant back and forth and the constant hoping and waiting and seeing — he doesn’t know why she puts up with it when she is beautiful and lovely and funny and smart and really doesn’t have to put up with such a stupid thing for his sake.

She wraps her arms around him, and they hug. He squeezes her extra tightly, in gratitude, maybe. They sway lightly back and forth, kind in a slow dance. She tells him that he better bust a move later — it’s a requirement at Dothraki weddings. He tells her that he’ll probably need a drink in him, but he will try. She looks at him and flutters her fake lashes at him exaggeratedly. She tells him that she’s kind of fire on the dancefloor. Like, she tears it up. Like, in heels, no less — though she might change into a pair of Nikes before the festivities because she really doesn’t want to be limited to girl moves. She tells him that he really needs to not develop a complex over how well she grinds and rolls and pops. He is only a mere mortal.

He laughs, this feeling of warmth just coming apart behind his ribcage. They are still swaying back and forth when he encases her hand in his and pulls it up to his mouth. He softly and wordlessly kisses her delicate knuckles before he unfolds her hand and kisses the pads of her fingers, her long nails lightly scraping against his face. He lays his mouth on the warm dip in the center of her palm — his eyes looking fondly at her face — as he runs his the tip of his tongue over her life line. He can taste the lotion

“Oh my God,” she whispers. “Are you gonna put out at the end of the night, or what? You fucking cock tease.”

“You love it,” he says.

“I love you,” she says, breaking into a giddy smile.

It’s not something he can say back to her. It’s not a concept he fully understands — as it pertains to her. There’s a part of him that resists because he doesn’t like indulging in fakeness — unintentionally or not. He used to be told he was loved, by various people — in manipulative and dark ways. His mother used to hold him tightly as he woke up from nightmares, and she used to tell him that she loved him. His mother also used to beat her frustrations into him and his siblings and after the fact, she told them that she had to do it because she loved them. For many reasons, love has been a concept that he’s avoided.

He smooths his lips into Missandei’s wrist, smelling the floral scent there. He does know that he feels so much for her though. He says, “Thank you.” It’s the best he can do. She stretches her body against his, arms crossing behind his neck as she playfully nips at his cheek with her teeth.

They hurriedly dress her when Doreah and Clea start pounding on the bathroom door, demanding to be let in. He has her night dress flipped over and he’s searching for the hem — as she strips off the Dothraki dress as fast as she can without tearing it — before their arms and hands stumble into one another as he pulls the peachy pink dress over her head. She shoves her hands into her neckline and adjusts her boobs in her strapless bra as he struggles with the zipper.

He mutters that it’s too tight under his breath. She hisses at him and tells him there is no such thing,
and his job is to look pretty and to tell her she is always right.

Missy takes a quick look at herself in the mirror — straight hair in dire need of smoothing down and her lipstick has completely rubbed off — and then she takes a quick look at him and says, “Oh my God,” reaching down to pull up his zipper. “Can’t take you anywhere.” There is still banging on the door. Clea muffled voice is letting her know that she’s a real vain bitch who is taking forever.

Doreah wants to know if Missandei’s taking a monster dump or what?

Clea and Doreah both wear identical looks of surprise when she throws open the door. They weren’t expecting her to have company.

Doreah is first to recover. “Nice!”

It’s impossible to say no to a Dothraki holding out a bottle of amber XO. They play dirty and invoke their traditions and their culture and — among males — they invoke brotherhood. Those who don’t indulge are elitist, racist assholes or race traitors. Outsiders who do participate are a source of amusement, a novelty. More shit about Drogo makes sense to him now.

The Dothrakis also keep drunkenly marveling at the sameness between people of color. Makani slurs at him and tells him that the way he killed the chickens — it was like how they kill chickens. The way he walks — there’s a quality in it that is familiar. Makani keeps pointing out dishes that get placed on the center of the table, asking Grey if he knows what certain ingredients are, what certain meats are, what certain sauces and spices are. There are a number of intersections — and Makani keeps saying, “It’s so crazy! It’s so crazy!” Makani also tells Grey that he drinks like a Dothraki. It makes Grey wonder if this sort of thing was what Drogo saw in him, when they first met — a familiarity.

He has also learned that the drunker Missandei gets and the more time she spends around her friends, the more ethnic she gets. Her speech shifts — she drops her Gs, drops extraneous articles, speaks more at her teeth. She gets louder. She adopts this aggression. She keeps pawing at him in front of people — his stomach, his butt, his crotch once — and he keeps jumping away automatically. She keeps oversharing — telling people about how they met, how they got together, how her ex tried to get with her — the specifics of that part, he did not know about. He can feel Clea’s and Doreah’s eyes on him, and he keeps trying to drink the attention away. Missandei keeps making fun of him, telling everyone stories about the various ways he’s shut her down over the years, from telling her to rub suntan lotion over her own damn body to the time she asked him to come over to change a lightbulb and he told her he was busy cleaning out his email inbox.

“Man! What’s wrong with choo!” Tua says, laughing. “Changing a lightbulb is obviously code for gettin’ dirty.”

Makani uses his wife’s shoulder to push himself up to standing position on the chair, to get a view of the commotion on the other side of the banquet room. He bursts out laughing, doubling over and holding onto his stomach. He hops off the chair and tells them that Uncle Noa just socked Uncle Kai
in the gut and Kai just puked on the floor before Noa tackled him from behind.

“Motherfuckers are lit up. What a bunch of Gs!”

It takes her and three other people to push and pull him onto the dance floor. She can barely hear him over the music, but she thinks that he’s saying that he does not need to be pushed. Jhiqui is already there and takes an avid interest in Grey as he sullenly steps forward and lightly loosens his tie with a finger, tucking the end of it into between two buttons of his crisp shirt.

She pats him on the chest to get his attention, gesturing between his eyes and her eyes. Over the music she shouts at him and tells him she don’t like to couple-up when she dances. So there will be no hanging on and no hand-holding. She tells him that she needs a lot of room for her moves, sometimes her arm flies out in a punch — just happens when the music moves her — so he really needs to give her a wide berth unless he wants to get hit.

She can see his face break out into a honest-to-God laugh at that — which makes her happy — as he nods, indulging her by taking a small step back. She pulls up the tight skirt of her dress a little bit, pulling it over her knees so she could move better.

She impulsively reaches out and yanks him to her, covering his mouth with hers — making it hot and intense — but quick so he can’t freak out on her. She rubs her lipstick off of his mouth before she pushes him away, grinning. He looks at her darkly — but this time, not like he’s annoyed with her. They are definitely attempting sex later. She’s sure of this.

Her arms are out in front of her, and she’s really drunk. And she warns him that she’s about to tear this shit up.

He’s not really dancing. He’s kind of standing and sort of moving around, cracking up as he watches Missandei run around him, her female body taking up way more space than everyone else. She’s a flurry of limbs and hair and attitude as she scream-sings along to the song and occasionally body-slams into Doreah, Clea, and Jhiqui. She can actually dance — he can tell based on what he’s looking at — but he also knows that she’s putting on a bit of show to help alleviate some of his discomfort. The fact that she has the wherewithal to do this while so fucking plastered is something that is crazy to him. She is just so awesome.

Grey pitches forward a little bit, stumbling as a pair of warm hands hold him up. He looks at Nick’s red, sweaty face. Nick opens his mouth and the smell of XO becomes his whole universe. Nick smiles dopily at him. Nick shouts, “I got you, buddy!” before he squats, puts his hands on his knees, and twerks right into Grey’s legs, tripping him up and making him bump into the people behind him. He holds up his hands in apology — and when he turns back to Nick, Nick’s pacing around the middle of the dance floor, asking people to clear the groom some space.
Nick dances like every white boy who is not Channing Tatum that she’s ever known. She really understands what Jhiqui sees in him, as she watches Nick spin himself in circles, do the robot, the running man — trying to do a two-step — before he drops to the floor and thrashes his legs around, doing something that sort of looks like breakdancing. He tries to freeze with his head and hands on the ground, his feet in the air, but he slowly slumps over and his back lands on the floor with a thud. He stands up, pumping his fists up to the ceiling in victory before he starts strutting, to thunderous applause and screaming.

He points to Makani and Simi, another one of Jhiqui’s brothers, who sheepishly point to themselves as if to say, who us? Nick challenges them to a dance-off with one hand, and with the other, he reaches out and snatches Grey by the collar of his shirt.

Missy feels Clea’s vice-grip on her arm. “Ohmigod,” she shouts into Missy’s ear. “I love it I love it I love it I love it!”

She sees Grey raises his fist to his mouth to cough. On her other side, Jhiqui has her hands cupped around her mouth and she’s screaming that she wants to see that booty bounce.

Everyone knows that Jhiqui’s brothers can dance. She’s heard stories about how they used to lay down cardboard in the garage and spend hours practice in there, driving both of their parents nuts because they couldn’t store their cars in the garage. Makani takes off his suit jacket and hands it to his wife before he has her help him unbutton his cuffs so he can rolls up his sleeves.

Nick pats him on the back and squeezes his shoulders before shoving him to the middle of the dancefloor after Makani vacates it. Grey’s not very fond of being the center of attention. He finds Missandei in the crowd and her hands are clasped together and placed under her chin and she watches him nervously. That expression — such concern — also makes him want to laugh.

It’s been a while since he’s done this sort of stuff — years and years. His upper body is weak in dexterity. It seems all he’s been doing lately is revisiting the past.

She’s dumbfounded as she watches him transition out of a six-step into a couple of power moves, before he freezes to a stop. Makani and Simi are already scrambling over and crawling all over Grey, pushing him down into the ground, laughing and shouting and smothering him with their body weight.

After a few seconds, they both get to their feet and yank him up, pulling him into a quieter corner of the floor — which has filled back in — to talk and compare notes.
She finds him during a slow song — pulls him away from the boys without an apology — and she raises her hands and hooks them over his shoulders. He’s a little damp, but he fits against her well, and he feels so nice.

“You let me look like an ass!” she accuses, as they sway from side-to-side. “You let me go on and on about my moves!”

“I think you let yourself look like an ass,” he says, grinning.

“I understand why you’re so good at back flips now.”

He smiles. “There was a year when I was a freshman in high school where I lived in this neighborhood with a lot of kids like me. It was government subsidized housing so there were a lot of low-income new immigrants, people more like me. And I kind of just fell into a crew. I had these friends, and we’d just hang out after school. That’s how I learned.” He pulls her closer. “But after I was kicked out of that house, it was just a lot of whiteness.”

It’s three in the morning by the time they get back to King’s Landing. Jhiqui had begged them to stay the night and go home in the morning — they can all hang out some more and do breakfast together — but Missandei said that Grey has to get home so he can do his run as best as he can. It sounded really lame to her own ears, but Jhiqui miraculously let it go without further comment.

When they near his complex, he reaches over to grab her hand. He says, “Do you want to come up? And help me change a lightbulb?”

She rolls her head back and lightly hits it on the headrest. She pulls his hand up to her chest, pressing it against her breasts. She smiles in the dark. She tells herself that they have plenty of time — that there’s no looming expiration date on this. She says, “I really want to. You have no idea. But I should really let you get to sleep so you can rest up for your run tomorrow. Maybe we can get together and change a lightbulb after you kick that run’s ass?”

He quietly laughs as he puts the car in park, before reaching over to palm her cheek, orienting her face to his. He kisses her softly. He says, “Thank you. And yes.”

She steadily says, “I love you. I know I’m saying it too much, but I do.”

“You’re not saying it too much.”
When he blows past her into her apartment mid-afternoon, a waft of laundry detergent trails warmly behind him. She tells him that he showered. His back is to her and his hands are dug into the large pockets of his zip-up hoodie. He tells her that he didn’t want to come over just to stink up her bed with his sweaty-ass body. She comes up behind him, runs her hands up and over his shoulders, pulling him to her. She tells him stinking up her bed with his sweaty body is kind of the point.

He’s never been in this new bedroom before, but he opens the double glass French doors with confidence — she’s been trying really hard not to be a complete slob because of these doors — and he walks into her space, stepping over a discarded pair of heels on the floor. He spins around on a foot to face her before he lets himself drop backward, neatly falling onto the bed. His legs are still hanging off and his shoes are still on. He unzips his hoodie — her brows raise up when she realizes he’s not wearing a shirt underneath — and then he splays his arms out, just about touching both edges of her mattress.

“I’m ready to penetrate you,” he says, staring up at the ceiling. “Or I guess I mean I’m ready to give it the ol’ college try.”

She crosses her arms and bites down on her bottom lip. Because he’s actually really funny, in a quiet, stealthy way. She climbs onto the bed, positioning herself over his stomach, pleased when she feels his hands automatically grab onto her hips, to shift her weight around so it’s more comfortable for him. She braces her hands against the bottom of his rib cage, his skin soft and smooth from the shower. “So I take it the run didn’t go well,” she says.

He closes his eyes and groans, basically confirming her suspicions. “It was a shitshow,” he says. “It felt awful and difficult, and I was just so pissed off at myself — and it didn’t make a difference to slow down the pace. So I just stopped short three miles and went home. I’ve been obsessing over it ever since. I can’t get it out of my mind. I’m sorry.” He sighs and then reaches up to cup her face with both of his hands.

She grabs onto his wrists. “You know, bad runs happen,” she says lightly. “Maybe you’ve been pushing yourself too hard and your body is telling you that it needs more recovery time?”

“Oh, maybe I shouldn’t have drank a bucket, and maybe I should’ve gotten more than five hours of sleep.”

Her hands drop off his wrists, and she frowns at that. She suddenly feels awkward, sitting on him, so she lifts up to her knees before sinking down to her bed next to him. She shrugs. “I’m sorry?” She feels her face getting warm — that prelude to embarrassment or tears — even though she knows his bad run wasn’t her fault.

He pulls her to his body, sliding her against her blanket with a hand firmly on her stomach. “I’m an ass,” he says. “That wasn’t a nice thing to say to you.” He presses his mouth to her temple. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should take it easy for the next few days.”

She blinks, still feeling a little bit defensive, raising her hand to lightly touch his cheek.
Her prominent presence in his life is still something he’s getting used to — which is a bit of a bizarre thing, given that he’s had years to adjust and acclimate to her. So many seemingly simple and easy things still require immense effort from him. He still wonders about the longevity of her tolerance for his bullshit and whether the bad parts of him will eventually wear down the good parts of him — to her. It’s something he tries to shut out of his mind — Jaime says such things are pointless to fixate on. One’s own worthiness is a stupid thing to question.

“I like how you want a car that someone’s white dad drives,” she says, reaching underneath his suit jacket to lightly scratch at his back with her nails — how frequently she wants to touch him is something that he finds he has to constantly adapt to.

“I mostly drive in the city,” he says lamely. “It makes sense.”

“I’m just teasing, babe,” she says, watching as a car salesman walks up to them. “I love your practicality.”

She likes how they are not having sex. The stakes are suddenly much higher, and it’s been something he’s been approaching with caution and trepidation. For her — she just doesn’t want to fuck this up. She finds that talking about sex is something that becomes less awkward and less precious over time though. While they are making dinner, she tells him she’s been reading a lot of books about human sexuality — which makes him stiffen. He’s told her that sometimes she makes him feel like some scientific curiosity.

She says she’s been reading about how people with physical disabilities, like those who are paraplegic, have sex. She tells him that many people with spinal cord injuries and who have no feeling below the waist report having orgasms still. She tells him that human sexuality is this complicated and vast thing that they don’t know enough about. She also tells him that she’s been reading about the concept of outercourse and how sex can starts before anyone takes off their clothes. She tells him that sex can be thought of as an entire process, not simply the end result. She tells him that people’s concept of sex — in general — is so heteronormative. Just penis in vagina, penis in vagina, penis in vagina.

He stops stirring the spaghetti. “You know, when you unload all of this stuff on me — I feel a lot of pressure. And . . . pressure doesn’t help.”

“I was just talking, babe.”

“I know,” he says, turning back to the stove and the pasta, adjusting the heat.

“Are we ever going to have sex again?” she says, her hands pausing over the salad, voice soft.

“What if I said no?” he says, pivoting his head so that she can see the side of his face. “What would you say to that?”

“I’d say that — I’m not with you for the sex,” she says carefully.
He drops the wooden spatula into the stock pot and he transfers a dishtowel to the handle of the oven door. He mutters that he doesn’t know why she’s with him, before he clasps his hands on top of his head and walks out of the kitchen. He pulls open the patio door and steps out onto it, closing the glass behind him. She doesn’t even know what to do. Sometimes she feels like she’s at her wit’s end. Sometimes it seems like she can never say the right thing to him.

He realizes that plus-ones are reserved for significant others, but he invited Jaime to his company party because there’s a buffet with unlimited food. He knows Jaime can do some serious damage to that buffet — and Jaime’s also been buried under work and school. He hasn’t seen Jaime do much of anything besides work, school, and video chat with Brienne.

This is what he explained to Missandei, when she told him that she had really wanted to meet his boss and his coworkers. He doesn’t understand why she’d want to meet the people he works with. They are just people he works with. And he doesn’t feel any inclination at all to hang out with the people she works with.

He is not at all surprised when he introduces Jaime to people as his roommate, and people just start assuming that they are a couple. It’s something Jaime gleefully takes in stride and occasionally plays up.

“Oh my gosh, you’re with Grey? We all just adore him! He’s the best!”

He supposes that he also didn’t invite Missandei to this thing because he doesn’t want her to listen to his coworkers say all this over-exaggerated shit about him.

“Seriously?” Jaime says to Emi, popping a canape into his mouth. “You don’t think he’s sullen and bitchy and hypercritical and intense and uptight?” Jaime glances at Grey, a shit-eating grin ghosting over Jaime’s mostly blank face.

Emi blinks rapidly, obviously thrown by Jaime’s comment. She carefully brushes her hand down her skirt, brushing off imaginary wrinkles, before she says, “No. He’s really sweet, and his work is always impeccable.”


She felt like a total doofus when she texted Jaime and asked him if he’d be interested in grabbing a bite with her sometime — and Jaime texted back with, “Who is this?” After she explained to him who she is, his attitude shifted and he was sunny and bright and started inundating her phone with places he has recently Yelped and bookmarked.

For the first half hour of lunch — a sandwich place that cures its own charcuterie, which Jaime explained to her in detail leading up to the meet-up — they actually talk about her hair. He says he likes the new look. She raises her hand to her hand to touch the ends of her hair and tells him she’s been getting a ton of compliments on it — but she’s probably going to go back to the natural curls pretty soon. He comments that the curls are probably lower maintenance. She tells him not really —
and she doesn’t mind maintenance. It’s more that she feels most like herself with the curly hair.


She scrunches up her face and looks at him like he just grew a second head.

It makes him laugh. He adjusts his snapback on his head, and he repeats, “the politics of hair,” before the tells her about a scholarly article he recently read about good and bad hair valuations among Black females and how they intersect with the legacy of slavery.

Her jaw drops, and she tells him about all of these phases she went through when she was younger and all insecure in her body. She’s dabbled with hot combs, relaxers, so many straightening irons — and she used to tell herself she was simply trying to be pretty and trying to fit in — and it took some time before she realized the underlying and inherent disassociation from her cultural identity — in trying to “fit in.” She asks him how he knows so much about Black hair.

He laughs. “You don’t even know how many times I’ve been angrily told I’m patriarchal, racist, sexist, heteronormative, culturally insensitive, privileged, and elitist by my classmates.” He gestures up and down his body. “I mean, look at me.”

“I actually don’t know very much about you,” she admits.

“I’m not that interesting.” He shrugs. “Did you want to grab lunch with me because you wanted to talk about Grey?”

“Oh, and also to extend a belated gesture of friendship. Duh.”

“But mostly to gossip about that bitch behind his back, right?” Jaime says, grinning and saying thank you to the server when two plates are put down on the table.

The sandwiches are massive — she can only eat half of hers. Jaime asks her if she minds if he takes the rest of hers. She sarcastically comments that it must be tough to eat tons and never gain weight. He tells her that it’s actually pretty annoying sometimes. He has to constantly stuff his face or else he becomes a scrawny little thing. He says Grey has the same issue — maybe worse because Grey insists on running dozens of miles every week. Most of their hang-out sessions lately have involved shoving healthy calories into their faces. Jaime tells her he kind of looks forward to when his metabolism slows down some.

She knows that Jaime is basically Grey’s best friend. She knows that they are weirdly physically close. She does not know how emotionally close they are — if they just bro out all the time or if they do the sort of thing where they go to each other to talk out problems. She absolutely cannot imagine the latter at all, but she’s not ruling it out.

She feels the weight of betraying Grey’s confidence — a little bit — as she tells Jaime about how distant Grey’s been lately — and also, she tells Jaime some of the sex stuff. That part, she feels pretty bad about revealing.

Jaime leans back in his seat, quietly thinking over the new information. Then he says, “I’m not surprised that that’s been an issue.” He purses his lips. “For me, I would have a really hard time having sex with anyone who’s not Brienne. I actually have a hard time when women touch me casually.”

The implication of what he just said slowly sinks in for her. She says, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He shrugs. “So I think it’s really easy for me to empathize with him and to defend his
bullshittery to the death — and it’s not out of loyalty. You just — we just gotta sometimes work to remember that he has no basis for a lot of the stuff that we take for granted. He’s never really dated anyone before in his life — he has no idea what a relationship looks like. He’s not used to people sticking around, and he will probably always be the kind of person who will look over his shoulder, the kind of person who just waits for the bottom to drop out. And honestly, as his friend, I’m saying that he should not have to put up with another person abandoning him again. So if you’re not ready for how hard this is going to be — if you’re just looking for something casual — you should drop all your good intentions and just get out and leave him alone, right now.”

Jaime has Grey’s new car packed by the time he gets back from his run. He hates the way Jaime packs shit up — it’s just a lot of cramming and a lot of random shit that struck Jaime’s fancy — but the pack job is nothing Grey can really bitch about because Jaime did take it upon himself to be proactive.

Jaime hands him a smoothie that is guaranteed to taste extra fatty and extra sugary, beaming. “I love road trips,” he says. “And I’m so excited to see that d-bag. Do you wanna play a game or do you wanna listen to an audiobook on the way? I have Fifty Shades of Grey. I thought it was appropriate because your name is Grey. We can pretend that guy is you, when we listen to the book.”

He laughs, swatting at Jaime with the mason jar smoothie as Jaime dodges him on the sidewalk.

He watches despondently as Jaime becomes melodramatic and tackles Drogo’s back, climbing him like a monkey. Drogo teeters back and forth on his feet, tucking his arms under Jaime’s knees, staying upright, hiking Jaime up higher on his back. Grey sees them laughing, already making stupid jokes with one another.

He can see Drogo beckon to him with a hand, telling him to come over. He wryly smiles and slowly makes his way to them. When he’s within arm’s reach, he sees Drogo suddenly shoves a hand at his loose running shorts. Grey twists and lunges away, feeling Drogo’s tight grip on his pants holding him in place. With effort, he digs his feet into the ground and pushes forward. The pressure suddenly pops and the elastic waistband of his shorts snaps against his skin, lightly stinging. He hops a few steps, pulling his now-looser shorts back over his butt.

“God, you’re so slow,” Jaime says to Drogo. “You know he’s a slippery motherfucker. I personally like to surprise him in the shower.”

Jhiqui eagerly wants to meet up after getting back from her honeymoon. She tells Missandei to bring her man. Missandei tepidly explains that “her man” is away on a romantic getaway with his boyfriend for the weekend. It’s a joke that she’s sure Jhiqui doesn’t get, but Jhiqui laughs like a
braying donkey over the phone anyway.

Jhiqui wants to show Missy the new house — show her how they’re going to decorate and the stuff they are thinking of buying. She plies Missy with promises of lunch and sangria.

Nick has an apron on and is delicately flipping over thin crepes when she walks into the kitchen. She leans over the stove and tells him it smells amazing. He tells her about this new food blog he’s been following and how he makes the batter in a blender. He tells her that there will be savory crepes with a reduced mushroom wine sauce and sweet crepes with an orange marmalade.

Missandei asks him if he made the marmalade himself — and he has the audacity to look genuinely sheepish. It makes her laugh.

Jhiqui is bursting at the seams with some sort of news as Missandei takes a long series of gulps from the really insanely good sangria.

She half-expects for them to announce that they are already pregnant — but instead, Jhiqui says, “We want to invite you and Grey to a dinner party we’re throwing in a couple of weeks!”

“What?” Missandei says around the rim of her glass. “Come again?”

Without any embarrassment, Jhiqui admits that she and Nick have become known for their monthly dinner parties — it’s mostly to keep up appearances because of Nick’s job — and they’ve never invited Missy before because she’s single and some of Nick’s uber rich coworkers’ wives are kind of weird about that kind of shit. The wives are honestly like — the worst.

“Spoken like a true feminist,” Missy says. “Go on.”

“We were thinking that you and Grey can join us? It would be so great to get some back-up against those shrews. We kept talking about you guys on our honeymoon! We just love him. I was totally wrong about him! I’ll admit it! I misjudged and was probably prejudiced against him because he has a crappy friend. But we all have crappy friends!”

It’s pretty shitty to be the only one not drinking and the only one on a shitty diet plan. He actually feels envious as he watches Drogo refill two glasses of beer from their pitcher. It’s akin to the feeling he had when he watched Drogo and Jaime shove rare beef and fried potatoes into their faces as he miserably ate his chicken salad.

Drogo looks at Grey’s glass of water and asks him how he’s feeling about the half. Grey tells them that the other week, he had a really shitty long run — and that was his longest scheduled run, so that has him a little bit nervous.

On Sunday night, just as she’s leaving the gym, he calls her after getting back from Drogo’s and asks her if she’s busy, if she wants to get together. He tells her he wants to talk — which sends alarm bells blaring in her head — and she tells him that she actually wants to talk to him, too.
In the hour in between getting home from the gym and his arrival at her place, she quickly showers and then hunts around in her kitchen for ingredients for some sort of dinner that he can eat. There’s nothing much, beyond the old brainless standby of whole wheat pasta and canned tomato sauce that she doctors up with veggies and some leftover cooked chicken.

When he arrives in sweats, he gives her a kiss on the cheek and he tells her he’s already eaten, but he’ll eat again. That makes her feel awkward. She tells him he doesn’t have to eat, as she scoops a hearty serving into a bowl for herself. She tells him she can watch her as she eats. He pulls a fork out of her drawer and, sitting across from her at her kitchen table, he jabs and twirls the fork in her bowl and shoves a bundle of pasta into his mouth before going back to stab a piece of chicken. It’s such a ridiculously cute gesture — and it doesn’t alleviate the dread in the pit of her stomach at all.

She decides to go first.

“I had lunch with Jaime,” she blurts. “And we talked about you. We talked about some really personal stuff — like sex stuff. I mean, me and you sex stuff. I hope that’s okay. He was really cool about it. I’m sorry I’m such a blabbermouth.” She frowns. “I just wanted to talk with someone who really knows you. I’ve been feeling — like, Jaime keeps saying stuff about how I should leave you the fuck alone if this isn’t real for me — and I know this thing with us started as a really casual thing — yesterday, Jhiqui was just rambling on about how she wants us at all of her dinner parties and game nights and barbeques, because she really likes you now, that flighty bitch — and the whole time she was making these plans, all I could think of was how much you’d hate these things and how you’d be miserable if I asked you to do these things with me — and so I told her to shove it and that we won’t be going to her silly dinner parties.” She looks up at him. His face is blank, save for the tiny crease between his brows. “I want you to know that this is so real for me.” She feels herself tearing up, which makes her drop her fork into the bowl. She crosses her arms and leans back in her chair. “I love you. Even when you don’t put out.”

He makes a noise of surprise — a stifled laugh — as his mouth curves into a smile.

“I mean, that was a joke,” she says. “I get it. I understand why things are the way they are. I’m okay with it.” She groans loudly, before sighing. “Okay, you can break up with me now,” she says, pouting.

He laughs for real. It makes her frown deepen, because she just spilled her guts, and he finds it so amusing. He leans forward and flicks the bowl of pasta toward her a few inches. “Eat your dinner,” he says.

Obediently, she glumly picks up her fork and shovels in a mouthful of pasta, finding it tasteless, filling her cheeks with complex carbs.

“Look,” he says. “I don’t care if you talk to Jaime. It’s fine. It’s probably nice to have someone to commiserate with.” His mouth twitches, as he holds back another laugh. “Babe,” he says softly. “I came over to apologize for being such an ass to you these past few weeks — and to thank you for putting up with it. I know it’s been difficult. Thank you.” He clears his throat. “I also was wondering if I could stay over tonight.”

“But it’s Sunday,” she says through the half-chewed mouthful of spaghetti.

“I brought my suit. I brought my razor. I brought my toothbrush. I brought some of my shittyass food for lunch tomorrow.” He laughs at the expression on her face. “It’s all in the car! I didn’t want to be presumptuous!”

She gets up from her seat, swallowing the really slimy, really gross lump in her mouth. He pushes his
seat back from the table, anticipating her impulsiveness, the chair squeaking a bit. She straddles him in his chair — she just needs to be close to him — and she whimpers as he roughly grabs onto her body, before she gives him a big kiss on the mouth. She says, “You know I love sleepovers. And on a school night! What!”
She supposes that it’s human nature to compare. She can’t help but track all the ways he is different from Neal — all the superficial, obvious ways, like personality, sense of humor, looks, general intelligence — and all the quiet, underrated, nearly imperceptible ways, like how they each tackle small setbacks in life, how they articulate complex thoughts and feelings, how they make her feel about them, about her feel about herself.

She supposes that the fact that she is so crazy about him says a lot about who she is, how she’s changed, and where she wants to go. She is constantly stunned by his resiliency and calmness. Where Neal kind of lived an insular life with a lot of modern comforts and feelings of being loved and happy — she finds that she can’t imagine Grey ever freaking out because his car got keyed while parked on a street at night. She can’t imagine Grey complaining about his bad luck. And where Neal listened to the sad stories from her grandparents’ lives, from her life, and said things like he couldn’t believe that people can be so bad to other people — she finds that Grey’s small gestures — the way he pinches the hem of her skirt and runs his fingers over the edge as she talks to him about her grandfather’s death, her brother’s death — that’s what ends up making her feel comforted. It’s what makes her feel heard and understood.

They are going at it hot and heavy. Her feet can almost touch the ground at the same time, as she sits in his lap, his chair squeaking as she claws her nails into the back of his head, as she unabashedly and mindlessly spreads her legs wider and grinds herself thoroughly over the bulge in his pants. She lets out a thick groan as their tongues collide, as his fingers dig into her skin, holding their bodies together, as she pushes her face closer to his, closing the seam between their mouths. She breaks the kiss and arches her back, using her pointed toes pressed against the carpet, lifting her breasts as he ducks his face down, his breath damp and heated, warming her body, making her squirm in her underwear. She has no shame as she shoves his face into her chest, whimper-gasping as he latches on with his teeth, lightly biting a nipple through her shirt and bra. She clumsily thrusts her hips against his again, trying to just alleviate the aching and the neediness between her legs. She keeps saying, oh my God. He keeps his fast breathing steady against her breast, panting. She keeps begging him, saying please.

This is a point of comparison, too. She dislikes doing a disservice to Neal, because he was a good boyfriend, but she constantly deals in nevers — when her mind compares the two. Neal never made her agonize with want. He never made her lose her mind in an orgasm. He never convinced her it was a good idea to bend over and fully expose herself to him. He never made her scream out her release. He never made her sob from feelings of being utterly overwhelmed.

She squeezes her thighs tightly around his hips, when he suddenly stands up, grabbing onto her ass, carrying her with him. Their mouths fuse back together, her tongue smearing against his. She can’t get enough of him, of the taste of him, of the feel of his body. He stumbles messily to the living room, which is on the way to the bedroom, tripping over her area rug, dropping her and shoving himself into the couch, knocking it backwards a few inches. He presses his erection back into the warmth between her legs, holding her in place with his hands as he bares his teeth, grinding out tension and friction, teasing out pleasure. They both groan in unison, and she lifts up his shirt so she can put her mouth on his skin.

Their clothes start dropping, and it’s when he’s licking a line down her sternum, down her sensitive
stomach — his fingers twisted in her panties — that she snaps to reality. She starts saying, “Baby — baby, hold on,” as she closes up her legs and pushes him off her body. She sits up, catching her breath, pressing her hand to her bare chest. “We should talk about this before we go further.”

“This?” he says, voice uncharacteristically high, staring at her with his mouth open. “What do you mean this?”

“I mean sex.”

“Sex?” He smacks the back of her couch with his hand, looking dumbfounded. “Are you fucking serious?” he says incredulously. “You’ve been on my ass about sex for the past however long, and now when I’m about to give it to you, you want to talk?”

He is exceptionally cranky as she finishes her bowl of spaghetti before rinsing it out in the sink. She asks him if he wants tea or water or something. He tells her she can go shove her tea up her ass. And she knows that he’s so mad, but she also happens to find this sort of anger to be so freaking funny and adorable and sexy. Because she is a crazy person.

She mostly ignores his attitude as she puts a kettle on the stove.

“What did you think of me?” she asks, in between blowing the steam off her hot tea. “When you first met me?

He looks at her dubiously. “I thought you were nosy and overly friendly.”

“And now?”

“You’re still intrusive and really friendly.”

She holds back a laugh, the dimples on her cheeks deepening from the effort. “Baby. I’m asking you how you feel about me. Like, how much do you like me? Do you really enjoy spending time together? How attracted are you to me? What’s in this for you?”

The way she’s looking at him, open and vulnerable — nonjudgemental — makes him feel like a pile of garbage. He really struggles to find the words. An idiotic part of his brain notes that Jaime and Drogo have never asked him to sit down and articulate how he feels about them. He wonders if this is a girl thing, a relationship thing, or a Missandei thing.

“I mean, I care about you. I care about you a lot. You know that. And I like you a lot. And I like spending time with you a lot. You know you’re a good-looking person. It’s just . . .”
“A lot?” she supplies.

He nods, feeling sheepish, feeling like an idiot. “Yeah.”

As they get ready for bed, as she ties her hair up in a loose ball on top of her head, she tells him that she’s noticed that she initiates sex most of the time — maybe all of the time — save for once. She tells him that it’s made her wonder if he even enjoys sex. Maybe he doesn’t. Maybe he’s just been engaging in it because he knows it makes her happy. Maybe that’s why he’s been so reluctant to have sex. And that’s why she wants to talk — because if it’s a case of him just taking one for the team — well, that’s not really how she wants to have sex. She doesn’t want him to do anything he doesn’t want to do.

After she snaps off the light on her nightstand, plunging the room in darkness, he reaches over and he pulls her body to his. She yields easily. She is warm, and she smells nice. Her legs are smooth against his. Her skin is pliable and soft. He likes touching her. He tells her this, whispering it into her ear. He feels her body shiver, which makes him smile. He tells her that he likes it when she has physical responses to the things he says.

He’s been thinking about it. And he tells her that he cares about her more than he cares about anyone else. He’s thought about it — he’s made a mental list — and he really can’t think of anyone that he cares more about than her.

She rolls around at that, twisting her body so they are facing one another. She tucks her hands under his shirt, rubbing his stomach up and down. She says, “Thank you.”

He tells her that when he decided to stop doing drugs — he had made this promise to himself — and to her. And that promise was that he’d be more authentic and truthful. He whispers to her that he’s really good at faking and pretending when it comes to sex. He’s had this morose training in it. It messed him up so badly that he spent a lot of years trying to prove to himself that he was okay, in really bizarre ways. He tells her that in the past, he did sometimes have sex with her just to make her happy. Sex has this way of making him feel empty inside sometimes. He doesn’t want to have empty sex with her ever again.

He tells her that he’s attracted to her. Of course he’s attracted to her. He tells her he’s a bit surprised that she wonders about that, because his attraction for her is often very obvious. His attraction for her is in his pants.


“Wait,” she says. “Are you saying that you think you’re dating up?” She softly laughs. “Oh my God. That is crazy. You think I’m better than you? Wow. That is nuts. I love that. I love that you think I’m better than you. Wow.”
She burrows deeper into him. She sleepily tells him that he’s not damaged goods. She sneaks her hand in between their bodies and places it over his soft penis, over his sweatpants. Her voice is light and girlish as she tells him that she just wants to comfort-hold him as she falls asleep. She tells him that he is clearly a better person than she is, and he’s dumb for thinking otherwise. She asks him to please try not to choke her in his sleep, her ensuing laugh an amused, snarky thing.

They stayed up entirely way too late talking, and he learns that Missandei is not a morning person. She hits the snooze button on her alarm repeatedly — and it drives him nuts. He just wakes up and shuts off her alarm, getting ready for work silently.

When he wakes her up twenty minutes later — he understands why her apartment is such a mess all the time. She is a hurricane of frantic energy in the morning, running around trying to find an outfit, scrambling to put on makeup, tripping over her own shoes as she hunts down two matching ones.

He kisses her bye at her car in the garage. He takes the opportunity to push her against the cold metal frame. She takes the opportunity to hike her leg over his hip, making the kiss dirty, trying to make them both late for work, with her tongue.

He has to wake up before the ass-crack of dawn to get ready for work because of Jaime’s flight. He lets Jaime sleep for as long as possible — because unlike Missandei, Jaime is fast as hell getting ready in the morning.

Jaime has told Grey that he didn’t tell his dad that he’s going to Yin because he didn’t want to put up with his dad’s super white comments on it — like how he better not come back with the bird flu — so he scribbled his dad’s phone number on a napkin and left it on the kitchen table for Grey. The phone number is just in case Jaime dies in a freak accident in Yin. If that happens, Grey should call Jaime’s dad and break the news delicately.

“I’m gonna miss you, bro,” Jaime says outside the car, in the airport drop-off area, hat positioned high on his head. Jaime does that so that the bill doesn’t get in the way when they hug.

Grey sighs and steps forward, lazily putting his arms around Jaime. “You are so annoying.”

Jaime rolls his eyes when they pull apart. “Your face is annoying.”

“Your personality is annoying.”

“Your skin color is annoying.”

That’s the one that makes him snort-laugh. Grey shakes his head at Jaime while simultaneously waving goodbye. Jaime’s walking into the airport backwards, just making a bunch of people move out of the way to avoid running into him.

“Will you write to me?” Jaime calls out, right before he gets to the automatic doors. “Will you send me pictures of yourself? So I don’t forget what your beautiful face looks like? So I can gaze lovingly
upon it before I go to sleep at night?” Jaime bumps into a haggard-looking woman dragging some big cardboard boxes on a trolley. He scoffs and tosses her a dirty look.

Since Sundays are his long runs, Mondays are his cross-training days — to give his legs a bit of a break. One thing he really misses about rowing is the full-body workout — the shoulders, arms, and chest.

He suspected that going to the gym with Missandei would be annoying as fuck. They recently had a chat about how he’s an introvert and she’s a crazy extrovert — how he needs a lot of alone and quiet time — and how she needs for them to spend a lot of quality time together talking to each other and getting to know one another better on an emotional level in order to — how did she word it? — to make her forget she’s horny as hell.

He was right. It is annoying as fuck to go to the gym with her.

But actually — not for the reasons he had anticipated. He honestly thought she’d goof off the whole time and would distract him. But the reality is that she’s fairly focused and fairly quiet.

It’s annoying to go to the gym with her because the gym that she goes to is a huge meat market. He is not a fan of the way she is dressed. He is not a fan of the way other men look at her. He’s not a fan of the way women and men look at him. He’s not a fan of the way everyone crowds around the drinking fountain, which makes it impossible for him to refill his water bottle. He knows he cannot tell her how to dress. He knows he cannot stop other dudes from looking at her. He knows he cannot stop anyone from looking at him. He really just prefers his own no-frills gym that he pays very little for, where everyone minds their own business.

“I think that went well!” she says cheerfully, as she hands over her gym bag for him to carry, when they’re on their way out.

“We’re not doing that together again,” he says. “You get to pick a new activity for us to do.”

She’s finding that they are very different. They have very different hobbies. They have very different ideas of what is fun. For instance, his idea of a rockin’ good time is sitting alone quietly in a dark room by himself — a room with nothing in it. No furniture. No people. No electronics. That is the dream.

When he tells her that, it makes her sad. Because it’s probably one of those weird psychological things that traumatized him as a child — but became something he kind of jives with, as an adult. He says as much, shrugging it off. He tells her he just likes what he likes.

She is a stimulation junkie. She needs something in her face at all time. She loves to multitask. She loves watching TV and folding laundry and checking her email all at the same time. She loves moving around and going to dinner and being social and gossiping. She likes talking about celebrity news and pop culture — things that he has absolutely no interest in.
She also like, tells him she’s high-maintenance and needy. She needs words of affirmation from him. She needs to feel that he is attracted to her. He needs to tell her she’s pretty sometimes. She needs for him to make her feel like a woman sometimes. She cannot be sustained on shoulder punches and being called “dude” all the time. She tells him that the reason why he didn’t get clued onto the fact that she’s a lame-o codependent bitch-shrew is because the entire time she was like — trying to get with him — she was on her very best behavior and trying to be the chill and cool and casual girl — to entice him into wanting to stick his penis into her butt.

He cracks his back, before loading another wet plate onto the top rack of the dishwasher. “I really hate to break it to you,” he says, “but you really didn’t do the greatest job hiding your psychotic inclinations. I knew you were nuts from the moment we met.”

She balks. “No, you didn’t! I did an excellent job of hiding how insane I am!”

He laughs, curling over the sink with suds all over his hands. “Missandei. You stalked me for years. Every time I turned around — there you were.”

“Okay, how dare you!” she says, her jaw trembling from the effort of not laughing. “It was for one year. Tops. I stalked you for one year.”

She gathers up her curls and bundles them on top of her head with a loose scrunchie. The bedroom routine has been domesticated. And she loves it. She no longer has to stumble into his bedroom, coy and drunk and thinking of transparent reasons why she needs to take off all of her clothes.

The nights that she stays over — and it’s been with greater frequency since Jaime is away — she just wipes off her makeup and brushes her teeth in the bathroom before she sheds off her tight girl-clothes and pops on an over-sized t-shirt. She really likes how he will start cleaning up after her — start picking up her clothes — even when she’s in the middle of stripping.

“Is it really annoying that I’m such a slob?” she says into his hip, in bed, as he types out some work emails.

“No,” he says absently. “I clean up after everyone. And I realize that I’m the one who needs everything to be in a certain way — so I should be the one to clean. It doesn’t take long. I just do it as I go.”

“I feel guilty sometimes,” she says. “That I’m so gross, and you have to put up with it.”

He breaks his eyes away from the computer and grins down at her. “If you feel so bad, then help me clean more often!”

“Ugh, I don’t feel that bad. I just wish you weren’t such a neat freak so I don’t feel like an a-hole.”

Saturday mornings are the best. She slowly wakes up in a warm, sunny haze, rolling her face into his pillow, sniffing his laundry detergent, feeling the cozy drag of the fabric against her sleepy cheek.
During the night, they always drift apart. He burns hot when he sleeps — she thinks it’s because he’s so healthy and his body so efficient — that it’s uncomfortable to sprawl on top of him for the entire night. She’s asked him to take his shirt off when he sleeps — something he normally does not do when he sleeps by himself — because she wants to be able to easily feel his bare skin throughout the night. She told him she can sleep shirtless, too, to make it fair. He had said, “No, I’m good.” Which made her laugh.

She shimmies backwards on the bed, getting her backside closer to his warmth. Even in his sleep, his hand comes up to run over her leg, to pull her closer against him. He’s holding onto her stomach, holding her in place as he lazily, but firmly, rubs his morning wood into her ass.

“Oh, hello there.” She giggles, even as she feels her body respond to him.

“Sleep good?” he mumbles, hand sliding up to cup her breast, releasing a groan as she reaches behind to grasp onto the back of his neck, for leverage as she rolls her bottom into him.

Sex continues to be a bit of a moving target — now ebbing and flowing based on his moods. They decided that she’d take a back seat and he’d try to drive it more. The logic being that maybe the idea of it will feel more comfortable to him if he had more control over it. He’s been really good about rolling with the punches, not getting insanely pissed at himself whenever things don’t work out like how he wants them to. She’s kind of put a temporary stop to the oral — because it’s so easy to get lost in the oral, to use the oral as a crutch of sorts, to get addicted to it. He’s told her that he likes it when he can make her feel good. She’s told him that she wants him to feel good.

After long, meandering minutes of grinding into each other and dry humping, his patience snaps — it’s something she lives for — and he yanks down her panties, pulls down his boxers, and she’s pretty fucking ready for him, wet and easy as he slides into her from behind.

He exhales. “Oh — fuck. Hold on, babe.”

She feels him shudder inside of her. And she lives for this, too.

“God, you feel so good,” he says, shallowly thrusting into her.

He’s become more vocal during sex — more responsive — more open. It’s just baby steps, but she finds herself tearing up all the time, at the way his voice sounds when he’s turned on — when she turns him on. It’s become this grounding thing for her — what anchors her to them — what makes her sure that this is real and that her ridiculous love for him is tangible and thick and concrete.

His hand sneaks over her waist, down her stomach, over her pubic bone, before he digs two of his fingers in, in search of just the right spot.

Her physical response to it is immediate. She muffles her cry into the pillow and she punches the mattress with her fist, making him laugh behind her, feeling his amusement vibrating inside her body. After that, it’s just mindlessness and instinct. She doesn’t even care about his pleasure anymore — she’s just chasing her own, her hand on his wrist, keeping him in just the right spot, the push-pull of him going in and out of her steadily eroding away her control over herself. She shoves her ass back against him, grinding, smearing — she can vaguely hear him directing her, telling her to slow it down a little bit, to make it last. And she pushes out, “Oh, fuck you,” right before she comes.
When she floats back down to Earth, she’s a little sheepish. She had accidentally pushed him out when she came, with all of the thrashing and the crying and the flailing limbs. She’s about to turn around and apologize for being such a wanton slut when he suddenly shifts behind her. He gets to his knees, and she feels herself being yanked up by the hips. Her elbows are on the pillows, and she’s still confused when he lightly slaps her ass to get her attention. She says, “Oh my God,” when she feels the firm head of his cock pushing insistently through her folds. “Whoa,” she says in awe.

“Yeah, dude,” he says, voice husky, hands smoothing down her back, heading to her shoulders. “We are good.”

She shouts out a whimper when his hands curl over her neck and he pulls her harshly back, slamming himself crazily deep into her that it almost hurts. And it is so good.
Grey runs a marathon

He’s in disbelief as he shoves himself back into her, over and over, the hot tug and wet friction of flesh against flesh. He’s in disbelief on multiple levels. He is stunned that he’s still hard — and that’s been something he’s been fighting for — he’s been working overtime to shut out the bad thoughts and the bad memories. He’s sweating as he maintains his focus on her. He's also in disbelief that she keeps letting him do this to her — just in crazy pure disbelief that she willingly takes off her clothes and willingly accepts what he is able to give her.

He never, in a million years, thought that he’d come across someone with such patience — someone who would just accept who he is without judgement. He never ever thought he would be made to feel this way about someone else. He would die for her.

He looks down at her ass, at the slick, shiny mess where they are joined, hears the stinging slap of skin on skin as he picks up the pace just a little bit. She keeps twisting her head around to look at his face — she keeps telling him, “I love your fucking face. Oh my God.” She keeps coyly asking him, “Baby, do you see something interesting?” whenever she catches his gaze drifting down to look at them having sex, her voice an echoing, lilting whine dripping with faux innocence in his head.

And her body. Shit, her body makes him go so fucking insane with need sometimes. It’s something he should tell her — that he wants to tell her — but he’s rendered temporarily mute. And — she’s sensing the end is near — and she’s getting louder, grinding out, “Come on, baby,” and “Oh fuck, yes,” as her fist comes up to punch at his cushioned headboard. He vaguely registers that it’s Saturday morning, and they share walls with other people — but he can’t make his mouth work to remind her of that, either.

It’s almost sad, and it’s almost painful — as he yanks her ass backwards and slams his hips into her body on last time, holding them together — as the bright, body-shaking tremors zip through him, as he comes in waves inside her, her inner muscles clenching around him and pulling from him. He comes with a short grunt and a hot sweat, and it is everything.

After a few more short, mostly experimental strokes, after it’s done, he opens his eyes again. His face is tingly. And he sees her watching him. Her eyes are shiny — and it’s ridiculous — that she’d cry now when seconds ago, she was punching the wall viciously. She gives him a watery smile, before she grandly collapses and drops face down onto the bed, taking him with her.

Her body is damp. He kisses her shoulder.

“Dude,” she says, voice muffled by blankets. “That was fucking bananas.”

She feels him starting to leave — starting to pull himself out of her — and she lets out a grumble and squeezes her kegel muscles, trying to stop him from leaving her. She says, “No, baby. I want you to stay in there until you’re nothing but a little nub.”
He barks out a laugh. “What?”

“I just love you so much,” she says. “I’m delirious. I don’t know what I’m saying. Don’t go yet.”

He chuckles, voice deep and vibrating, as he pulls completely out of her, getting to his hands and knees. She says, “Nooo! Jerk.” She feels his stuff seeping out of her. He’s going to want to wash the sheets. They are going to kill the beginning of their Saturday doing laundry because he’s annoying. She is stupidly bummed because she unrealistically wanted the sex to last forever.

She squeals when he unexpectedly grabs her and flips her over. She’s about to make a comment on how strong he is, but then he’s looming over her on his arms as he dips down to kiss her, morning breath and all. What she’s learned about him is that he is a person of extreme contrasts. He is a clean freak. But he has such tolerance for a certain baseness.

“I love you,” she repeats, when he pulls away.

He gives her small, almost bashful smile as he sits back — all awesomely naked and brightly lit by the sun.

And then he spreads her legs, sticky with sweat and messy from sex, from their combined juices. And then he gets down onto his stomach. And her eyes widen and she says, “What the hell? Wait a minute, I thought we agreed.” And he laughs at her before he pushes her legs farther apart, before he spreads her with his fingers, before he puts his mouth on her. She can’t help but ruin his good work by squeezing his head with her thighs. She grabs at his scalp. She says, “Oh my God, you’re such a dirty, lying motherfucker,” before her head drops back onto the pillows and she arches up, gasping as his tongue hits a really sensitive part. “Oh my God, I can’t stand it. Don’t stop.”

He actually recoils and sneers, when she tells him that she wants to see him run his half. He tells her that she can’t actually watch him run the whole time. She can see him start. And then she can park her ass at the finish line and wait for him to cross it — which should happen within an hour and a half, or else he’s going to fucking kill himself. Why would she want to do any of that shit?

She tells him that she knows it’s a lot of waiting, and that’s what she wants to do — park her ass at the finish line, and hope that he is fast like the wind, so that she doesn’t have to deal with him killing himself and being a grumpy gus. He tells her that it’s going to be boring. She tells him she’s going to bring a water bottle full of vodka, and she’s going to share it with Jaime.

He groans and he asks her why she had to rope Jaime into this trivial shit.

“Baby, Jaime was going to go anyway. He was the one who invited me. You didn’t even tell me you were running this Saturday! You’re such a poop!”

There are three of them — and they are all totally plastered — when he crosses the finish line. He says, “Dammit, you’re here, too?” to Pia, right as Missandei tackles him, smelling of booze, knocking him back a few steps. He grabs onto her butt and hikes her up higher on his stomach so she
doesn’t slip off and eat pavement. His body is tired and his mind is distracted, as Missandei drunkenly whispers filthy things into his ear about what she’s going to do to him later, before he showers.

Pia giggles like a lunatic, giving him a small wave. “Hi! Long time no see! And congrats!”

“Twenty-three-thirty-four, you beast!” Jaime says, sloppily shoving his way in between Grey and Missandei, knocking Missandei off of Grey with his arm. Her feet land on the ground as she lets out an indignant squeak. “Yo, is it racist to call you a beast?” Jaime asks. Jaime grabs him in a tight hug and murmurs, “Mmm, you’re so sweaty. You smell nice. Yo, is it racist to say that I feel like your skin has this unique fragrance whenever it sweats?”

He squirms out of Jaime’s grasp.

They all talk over each other as they excitedly tell him that they’ve been fiercely debating over where to go eat after he finished his race. Does he want to eat a fatty burger or does he want to eat a fatty pizza or does he want to eat a fatty steak or does he want to eat some fatty fried chicken?

Grey chokes on air after Jaime walks in with Daven, after Daven drops his bags, runs up to Grey, and knocks the wind out of him by hugging him with bone-crushing force. Daven has gotten bigger — gained a little bit of weight.

“Oh my God,” Jaime deadpans. “The band is back together. I mean, minus the lead singer and the guitarist.” He pauses. “Drogo is the lead singer and Addam is the guitarist — just in case you guys were wondering. I know you guys think that Addam is so flamboyant that he has to be the front man, but Drogo can like, actually sing.”

Grey looks at Daven. The beard is back. The hair is long. “Are you still working for your dad?” Grey asks.

“Oh, dude,” Daven says. “My parents are so pissed at me right now. That’s why I thought it’d be good to take a little vacation! I’m trying to save money. That’s why I’m staying with you guys. Didn’t Jaime tell you?”

“Oh, bro,” Jaime drawls. “Daven is staying with us for a week! By the way!”

They keep Daven company out on the balcony as he lights up a joint. After the hit, he grins and kind of melts into his own body. He holds out the smoldering piece to Grey and Jaime. They both wave their hands in front of their bodies, silently saying no. Daven’s thick blond brows raise up as he brings the joint back to his lips.

Jaime explains that he’s completely worthless on weed, and he has some work stuff to do that he needs to stay sharp for. After all, it’s people’s lives that he’d be trifling with. Jaime also takes it upon himself to tell Daven that Grey is now drug free. It’s the way to be.
“Bro, are you serious? Weed is barely a drug,” Daven says.

“Dude, he had a raging morphine addiction.”

“Bieber,” Grey says warningly.

“Fuck, are you okay?” Daven asks, putting out his joint in one of their water-soaked planters before pocketing the remainder of it in his flannel shirt.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Grey says.

“You missed most of the drama,” Jaime says, leaning back against the railing. “You missed the bit where we staged an intervention and I tearfully read a letter to him that I wrote, talking about how, when he hurts himself, he’s really hurting the people who love him.”

He finds that Missandei in a relationship is really not as batshit as she likes to lead him into believing. She keeps making jokes about how she’s clingy and how he better not look at other girls because she will rip out his testicles — but he’s learning that she’s mostly bluster, and she’s mostly speaking out her insecurities about herself — and her past experiences.

He stops her — right after he gets to her place and she pounces on him, pressing short kisses on his face before he gets a chance to close the door, right after she sheepishly slides down his body, apologizing to him for being so needy.

He puts a hand on her hip and pulls her to his body so he can be physically close to her. He says, “You don’t have to say sorry for being glad to see me. I know you’re glad to see me. It’s obvious. I don’t mind.” And after some thought, he adds, “I am glad to see you, too.”

She frowns. “Am I being annoying about that?”

“Okay, that’s exactly what I’m talking about. You’re so confident in everyday life and when we were just friends. What has changed now that we’re together?”

She looks surprised — and blindsided. She gently extricates herself from him and she takes a few steps back. She’s still in her work clothes. He is still in his work clothes. He came over without stopping off at home to change because they’ve spent three days apart because of their schedules and because Daven is visiting. He has missed her in those three days.

She sits down on a stool at her kitchen island. She tells him that she hasn’t ever thought about this before — no one has said this to her before. She tells him that Neal broke up with her because he had this wanderlust.

Grey rolls his eyes and he says, “Fuck Neal. I don’t give a shit about Neal.”

“Well, I mean, he factors into what you said.” She sighs. She tells him about how there was a period after her and Neal’s break-up when they were still having sex on the regular. She tells him it was around the time that she met him — and she was being dumb and desperate all over the place. She dryly tells him that he must remember that, voice tinged with bitterness. He must clearly remember how she kept throwing herself at him like an idiot with no self-respect.
He frowns.

She tells him that there were times when she just felt so awful and alone — being so far away from her family, from home — and Neal was kind of that anchor to home. She tells Grey it sucked whenever she’d called Neal to get together and he blew her off. Because she wasn’t important to him anymore. And she kept going back for that punishment, because she was stupid and clingy and desperate and an idiot. She tells Grey that she knows how men look at her and what they see. She knows she’s shiny when she’s new. She knows she’s pretty, and she knows that’s what initially attracts their attention. But then they figure out she’s not very interesting, and she doesn’t have much of a personality. She’s not compelling — and so people leave.

“And with you. . . .” She grimaces, nervously twirling herself back and forth on her rotating stool. “I thought I loved Neal. I mean, I did. I did love him.” She sighs and blinks rapidly, carefully brushing her knuckles underneath her eyes so she doesn’t smear her makeup. “But how I feel for you — it’s just — it’s —” She leans over and rips off a sheet of paper towel from her dispenser. She folds it over onto itself twice before she uses it to dab at her eyes, lightly sniffing. Her voice is quiet and it’s shaky when she says, “I don’t want to do anything that would make you want to leave me.”

She is so dumb. And she is killing him with this shit.

He walks over to her, where she’s sitting, and he pulls up her tight skirt so it’s just about up to her underwear. He does it so her expensive skirt doesn’t stretch and rip at the slit in the back. He lifts her up and holds her in his arms, feeling her legs come around his waist as he walks them over to the couch, sitting down on it with her in his lap.

“You are so dumb,” he says, lightly knocking their foreheads together. “Why would I leave you?”

“I don’t want you to,” she whispers, still clutching the paper towel in her fist.

“I don’t have any plans to,” he says.

He reclines back on the sofa, smoothing his hands up and down her back as she pushes her face into his neck. He’s been removing makeup stains from the collars of his shirts for a while now. He gently reminds her that he really does know just how fucking nuts she can get — and she’s actually not that bad — so she doesn’t need to hold back with him. After all — she’s already put up with so much when it comes to him — just all sorts of annoying shit. She knows that he’s referring to sex. She raises her hand to his chest, tucking her fingers underneath his tie to search for his heartbeat. She tells him that it doesn’t feel like she’s putting up with anything. He repeats the same to her.

After a few minutes of silence, she tells him that she got a new letter from her parents. She got it yesterday, but she wanted to wait for him.

He asks her where it is. And she tells him it’s on the counter, next to her salt and pepper dispensers. He holds onto her back with one hand as the other digs into the arm of the couch, lifting the both of them off of it. He carries her to the counter, letting her arms and legs do all the work of holding her body to his as he rifles through the stack of mail, looking for the letter.

They watch as Jaime angrily paces back and forth in front of the TV. “How the fuck did Addam get
a gold digger he barely knows fucking pregnant?"

“Probably unprotected sex,” Grey volunteers, looking over at Daven on the other side of their couch, holding a bowl of oatmeal up, for his agreement.

“I dunno, man,” Daven says. “I didn’t ask about the dirty details. Obviously it happened, so now he just has to man-up and deal.”

“Yeah,” Jaime says. “Either by telling that ho to get an abortion or punching her in the fucking uterus.”

Daven sighs. “Jaime, would you stop joking about that?”

“Who says I’m fucking joking?”

“It’s not funny, dude.”

Jaime whirls on Daven, pointing a condemning finger at him. “Why don’t you stop being such a fucking bitch?”

To Grey, this conversation is honestly — really fucking pointless. What’s going on with Addam has happened and it’s not like anything they say or do makes a difference in outcome. And it’s not his favorite when Jaime gets all worked up into a frenzy of rage because Jaime becomes pretty irrational and kind of turns into a megalomaniac with a god complex when angered enough. Grey leans over the coffee table and swipes up the TV remote — a movement that Jaime watches like a hawk, his whole face screwing up in displeasure. Grey flips on the TV and starts surfing channels. Because he just does not give enough of a fuck.

“It fucking sucks being the only one who ever fucking cares!” Jaime shouts, gesticulating wildly. “It always sucks to be the only one who gives a fucking shit!”

“I care!” Daven says. “Just not as loudly.”

“Your hysterics over rich people problems isn’t really helping anyone, man,” Grey says, settling on some Saturday morning kids show.

“Rich people problems are sometimes legit as shit, and you fucking know it!”

She spots him standing next to and talking to a table full of well-dressed, beautiful women — she’s guessing his coworkers — when she pushes through the heavy swinging doors of the restaurant. They meet for lunch about once a week. He insists on having two days a week to himself, two days where they don’t see each other. He says that he needs it — to do chores, errands, some work, to hang out with Jaime sometimes. She wouldn’t mind seeing him every day — in fact, she would love that. But she understands that he’s a different person, and he needs the time to himself to recharge. The time off is sometimes nice. It gives her a chance to check in with Doreah, Jhiqui, Clea — sometimes Skype with Brienne or email Sandor. Lunch with Grey once a week on the days she doesn’t see him at night is a compromise.

She walks up to him and the table, with her hands clasped behind her back. She says hi to him softly before she turns her attention to the table and turns up the wattage on her smile, to clear out some of
the awkwardness. She introduces herself by stating her name. They respond in kind by going around the table, stating all of theirs.

“Oh, this is your girlfriend!” says the woman with long, shiny black hair — Tanja. “He’s shown me your picture,” she explains.

“Oh. I’m only surprised because he doesn’t like to share things about himself.” Missy throws Grey a look — a funny, skeptical look that garners a few chuckles.

After a short bit of small talk, he says bye to his coworkers and he leads her to their table. He opens the menu, asks her what she wants him to order. She smiles at him, even though he’s immersed in the food choices. She asks him which picture of her he shows people.

“The nudie. Obviously.”

“Oh my God —”

She catches the glint in his eyes as she presses her hand to her neck. Her heart is jack-hammering. He is so fucking deadpan and dry sometimes that it confuses her.

“That’s what you get. For sending someone a naked picture of yourself.”

She waves him off. “I know you’re trying to shame me right now, but all I can focus on is the fact that you not only looked at the picture after you said you weren’t going to — but you saved it. Perv. Have you jacked off to it, too?”

“Well, yeah.” He looks at her blankly. “Obviously.”

She hunches over the table, orienting her face into her place setting, and she loudly snorts out a honking laugh. Every time she raises her face to look at him, appearing totally innocent and casual with his fingers twirling the stem of his water glass, it gets her giggles going again.

She’s sweating from laughing when he leans over and swats her with his napkin. “Oh my God,” he says, “Can’t take you anywhere. People are watching, probably wondering why they opened up this fine establishment to such riff raff. Be a lady, will you?”
He actually wakes up in the middle of the night to the sound of people having sex in the next room over. He can hear muffled rhythmic thumping — and he can hear the faint breathy squeak of a female. He belatedly realizes that it’s coming from Jaime’s room. Jaime is having sex with a female in his room.

Is Brienne back?

He has no idea what to say to Jaime’s girlfriend, as she hovers around him while he gets his lunch together for work. They’ve never ever spent any time alone before. Jaime is generally always around to be a buffer, spewing shit that makes everyone distracted. Grey clears his throat and turns back to the coffee machine, pressing the bottom of his tie into his stomach. She tells him that jet lag is killer — before she self-consciously says that he must already know that because she knows that he takes trips to places sometimes. She tells him that she’s back now. Like, back to stay for good.

She is a nervous talker — she compliments his suit and says he looks nice. She says it looks like a fancy suit, and it looks like it fits him well. But she doesn’t really know very much about suits, so it could really be a bad suit and a bad fit for all that she knows. Her ensuing laugh sounds insane and forced to him.

He tells her that his suits are tailored. And then he puts a cup of black coffee in front of her.

She takes a careful sip of the coffee and she immediately pulls her face into grimace. And then she feels self-conscious about that, too, so she tells him that he sure likes his coffee strong. And then she feels self-conscious about that — her face turns red. She asks him if it’s okay if she puts sugar in it — and she dumps a lot of sugar into it.

He shrugs. “Other people make their coffee too weak.”

“How are things going with Missandei?” Brienne says. “It’s been awhile since I’ve gotten a chance to chat with her.”

“She’s coming over tonight.”

“And things are?”

He looks at her straight on. “They are fine.”

She looks down to the floor and a smile breaks across her face for just a split second.
When Missandei knocks on their door, Jaime tells Brienne to go hide behind it. When Jaime opens the door for Missandei, he tells her that he has a surprise for her. And she squeals, “Ooh! I love presents!” And then she screams her lungs out when she sees Brienne pop out from behind the door — the volume and pitch of her scream making him wince. The ladies are jumping and hugging each other and talking a mile a minute. It’s a bit much, so he escapes back into the kitchen to check on the pupusas, which Jaime left frying on the stove.

“Oh my God,” Jaime says, following behind him. “We are so domestic. We both have bitches. We’re making dinner together. When the hell did this happen?”

Jaime’s been over-the-moon apeshit happy — because Brienne is back — and it’s been almost unbearable.

He decides to go home with Missandei to give Jaime and Brienne some alone time. So they can have sex without worrying about him listening in. Missandei is tipsy off red wine and entirely weird about it when he suggests that he go home with her in front of Jaime and Brienne. She tells him it’s a Thursday night. He slowly tells her that he knows it’s Thursday — so can he stay over? Missandei cuts eye contact and tells him that her place is a mess. He patiently tells her that her place is always a mess.

Jaime, with his impeccable sense of social decorum, says, “Dude, this is awkward to watch. Boo, I think Missy’s saying she don’t want you to come over.”

He tells Jaime that it’s fine. And then he mutely goes into his bedroom to pull a suit out of his closet, putting it in a travel bag before hooking the hanger over his wrist. He tells Missandei that he’s ready to go — and he can drive her car and they can carpool tomorrow. And her eyes snap to his — and he notes, with a bit of surprise, that she is seriously pissed.

“What is going on with you?” he says, when he starts her car.

“Were you going to talk to me at all before you renewed your lease with Jaime!” she shouts at him.

“What?”

“At dinner,” she says condemnationly. “When Brienne was talking about finding a place to live — you guys said you were about to sign another yearlong lease together.”

“Yeah? We are.” He is utterly confused. He has no fucking idea why she is flipping out about this.
After they walk into her apartment, after she turns on the lights and pops her keys in the tray near the doorway, she tells him that she can’t believe she has to tell him to think about her sometimes. Think about her before he makes these plans. Talk to her before he schedules, blocks off, and buys plane tickets for a weeklong vacation. Talk to her before he decides to shack up with his boyfriend for another entire year. She tells him that he still operates like he’s single.

He tells her that he already knows how these conversations will unfold. She wouldn’t want to break her lease to move in with him right now. They have never even talked about living together once. If he doesn’t renew his lease, then where the fuck are he and Jaime supposed to live? If, in the event that she and he decide to fucking cohabitate in the next fucking year — he can probably find someone to fucking sublet the fucking apartment. Why is it necessarily to talk shit out with her that he already knows the answers to? And he has a shit ton of vacation time. He has accrued four weeks. He is only taking off one fucking week to go hang out in the fucking woods with Drogo because Drogo is having a shitty time at work and they were reminiscing about their trip to the Summer Isles and so they decided to go out into the woods for a fucking week to just chill. He says that fucking Jaime is going on the trip, too, yet she is not on Jaime’s fucking ass for taking time off without her input. He says that he and Jaime do this shit to each other all the time, and they don’t freak out on each other. Jaime fucking invited Daven to stay at their apartment for a week without telling him, but he didn’t fucking blow a fucking gasket at Jaime over it — because it’s actually not a fucking big deal.

She tells him that he really needs to stop constantly comparing her to Jaime. Jaime is his friend and his fucking roommate. Jaime is not his fucking girlfriend. Jaime doesn’t have to fucking get naked and let him stick his dick inside Jaime’s vagina.

“Oh my God,” Grey says. “I’m so sorry for burdening you with my dick. It will never happen again.”

“Don’t you dare threaten me,” she says.

“Who do you think is threatening you? Did what I said actually sound like a fucking threat?”

She tells him that he always does this. When he moved in with Jaime — he didn’t even tell her about it. She learned about it from Jaime when they were packing up their shit. She reminds him that he didn’t even tell her when his fucking half marathon was — if she hadn’t accidentally stumbled upon it by talking to Jaime, then she wouldn’t even get a chance to be there for him. He didn’t even invite her to his fucking company party! He didn’t even think that she’d want to go — which she did! She wants to meet the people he works with because he spends a fucking third of his fucking day around these people and she wants to be involved in his fucking life. It’s not like she wants to tie him down and make him have her babies. It’s not even that she thinks they should be living together or that they should take vacation together — it’s just that it’s not even on the table for him. He just doesn’t think of her when he carries out his shit.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” he says. “I do think about you. Are you saying you want to move in together? I didn’t think we were at that point yet. We haven’t even talked about it once.”

“No, I didn’t say I wanted to move in with you!” she yells. “You’re making me sound like a crazy clingy bitch! I just — you just decided it, man. You just decided it all without talking to me.”

“Missandei,” he says in frustration. “You’re really loud right now. People are probably trying to sleep.”

“Are you fucking kidding me with this!” she screams.
He’s never slept on her sofa the entire time they’ve been together — including the parts when they weren’t actually together. He didn’t even know her sofa was one of those pullout ones.

He’s drifting off to sleep, after an hour of getting the silent treatment from her, after he had brushed his teeth and taken off most of his clothes. He had to go hunt for his own blanket because she seemed like she wanted him to go die in a corner somewhere.

He snaps back awake when he feels her shove him roughly.

He stares at her incredulously. In the dim light, he can see that her arms are crossed over her chest — her body taut with anger still. She hisses at him that she can’t believe he can sleep when they are fighting like this, like he doesn’t even give a shit that they are fighting. He grunts and digs the heel of his hand into his eye, telling her that he has work tomorrow. She has work tomorrow. What the fuck is he supposed to do? Lie awake all night thinking about how fucking irrational she is being?

She scoffs softly. He sighs. He starts reaching out for her.

She yanks her arm away. She says, “Forget it,” before she walks into her bedroom and shuts the glass doors behind her.

The next morning is tense. They get ready for work wordlessly, moving around each other in silent politeness. He accidentally catches her in the bathroom naked from the waist up, as she’s picking up her bra to put it on. He spins around on his feet when he sees her and walks back into the kitchen, where he has the coffee machine going. She still thinks he’s a heartless, inconsiderate fucking bitch, but she’s done shouting that at him.

The ride into work is not much better. There’s no sound except for the road and her winter wedding mix, volume turned down low. She doesn’t know how he’s going to get home — if he expects her to pick him up after work or if he’s going to take the bus. She’s being stupid, but she doesn’t want to break the silence to ask him.

He exits out of her car, dragging his leather bag behind him, without a word to her.

By the end of the work day, after a lot of hours distracted by it, she’s completely over their stupid fight. At some point, she decided it was a really dumb fight, and he sort of had a point — she was being kind of unreasonable and expecting him to read her mind. And it’s also not like she didn’t know what she was getting into — being with him. She knows how he is. She’s known him for a lot of years now. She knows that he’s been on his own for most of his life, and it’s likely just a foreign, unheard of thing for him — to incorporate her into his decision-making process. She realizes that she never once brought up these issues to him — before she blew up at him.
He takes the bus home to change and to hitch a ride to dinner with Brienne and Jaime, maybe. They had all made these Friday night plans last night, before he and Missandei started beating each other down like a couple of assholes. She’s been quiet all day — she usually sexts him intermittently throughout — and her wounded silence has been making him feel like shit.

Jaime and Brienne are laughing on the couch when he enters the apartment. Jaime is immediately super fucking nosy and a hag, asking him what was going on and if everything is okay with Missandei.

He groans and clasps his hands on top of his head. He reluctantly tells them the cliff notes version of the fight, recapping it as faithfully as he can.

Jaime is a stupid bitch. Jaime starts cracking up, hugging a couch cushion to his chest. “That fight is so classic!” Jaime says, body bouncing up and down from his laughter. “You’re such an idiot! It’s so great!”

Brienne lightly swats Jaime and gives him a look of disgust before she turns back to Grey. “Sounds like a rough night,” she says, frowning. “I can see both sides, and I feel for the both of you.”

“You didn’t get pissed at Jaime for renewing his lease with me, though,” Grey says.

“Well,” Brienne says carefully. “He actually talked about it with me. Over Skype. Before he talked about it with you.”

They are already there when she walks into the restaurant. They are at a booth and there’s a spot saved for her next to him. He is schlubby, in well-worn jeans, an old t-shirt, and a zip-up hoodie. She finds that as much as she loves looking at him in his suits, she’s really sentimental about his boy-don’t-care wear. It was how he looked when she first saw him, when he first walked into the language center and she was struck dumb by how cute she thought he was.

When he looks at her, walking up to the table, there’s still a part of her that wants to punch him in the face. There’s still a part of her where anger flares, just a little bit.

She silently slides in next to Grey.

“It’s good to see you guys back together again,” Jaime says with a straight face.

Brienne hits him. “You are seriously the worst!”

The tension starts easing the more they drink — or the more she drinks. She’s not sure. Sometimes
she wonders if she has a problem — always drinking to make the sad stuff go away. Jaime is telling
them about the class he’s teaching — teaching teenagers their rights in case they get detained by law
enforcement. Jaime is choking up laughing, when he tells them that the boys are just a bunch of
hilarious little shysters, always joshing him for his wannabe-talk and for his hats.

“They call me Justin Bieber, too,” Jaime tells Grey, bringing his glass of whiskey to his mouth.

“I believe that I was actually the originator of that nickname,” Brienne says. “I called you that when
we were kids.”

“Oh my gosh!” Jaime slaps his hand on the table. “That’s right!” He swings his arm over her
shoulders and gives her a sideways hug, kissing her cheek. “I love that,” he says into her face. She
blushes.

They are so cute. It only serves to remind Missy that she’s stuck with an emotionally constipated
robot. She turns to glance at Grey, sitting rigidly next to her. He’s been relatively quiet, and his
knuckles have been lightly brushing against the side of her leg all night. She spontaneously grabs his
hand under the table, and she squeezes it. It makes him look at her.

On their way out of the restaurant, she snatches Grey’s car keys out of his hand and she tosses them
to Jaime, who manages to catch the bundle even though he wasn’t expecting it. She tells Jaime and
Brienne to take Grey’s car and drive home with it.

“Wait, what about me?” Grey says from beside her. “Who’s taking me home?”

“Bro,” Jaime says. “You are so pretty. But so dumb.”

She grabs Grey’s hand in both of hers, dragging him backward toward her car. She calls out her
goodbyes to Brienne and Jaime. She tells them that she and Grey are going to go back to her place,
and they are going to have ugly animal sex — with each other. Jaime raises his arm and gives her
the victory sign.
He turns on her car with the flick of the key, after he adjusted the seat and the mirrors. Her Fit is tiny, and he often looks awkward driving it, like it’s not made for his long body, but this has become something automatic — him walking over to the driver’s side of her car whenever they go or leave somewhere together. She doesn’t prefer to drive if she doesn’t have to. She likes being driven — maybe that’s another holdover from childhood, when she used to go on long drives, first with her grandparents, and then later, tagging along with her brothers when they’d go scope out cars to restore. She even has these memories of being in a car with her parents — in the backseat with her brothers. They were playing with an orange. She can’t remember what kind of car it was and how it looked — it must’ve been a really old, really cheap beater — but for some reason, she does remember a plush red velvet material covering the seats, saturated with dust.

She looks at him through the faint light, thinking about how they’ve developed a routine, feeling a little maudlin about it — because her brain is already worried about how it will cope if this ever went away, if he ever went away.

“So what kind of ugly animal sex are we having?” he says casually, after he adjusts the heat, as he buckles his seatbelt. “Hyena sex? Panda sex? Gorilla sex?”

She can’t even stand it sometimes — the way he looks at her, the way he sounds when he’s speaking to her. “Baby, I’m so sorry I was such an ass to you!” she blurts. “I’m sorry I went psycho and raised my voice and yelled. It wasn’t right.”

He sighs, clenching his hands around the steering wheel before he puts the car in reverse. “Shit. I’m really sorry I didn’t consult with you before making all of those plans. I really do want to involve you in my life more. I just — wasn’t thinking. I’ll try to do better the next time this comes up.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t more patient.”

He puts his hand on her leg. “You are immensely patient with me.”

The mood is considerably lighter when they get to her apartment. She’s holding his hand in the elevator. He’s letting her. She’s really giddy and excited that they aren’t fighting anymore. It’s pretty nuts.

She complains that it’s so early on a Friday night, and they are like old people now. They are having dinner parties, and they are going to bed at reasonable hours because they have work the next day. She asks him if he sometimes misses the good ol’ days of college. He raises a brow and says, “Do I miss constantly getting blitzed out of my mind and feeling like shit all the time? Nope.”

“I’m not talking about that. God, you always take it to such a dark place.” She leans over the
counter, opposite of him, unconsciously pushing up her breasts with her crossed arms. She can track his gaze — she can see it drift from her face to her chest — and she can see the tick in his jaw and see this cast come over his eyes. And she licks her lips and she already feels heated, and she’s already breathing a little bit heavier.

She lowers her voice and she tells him that some of her favorite parts of college were all of his self-denial — all of those times he acted like he didn’t desperately want to fuck her. His eyes come back up to her face, and he’s serious, as he tells her that he hadn’t wanted to burden her with himself — he liked her too much as a person to do that to her. The statement makes her melt, and it makes her feel sad. And then his mouth tilts into a quiet smile. And he tells her that there were times when he really wanted to fuck her so badly. He just wanted to be with her so badly — and perversely — a lot of those times of want were good times.

“You knew I wanted to be with you, too. I was so embarrassingly obsessed with you,” she says, frowning. “God, we wasted so much time.”

“I don’t think so,” he says, still smiling. “I think it happened just how it was supposed to happen.”

He lightly tells her that the night is still young. And they don’t have work in the morning. His overtures are sometimes tiny — microscopic — but she thinks he’s offering her sex. She agrees, that the night is still young. She asks him if he would like a drink. He tells her sure, a drink would be nice.

She pulls out some martini glasses and liquor bottles from her cabinets and sloppily starts mixing drinks blindly. She’s actually not horrible at making cocktails — but she’s already a little buzzed and she has no patience for crafting something nice and she doesn’t want to fuck with simple syrup. She puts a little bit of the brown liquor into a shaker and then a little bit of the clear one, and then a little bit of the blue one and then she gives it a squeeze of lime — with her fist — and she cracks open a can of really light beer and gives the cocktail a little splash of that, for bubbles. He’s leaning over the kitchen island, watching her as she raises her concoction to her face and takes a sip. She recoils right away and coughs spastically, patting her chest to get the poison fumes out of her lungs.

“Yeah, that looks about right,” Grey says, smirking, leaning over to pull the stem of the martini glass toward him. He takes a sip of it and pulls the glass away from his face, going, “Whoa.”

“A little strong, huh?”

“Babe,” he says, tilting his head back. “We are going to regret this in the morning.” He takes down a little more than half of the drink in one continuous gulp, before he returns the glass to her.

One of the many things she loves about him is actually how funny he is. She knows that in group situations, he’s constantly overshadowed by Jaime or Drogo because they’re preening little peacock bitches. And she knows that she’s also a preening peacock bitch, always desperate for people to look at her and to focus on her and to listen to her. She knows he’s content to take a backseat to everyone and just lie low. But she really, really loves the way he makes her laugh. He pulls laughter out of her with a yank — he surprises and shocks her into laughing.

She bets him that he can’t get her dress off without using his hands and he bets her that he completely fucking can. They shake on it. At stake is a non-sexy back rub for 30 minutes.
He takes down the zipper of her dress with his teeth. And then it stops being sexy after that. After
that, he is constantly almost kicking her in the face, as he tries to push down the tight sheath with his
bare feet. He grumbles that she always wears stuff one size too small — and she’s completely
scandalized that he dared to say that to her.

“Oh my God, chill out,” he slurs, finally giving up and pulling her into sitting position, yanking her
dress up and off her body with his hands. “I didn’t call you fat. I just said that you could size up one.
Weren’t you the one who told me that numbers don’t matter? It’s the fit?” He tosses her dress over
his shoulder. It lands somewhere next to her sliding glass door.

“Oh my God,” she says, lying back down, rolling over to face his jean-clad knee on the floor next to
her coffee table, still in her red strapless bra and panties. “I can’t believe you used my own words
against me.”

He reaches down and knocks her so she’s on her back. He straddles her. He grabs her breasts,
squeezing them and pushing them into one another. “Your fucking body drives me fucking insane,”
he grinds out. “Your tits are fucking awesome. I like how they fit into my hands.”

She laughs, reaching for his shirt, pushing it up. “Oh man, say more of that romantic stuff to me,
please.”

He tells her he’s going to stick it in her ass. He says it to scare her. He doesn’t know why he’s bent
on terrifying her before they’re gonna do it. It’s just something that feels right to him, and he’s just
going with it.

He rolls his eyes when she tells him to go for it. Because she’s prone to talking a big game. She likes
to exaggerate and brag. She tells him she’s never done that kind of ass stuff before — she’s really
only done ass stuff with him because the other guys she’s been with have been kind of like . . .
what’s the word? Not prudish. But something kind of like that. Maybe squeamish is the word? She
mutters something unintelligible in Low Valyrian, and then she cracks up. Then she tells him she
guesses that she means that the other guys were not like him — like, they didn’t fuck her like he
fucks her.

In Low Valyrian, he tells her to please fucking shut up about the other men she’s been with, unless
she wants him to start talking about the other women he’s been with.

“Oh, baby. I love it when you get jealous. I know I shouldn’t, but you’re so cute.”

She cackles, and she tells him she’s pretty much down for any sex stuff. Like anything. Except
threesome stuff. And nothing with fire. Or electricity. Or clothes pins. Nothing involving too much
poop. She would never let him or want to watch him have sex with someone else. That’s just crazy
shit. Hmm, maybe she’s actually not that sexually adventurous after all. Maybe they should be
talking about what she will do? She would let him pee on her. She would let him try to pee inside
her. He could jizz on her face, if he’s into that sort of thing. They can wear costumes. Like sexy
nurse. Or his favorite Power Ranger, whatever floats his boat.

She won’t stop laughing as she rolls over and gets on her hands and knees on the floor, and tells him
to stick his cock in her ass. She’s choking on her own spittle-filled laughter as she tells him that she
went number two like, right before leaving for dinner. So, consider that. So like, weigh his options.
Pick his journey. Embrace adventure.

He’s swaying on his knees. The room is spinning slightly — but nothing horrible and vomit-inducing. He wants to blurt out that he fucking loves her — and not because of this stupid asinine conversation — but because he just derives so much happiness from her. But even his drunk brain knows that this is a bad time to say that to her. Instead he slaps her ass and he tells her that anal is not a deed that one can enter into lightly or spontaneously.

“Wuss,” she says.

He rolls his eyes again. Because she is wrong, and he’s not a wuss. “We would need an assload — literally, an assload of lube. Or else it will hurt. Trust me. I’d know.”

“Aw, sad. Don’t taint our sexy times with your terrible stories.”

He grins down at her back. He reaches down and parts her, smoothly slipping a finger into her, feeling her slick walls contract around his knuckle. He adds another finger, and she moans. He bites down on his bottom lip in concentration, ducking down a bit to watch what he’s doing.

“Dude, I actually happen to have an assload of lube,” she says, grunting as he touches a sensitive spot inside her. “No joke, babe.”

They are naked and hanging out in her bathroom, all casually with all of the bright lights on. She has the nearly full bottle of Hpnotiq next to her on the bathroom counter, where she is sitting, swinging her legs. They’ve been taking turns pulling sips from the bottle. He’s already asked her if she like, thinks she’s gonna be in a rap video or something. He reminds her that she apparently has some dopeass moves that he has yet to see.

She shoves her hand to his face, as she reads the back of the bottle of lube. She actually knows how lube works. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out how lube works. But this seems like a momentous occasion — one that she should be fully informed for. “Shut up, slut,” she says. “My moves are fresh to death, and you have already seen them. You see them every time you close your eyes to go to sleep.”

“Why do you have so much lube?”

“I was hoarding it,” she says. “Because I was preparing for a future of having sex with myself and only myself because I wanted to respect you as a person who deserves to feel safe and comfortable DO YOU SEE HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU OR WHAT, DUMBASS?”

He takes a swig of the disgustingly sweet blue stuff before he uses the bottle to bump into the lube in her hand, making it lightly hit her face.

She grumbles and swats him away. “Oh my God, it was a buy-one-get-one deal, okay? Don’t slut-shame me. It’s such a slut thing to do, to shame another slut. Ack! Why is this fucking thing so hard to read! I can speak a gajillion languages! But I can’t read the back of a bottle of lube! What if we use it wrong because I’m illiterate!”
She holds down the other end of the coffee table with her elbows, leaning her full weight on it so it doesn’t flip over. He stands on the other end at the edge — totally naked except for his shoes — he needs his shoes for the grip and also for the cushion because her floors are hardwood. He tells her that her downstairs neighbors are going to hate her.

“They already hate me,” she says. “They’re always like, blah blah blah why do you have to stomp around with heels on all the time? And I’m like, yeah, yeah, I don’t give a fuck.” She giggles. “Okay, go ahead, baby.”

When he backflips off the edge of her coffee table, the sudden lift in weight skews the balance and Missandei takes her end of the coffee table down with her arms. She squeaks in surprise before she lets go of the table and it comes crashing down loudly on the floor, about the same time that he lands with a booming thump.

He stares at her. She starts cracking up. He shakes his head. “You are horrible. Is your table okay?”

He smears lube all over his hand and fingers, before he bends her over, smears more lube over her opening, pressing his thumb against it — making her whimper — before he warns her that it’s about to go down. She tells him to stop yapping like a little bitch and just do it already. He pushes his forefinger into her ass, just a little bit.

She exhales loudly and clears her throat. “Okay. This is different. Hmm.”

He starts moving in and out of her — just tiny movements.

She sinks down into the floor. “Oh shit. That is nice.”

He is drunk as fuck, and there’s lube all over the goddamn place. It’s all over her hardwood floor, it’s all over their bodies. It’s like they’re skating around on ice on their hands and knees. She’s also drunk as fuck. She keeps biting him and squirming around, knocking him over. She can’t stop laughing as she keeps trying to wrestle with him, occasionally threatening to mount him like he’s a horse, if he doesn’t man up already and put his dick in her ass. He is pretty sure she is not ready to get a dick in the ass. She’s too tight and and it’s happening too fast and her body is naturally a little tense from the prospect if it all — despite all of her drunk bravado. A finger is one thing, but a dick is like — a whole bigger matter. He tells her as much, and she tells him that he’s such a fucking pussy. She tells him to stop being such a fucking pussy. And he shakes his head because there’s just no reasoning with her sometimes.

He says, “Okay,” sighing as he positions himself behind her. Her body shakes from holding her limbs together, so she doesn’t collapse onto the slippery floor.

He’s not even half an inch into her when she screeches, “Oh my God, stop! Stop! It hurts! It hurts!”
What the fuck! Why would you do this to me!

“I told you!” he says, immediately pulling out.

“You did not!”

“What the —! Babe, I just told you seconds ago that you do not want my dick in your ass, and you called me a pussy.”

“I do not remember this.”

Sex on the floor is incredibly hard with all of the lube. At some point, Missandei declared that she is rich, bitch, and can afford all the lube in the world. She had squeezed out the rest of the bottles onto his body, laughing maniacally.

His knees are hurting and he can’t stay in place enough to properly thrust into her. They keep sliding around. She’s being a little annoying — drunkenly egging him on with a bunch of incoherent vulgarities. He gets fed up with all the fucking bullshit that he pulls out of her. He decides that they have to leave the mess on the floor for clean-up tomorrow. He picks her up and drags her into the bedroom, clumsily stepping on one of her shoes, bitching her out under his breath for wearing such fucking stupid things. She tells him not to be so mean to her little pretties.

She collapses and rolls around on her bed — wiping off the excess lube on her sheets and blankets on purpose. He’s watching her in horror, going, “Holy fuck, we have to wash your entire bed tomorrow.”

“You’re so fucking obsessed with laundry, and it’s not sexy!” she shouts at him.

“Shh, baby,” he says, spreading her legs and orienting himself at her entrance — the regular one — the normal one. “You’re so loud.” He pushes in. She is really wet and he slides in so easily. And they’ve had such fucking ridiculous foreplay for what seemed like a million hours — and this is the first proper bit of penetration. This is the good stuff. And it feels like it’s been so long and they’ve been working so hard for it. He seats himself in her further, breathing through the incredible feel of her.

On cue, she moans really loudly and proudly, as she digs her bare heels into his back, pulling him in deeper. She gasps, grinding herself against him, and says, “You like it when I’m loud.”

“Yeah, it’s hot,” he admits, pulling out — his eyes just about rolling back into his head — before jamming himself back into her. She exhales into a ragged moan, and he runs his hand down her slick body. “But I don’t think your neighbors like it.”

“Fuck my neighbors,” she says, looking up at him through heavy-lidded eyes. “Baby. God, you’re so hot it makes me want to fuck you — even as I’m getting fucked by you. How can we make this happen? Baby, I just love you so fucking much.” She yanks his face down to hers, kissing him like she’s trying to touch the back of his throat with her tongue.
She rolls onto her back, twiddling her thumbs on her stomach as he twists his body around, cracking his back and neck.

“Yeah, so I think I’m too drunk to fuck you,” he says, gesturing down to his penis, which is still shiny with her arousal. It’s just chilling very unassumingly and being very cute and squishy and soft.

She smiles at him — at her boyfriend — which is still kind of a really weird term to apply to Grey sometimes. She’s definitely someone’s girlfriend — his girlfriend. But he doesn’t seem like he’s anyone’s boyfriend.

“This is kind of your fault,” he says, swiping up the bottle of Hpnotiq from her side table, sloshing it around. There’s only an inch of it left. “You’re a bad influence.” He raises the bottle to his lips and takes another sip from it.

She kicks him. “What the fuck! Why are you drinking more! That’s not going to help!”

“It’s almost gone,” he says, like she is stupid. “We lost the cap. Can’t let this go to waste.”

“Oh my God,” she whines, sitting up. “You are so pretty. But so dumb.” She steals the bottle from him and throws him a dirty look before she tilts back and finishes it all. It’s horrible and gross and she’s getting to the icky stage of being drunk — but she needs to take one for the team because he will kill it if she doesn’t. Stupid immigrant-y bitch.

He snatches the empty bottle from her and casually tosses it off the bed. It lands with a muffled, obnoxious thump, somewhere on her carpeted floor. He grabs her legs and slides her down on the bed a little bit. Oh, hells yeah. She knows where this is going.

“Let’s play a game,” he says.

“You hate games, though.”

“Shut up,” he says, lifting her leg and placing it over his shoulder. “So the game is . . . you don’t get to come, unless I get to come.”

He’s munching on a piece of cold pizza from her fridge, sitting naked on the bed on between her legs, anchoring them down with some of his weight. She is a sweaty mess, strung tighter than a bow string. They’ve been at this forever. He keeps bringing her right to the fucking brink — and then he keeps pulling away. She cannot take it anymore. She keeps reaching down, to her clit, trying to just fucking end it, but he’s been vigilant and a major asshole. He keeps leaning over and slapping her hand off of her own body, reminding her that she doesn’t get to come until he gets to. She’s been fruitlessly trying to rub her thighs together. She’s been trying to hump his leg. She’s begged him desperately to just give it to her, crying over it even. He’s a crafty motherfucker, and he’s thwarted all of her efforts at getting off.

He’s even erect again. He’s been erect.

“How the fuck are you eating pizza right now!” she shouts.

“I’m hungry,” he says through a full mouth, throwing her a ‘duh’ look.
“I hate you!”

“No you don’t,” he says, chewing through crust. “You love me.”

Her mouth is completely foul and her head is throbbing when she wakes up. She’s also disgustingly sweaty and hot. Her sheets and limbs are all tangled up together. She is pretty sure that she hates everything. It’s too fucking bright, and everything feels horrendous. She roughly kicks at his naked chest to wake him up — somehow she ended up sleeping perpendicular and a little bit on top of him — because she will not bear this torture alone.

She hears him groaning, shifting around on the bed. Then she hears him say, “How the fuck is it one p.m.?”
He stops over at her place on the way out with the guys to grab her three-season two-person tent, her mummy sleeping bag, her butane camp stove, her heat reflecting sleeping pad, her water filter, and her headlamp. When he marked those things off on Jaime’s checklist and told Jaime that Missandei already owned a lot of the supplies, Jaime had scoffed in disbelief.

He gets there early because he anticipated having to help her dig through her shit for all the supplies — so he’s a bit shocked when she swings open the door and shows him all of the stuff nicely bundled and piled in the hallway for him. She looks like she’s on her way to the gym. He kisses her hello, hand skimming over the curve of her butt before he grabs a handful and pulls her into his body, smiling at her as she shrieks and laughs into his neck.

“Hey,” she says, leaning up to kiss him, placing both of her hands on his chest as he holds her. “I have something to ask you,” she says when she pulls away. She blows an errant strand of curly hair off of her face. He helps her by reaching up and tucking it behind her ear. “It’s my grandma’s seventieth birthday at the end of next month, and I’m going home for it. I was looking into plane tickets and, well, I was wondering if you wanted to come with? I can get your ticket, too?”

“Oh,” he says softly.

“I’m sorry I kinda sprung this on you right as you’re about to leave,” she says quickly. “But Mars just nailed down the actual date of the party today, so . . . just wanted to put it on your radar.”

“That’s a big deal, right?” he says. “Meeting your family?”

She looks uncomfortable. “I mean, technically you’ve already met them. During graduation.”

“That was almost four years ago. And we weren’t — um — you didn’t introduce me as — you know.”

She forces out a smile, patting him on the chest before she takes a step back, pulling herself out of his arms. “I know this stuff makes you uncomfortable. I just — it was just something that crossed my mind. You don’t have to come. I really mean that. There’s no pressure. It was just an idea. We can pretend I didn’t bring it up.” She lightly laughs. “Um, you probably shouldn’t keep your friends waiting much longer.”

She tells him that she wants to walk him down to the car — help him carry some of the stuff, but also to say hello to Drogo and Daven, both of whom she hasn’t seen in awhile.

Jaime’s huge Range Rover is parked in the loading and unloading zone of her complex. Jaime pops the trunk and Grey starts loading the stuff. Missandei cheerfully says hello after the windows are
rolled down and heads pop out. Daven asks her if she’s tagging along on their man trip. She holds her hands up and she says she wouldn’t dare ruin the sanctity of manliness by bringing estrogen into the woods. Drogo calls out from behind Daven and thanks for her letting them use her gear. He promises her they will take good care of it. After Grey slams the trunk door closed, after Missandei reaches through the open windows and squeezes some hands, all that’s left is for him to say bye to her for a week.

She gives him a small, shy little wave. She says, “I’ll see you when you get back.” She takes a step forward — her arms coming up to give him a hug — but he sees her hesitate, sees her stutter as she glances at the vigilant people in the Range Rover behind him. She stops in her tracks. And lowers her arms to her sides. And silently, she mouths to him that she’ll miss him. And that she loves him.

He takes a step forward, cups her face in both of his hands, and he softly kisses her there on the sidewalk, gently and chastely. He whispers that he will miss her too.

“Fucking — cocksucking — goddammit!” Jaime taps the screen of his phone rapidly as he screams at it, face turning the same color as his hat.

Grey mutely walks over, places his hand over Jaime’s phone, picking it up out of Jaime’s sweaty palm, pocketing it in his hoodie. “Bieber, we told you, man. There’s no reception here.”

Jaime bitchily tells him that the coverage map that he checked before leaving showed that this area was in the yellow zone — it was clearly in the yellow zone — which meant roaming data. Well, the map is a fucking liar. Jaime tells them all that he’s not going to be able to ‘gram their man-trip in real time.

Grey leaves Jaime to grumble by himself as Grey returns to continue helping Drogo and Daven set up the tents.

Missandei dips a carrot stick into the creamy avocado concoction and snaps the end of it off with her teeth, crunching and chewing it up.

“Dammit, Missy, how many times do we have to tell you that that’s for our faces — not for you to eat?”

“Needs salt,” Missandei says, casually rolling her body around the edge of Jhiqui’s humongous kitchen island, wearing her matching pink flannel pajamas from a million years ago. She spots Brienne’s secret smile, pointing into her lap as she sits on the ground, as Doreah finger-combs Brienne’s short blond hair off her face from behind on a kitchen chair. Doreah has an odd fascination with white people hair.

Missy picks up a fork and spears a strawberry from the top of a glass cup of basil-y fruit parfait that Nick had made for all of them before he left to go to trivia night at a nearby bar with his “boyz.” He had been adamant about the pronunciation of boyz. Hands down, Jhiqui has the most adorable husband in the history of all humankind.
Clea asks them all if they remember how slumber parties used to go down in college? They were poor, single, and made drunk nachos from stuff they pulled out of cans and opened from plastic bags. Now they’re in a fancy-ass five-thousand square-foot house, sipping on wine spritzers, and talking about their retirement accounts.

Brienne raises her hand. “Um, I would like for you guys to know that I am still very poor. And I still eat food from cans and plastic bags.”

“Ain’t no shame in that, babe,” Jhiqui says, increasing the volume on her bluetooth speakers, which has been playing a smattering of old school R&B sex music from Jhiqui’s phone. “I have a real question. You guys think I’m still down? You think I’m still with it? You know, tapped into the struggle? One of my cousins called me bougie the other day.”

Missy pauses in her dancing to raise her arms out, gesturing up and down at Jhiqui’s marble floors, Jhiqui’s walnut slab table, Jhiqui’s reclaimed lumber custom-made doors. “Look at where you live, Jenny from the Block.”

Jaime grew up very sheltered — literally — which is a fact that he keeps reminding them of. He keeps telling them he is so bored. He keeps telling them his hands are too delicate from white collar work and it hurts when he has to pick up rocks or gather wood. He keeps telling them that he is freezing his ass off because no one mentioned to him that the mountains are cold as fuck. Grey has already stripped off his own thermal under layer and gave it to Jaime to wear just so the guy would shut the fuck up about being cold.

In contrast, Daven, who was also fed from a silver spoon, is actually really impressive. He tells them he goes backpacking with his dog all the time to get away from the oppressive city. Daven can identify edible plants and tell them bits of trivia about animals and ecosystems.

Drogo is thinking about quitting his job at his friend’s startup. The hours are long, the money isn’t coming in, and he just wants to have a fucking life where he is not constantly stressed out again. The thing is that he sunk a good chunk of his own money into it and for that reason, it’s hard to walk away. It would feel like failure.

“You’re not a failure, man,” Daven says.

“I didn’t say I was a failure,” Drogo snaps. “I said it would feel like failure.”

“Dude,” Daven says, poking their small fire with a stick, turning a log over. “I get it. It wasn’t easy to tell my parents that their path isn’t going to be my path. I know it’s more of that rich white people problems you guys are always giving me shit about —”

“Rich people problems are sometimes legit as fuck!” Jaime declares.

Daven keeps staring into the fire, ignoring Jaime. “Anyway,” he says. “You just gotta do what you gotta do sometimes. Learn from the experience, then move on.”

“Dude,” Jaime says. “Did all that weed make you a fucking genius, or what?” Jaime turns to Drogo. “You should listen to him, Daniel.”
To prove to them that she’s still a homegirl, Jhiqui goes into her liquor cabinet and pulls out a bottle of Courvoisier, making Brienne instantly groan. Brienne says she’s not drinking very much because she’s going to brunch with her parents in the morning and she would really like to not show up hungover as hell. She’s not 21 years old anymore.

“I’m with Brie,” says Doreah. “I have my sister’s baby shower to go to.”

“Yoga class,” Clea says.

“Oh my God! What has happened to us!” Jhiqui says passionately, hitting her chest with the flat of her hand. “Remember when we partied so hard that we blacked out and forgot what happened to us and we got all scared we might’ve been raped by some frat boy until we talked to each other and learned that we just spent half the night passed out in a bathtub?” She spins to Brienne, the bottle of Courvoisier sloshing in her delicate hand. “Remember when I tried to sell you to that homeless man and he was like, uh, no thanks — like a chump?”

“Girlie,” Clea says. “I do remember those times. I also remember hitting my head on the sidewalk and my skirt flipping over my ass and me flashing a whole bunch of strangers. Those were actually not fun times.”

Jhiqui sighs loudly and paces the living room, cinching her robe tighter around her body. She tells them that what she misses about extreme youth is that feeling of invincibility and immortality. And the sense of adventure — living loudly and spontaneously. Jhiqui says that sometimes she is just so fucking tired of her current life. It’s an admission that she immediately feels guilty over — it’s written on her face. She looks up to her insanely high ceilings and she tells them that she really loves her husband — and she can see herself having children and growing old with him — but there are no surprises left. She’s been with Nick for a long time. She tells them sometimes she isn’t sure how she’s supposed to resign herself to a life of routine and predictability. He’s a fucking banker. And he gets really excited when it’s morel season.

Just when Jhiqui heads back to the liquor cabinet to put the Courvoisier away, Missy says, “Hey. I have nothing important going on tomorrow.”

Daven tells them that he’s seeing someone — a high school art teacher. She’s the reason he hasn’t packed up his shit and taken it all to King’s Landing. She’s the reason he’s staying west. He tells them that she’s great and she’s watching Max, his dog, while he’s away. She’s five years older than they are — and she’s divorced. His parents met her once, and they really don’t like her. But — things are serious with her. He tells them that she is the one. He’s just trying to figure out his shit because he doesn’t want to be a deadbeat when he proposes to her.

Jaime says, “Whoa.”
“Grey’s not cut,” she says, holding the crystal glass of really expensive cognac up to her nose, trying not to get any of the face mask on the cup. “I mean, it makes sense. Because he was born in the Summer Isles. I wasn’t surprised the first time we had sex, because I was sort of already anticipating it.” She paused. “Because I had thought about his penis a lot before we actually banged.” And wow, she really has an issue containing her verbal diarrhea.

This confession came about because Clea has never been with anyone who is uncircumcised — at least not until this new guy she is dating. She told them that he sat her down all seriously on the third date and told her that there was something he had to tell her. His serious manner freaked her out so much — she thought he had a child or some horrible STD — so she was really dumbfounded when he just told her was uncircumcised. They still haven’t had sex. The relationship is still very new. And Clea apparently really likes this guy and is determined not to fall into bed with him too fast.

“I’ve been Googling pictures of uncut penises,” Clea confesses, frowning. “Like, a lot. To prepare.”

Doreah says, “Oh my God,” as the rest of them crack up.

“Stop,” Clea whines. “It’s not that funny. Is the sex different with an uncut guy?”

Brienne raises her hands in surrender. With her green face mask on, they can only detect her blushing at her neck, which is furiously pink and mottled. “I’m out. I have no experience in this arena.”

“Okay,” Jhiqui says. “So now we know that Jaime is cut. Oh my God, Jaime is so hot. I mean, for a white boy.”

“Look who’s talking!” Doreah throws a pillow at Jhiqui. “You love white boys.”

“No!” Jhiqui says. “I just married one! I was down with the brothers before Nick!”

He’s hovering nearby, gathering more wood for the fire. The others keep picking up green or wet pieces and it’s been smoking them out, so he told them to just leave their asses in place while he hunts down some older pieces in the dark.

Over beers, brats, and a crackling fire, Daven leans back in his camp chair and asks them if any of them ever think about marriage, kids, the whole shebang.

“Yeah, of course,” Jaime says, before sipping from his beer can. “She and I have talked about it a lot. We’re not sure if marriage and kids are really for us.”

“Oh yeah?” Daven says.

“Yeah. I mean, bringing kids into the world and raising them — that’s not something to take lightly, you know? That’s a huge responsibility. And well, I love Brienne. She is it for me. We’re gonna be together until she kills me in my sleep. But we’re not getting married. I mean, neither of us are religious. Marriage is an utterly archaic and pointless institution.”

“Marriage is not pointless,” Daven says.

“Dude,” Jaime says dismissively. “It totally is.”
Grey drops a bundle of dry wood next to Daven’s feet, to interrupt the stupid argument that Jaime and Daven are about to have.

Jhiqui says that only oral is different with uncut guys. The first time she went down on an uncut guy, she was super drunk and like, ahh, what to do! She tells Clea that sometimes there’s a smell if the guy doesn’t clean himself well — which makes Clea wince — but the foreskin is like, really sensitive — so Clea can try cool new tricks with her man, when it comes to that point.

Jaime sarcastically asks Drogo if he ever gets tired of having sex with a different gorgeous woman each week. It’s something Drogo jokingly takes offense to, telling them that he’s dated before. He’s dated women for months before. But — admittedly — he’s not really super into monogamy. It’s something that actually drives his mom nuts because she has baby fever and wants grandchildren like, yesterday. Drogo tells them that he doesn’t know what his deal is — whether he’s acting out because of his lingering issues with his dad or if it’s simply because he hasn’t met someone who makes him want to spend all of his time with her. It’s not that he doesn’t respect women because he clearly respects women. He tells them he’s had women accuse him of being an asshole misogynist for the way he carries on — when he tells them he’s not interested in more — but that’s a fucked up accusation.

“I mean, hello, my mom is gay,” Drogo says.

“Dude,” Jaime says. “I dunno if you know this, but your mom being gay is not a get-out-jail-free card for sexism.”

“No, asshole,” Drogo says. “I meant that my mom raised me and my sisters in a certain way. After constantly being almost beaten to death by her husband.”

Jaime groans loudly. “I hate it when you make me feel like a bitch for the things I say.”

“I love his dick,” Missy says. “It’s like, the baby bear of dicks. It’s not too big. It’s not too small. It’s not too fat. It’s not too skinny. It’s like — just right.”

“Well,” Brienne says lightly. “I dunno if I can look him in the face the next time I see him. I might just end up looking at his junk and getting all red in the face over it. Because I’m awkward with people. Thanks a lot, Missy. Your boyfriend and I already have amazing conversations together all the time. The other day, I believe I rambled on about bees. I was like, ‘Where have all the bees gone, Grey?’ And he was like, ‘I don’t know.’ And then he stared at me, saying nothing, until I just tucked my tail in between my legs and screamed Jaime’s name and told him to hurry the fuck up getting dressed for dinner.”
Clea snickers. “I’ve had that conversation with him.”

“Oh my God, we all have had that conversation with him!” Doreah says. “What’s sex with him like, Missy? Does he just stare at you, all judgemental, until you orgasm?”

Missandei thinks back to the last time she was together with him, when he pulled her underwear off and lifted her to his shoulders by the ass, pushing her into a tall glass window, telling her not to fall right before he started going down on her and she started panting and blanking out.

“Yeah, pretty much like that,” Missandei tells Doreah. “Sometimes he glares at me impatiently and asks me what’s taking my orgasm so long.”

“What about you, man?” Daven asks. “You ever think about marriage?”

“No,” Grey says. “Missandei and I haven’t been together that long.”

Drogo snorts, Jaime bursts out in a laugh explosion, and Daven smiles and gently keeps poking at the fire.

“Bro,” Jaime says. “You and Missy have been going at it hot and heavy since like — the entire time I’ve known you.”


“Forever!” Jaime shouts for emphasis. “You’ve even given each other chlamydia, for fuck’s sake!”

Brienne and Missandei are sitting on the couch with a board of cheese and crackers, wine glasses in hand when they all walk through the door of their apartment, carrying all of her shit — which he has to clean before he gives it all back to her. Jaime and Drogo have been irritating him a little bit because they have been so fucking loud. They keep shouting at each other for no fucking reason other than they think it’s funny. Brienne jumps off the couch and runs over to throw her arms around Jaime — before she recoils and scrunches up her nose. “Dude, you really need a shower.”

Jaime leans forward and gives her a kiss, as she tries to duck her face away. “I think you mean I smell super manly and sexy.”

Brienne lightly coughs.

“How was the trip?” Missandei says from the couch.

“So great,” Drogo says. “Just what we needed. Get away from technology, from the hustle of the city — just some relaxation in the woods.”

“Nice,” she says. “I’m jealous.”

“You should come next time,” Daven says, dropping his dusty backpack on the ground. “We’re
thinking of making this into an annual thing. I hear you’re quite the girl scout.”

“I used to camp a lot with my grandparents and brothers.” She grins. “But I don’t want to infringe on your whole man trip.”

“Dude,” Drogo interjects, walking over to peer at the cheese board. “We seriously just talked about our feelings the whole time. It wasn’t that manly.”

Amused, Missandei hands him her half-finished wine glass, which he takes and swirls before he delicately sips from it, looking just completely bonkers standing there all grimy and dirty and unshaven. He bends over and cuts into a soft cheese, smearing it on a cracker. Missandei bends over and points to some fruit jam thing. “You have to try that fig compote. Jhiqui’s husband made it.”

“Jhiqui’s married?” Drogo says. “Dav, come here. You would really dig this fig stuff.”

Grey’s a little surprised when Brienne walks over and helps him set down the bulk of the stuff he’s carrying. He quietly says thank you, and for whatever reason, her face starts beaming red at him.

Drogo and Daven tell the girls that they have one last night in King’s Landing before they head out. They’re thinking of showering for the first fucking time in a week — and then maybe all grabbing a bite together? Jaime reminds them that there’s only one shower, so obviously they have to partner up to be more efficient.

Jaime curves his arm around Grey’s shoulders from behind. “That’s nothing new for me and you though. Right, boo?”

Brienne laughs.

Grey extricates himself from Jaime’s limbs. “Dude, one of these days, I’m gonna call you on your bluff and get in the fucking shower with you. See how you like it.”

Jaime drops character, walking around to face Grey. “Dude,” he says, voice low and aggressive. “You do not want to play naked chicken with me. I would destroy you so bad. I dare you to get in the shower with me.”

“Dude,” Grey says, holding his hand up to Jaime’s face. “You do not want to play naked chicken with me. I have no fucking shame. I have seen things. I have done things.”

Jaime gets in his space, bumping their chest together. “Oh, bro, it is fucking on.”

He gets in closer, so they are nose to nose. “Bitch,” he spits. “Who you think you talking to?”

“Dude,” Missandei says out from the couch. “Is anyone else like, super turned on right now? Or is it just me?”

Since she only lives ten minutes away, and Jaime and Grey only have one bathroom, she offers Daven or Drogo the use of hers — for free! After a bit of back and forth — Daven cheerfully follows behind her and Grey to the elevator, going down to the lobby to exit out to her car.

On the way back to her place, she tells Daven about her shampoo, which has tea tree oil it in, so it
makes the scalp tingly. Daven sighs dreamily and says that tea tree oil is the shit.

She pulls out some fluffy towels — her biggest sheets — and hands them over to Daven. She also tells him there are extra razors that she shaves her legs with, under the bathroom cabinet, that he can use if he wants. He chuckles, stroking his beard, and he tells her he’s actually good. He’s gonna go with furry face for a while. He thanks her, and he shuts the bathroom door behind him. They hear the shower turn on a few seconds later.

And finally. She licks her lips and presses her soft body into Grey’s hard one. She meets his face into a steamy kiss. He reeks of charcoal and tastes of salt and slight bitterness — from sweat and dirt. She sighs as his tongue delves into her mouth, as his hands run up and down her backside, pinching and grabbing her with his fingers, pressing his hips, the bulge in his pants, against her stomach.

“Why did you offer to let Daven use your shower?” he whispers raggedly, rubbing himself against her.

“Oh my God, I don’t know,” she says, gasping. “That was really stupid of me.”

He laughs. And then the mood settles and cools to amicable warmth. He kisses her mouth and pulls her into a tight hug. She rubs her face into his smelly shirt sleeve. And she kind of sniffs his BO, which makes him laugh again. “I’ve missed you,” she says.

“Missed you, too,” he says. “Did you have a good week?”

She nods. “Yep, lots of stuff got done. Saw lots of people. It was good.”

“Good,” he says sincerely, smiling at her. “Hey, have you bought plane tickets for Myr, yet?”

She blinks. “No. Not yet.”

“Buy two when you do?”
“I like how he takes longer to get ready than I do,” Brienne says to Missy, sipping from her mug of tea, socked feet propped up on the coffee table.

“My kind of beauty takes time, babe,” Jaime calls from the open bathroom door. “I mean, I have to adjust my hat. Like a billion times.”

Missy sees Brienne looking over her outfit, facing her and leaning sideways against the couch. Missy is in a black blazer, a sheer white blouse, and skintight leather-look leggings. Brienne pouts and sighs. “I’m jealous.”

“Babe!” Missandei says, reaching over to touch Brienne’s forearm. “I told you. You can totally come to dinner with us!”

Brienne scoffs. “No, I’m not jealous that you guys are hanging out without me. I don’t care. Have fun with him. He’s really annoying in public. I’m just jealous that you guys have like, this whole thing that you do. You know, palling around with each other. I was working in Yin and missed out. . . .” Brienne’s blue eyes wander around the room, at the apartment that she is temporarily residing in while she accumulates enough money at her new job to afford to rent her own place. “Do you think Grey will be hungry when he gets home?”

“Dude,” Missandei says, slowly shaking her head, before she squishes her face tightly. “I mean, yes, he will be hungry. But I mean, no, you do not want to walk into that viper’s nest.”

“Dude,” Jaime says to Brienne, hopping out into the living room, pulling on socks. “Baby, you are so adorable. And so naive. Have you noticed that all of Grey’s friends — and his woman — are like, insanely arrogant and totally deluded about their self worth? I mean, come on, case in point.” Jaime grins, gesturing up and down his body. “I’m his bestie! And no offense, Missy.”

“Oh none taken, man,” Missandei says, laughing. “I totally think I’m like, way hotter than I actually am. I totally think I’m like, way smarter and funnier than I actually am.”

“Me too!” Jaime says, eyes wide, both hands pointing at her.

“Okaaay?” Brienne says slowly, flicking her eyes back and forth between Jaime and Missandei.

“Listen,” Jaime says. “Grey is like — he is like —”

“He is the darkness that overtakes your entire soul and makes everything cold and sad,” Missandei declares. “To be his friend, you just have to believe that he likes you.”
“Yes!” Jaime says excitedly, clapping his hands loudly together. “Yes! That is accurate! And for the record, I make myself believe that he loves me.”

“Dude, me too!” Missandei says, jumping to her feet to high-five Jaime.

He swings his arms around in arcs before he walks into the elevator. He nods at the lady in glasses that lives on his floor, the lady that always tries to make small talk with him whenever they grab their mail at the same time. She smiles at him, the lens of her glasses reflecting a bit of light. She starts talking to him as he presses the elevator button, and he points at the ear buds he’s wearing, shaking his head at her.

Missandei made him a Run Like Someone is Chasing You mix, and she’s been hounding him to listen to it and tell her what he thinks about it. Thus far, he thinks that it’s a mix. It sounds like music. And once again, she relies on Pitbull too much.

He waves bye to his neighbor without looking at her before exiting the elevator. The apartment is empty when he gets in — but stupid Bieber left the light like an idiot that thinks electricity is free.

Grey needs a shower because it’s been getting warm, and he’s so sweaty after his runs. He goes into the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water at the sink, Missandei’s mix still blaring in his head. And then something prickles at the back of his neck, at the base of his skull.

He sets the glass down, before he spins around.

He’s faced with Brienne’s wide blue eyes and her shocked pale face. He yanks the earbuds out of his ears, breathing heavily.

“Did you just pull a knife on me?” Brienne says carefully.

Grey sighs, before he turns and slides their chef’s knife back into the butcher block. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t realize you were home.”

She falters. “Um.” She laughs uncomfortably. “Um. Missy and Jaime went out to dinner.”

He nods. “Ah.” He clears his throat, picking up his water glass to take another sip from it. “Well, sorry again for scaring you. I’m going to go take a shower now.”

He’s mentally kicking himself as he strips off his damp clothes, the shower running behind him. He pulls aside the glass door and then steps in, trying to drown his stupidity under the hot water.

He hears her lightly knock on his bedroom door, and he momentarily shuts his eyes in irritation — at
himself — before he calls out and tells her it’s okay to come in. He spins in his desk chair to face her, as she steps into his room, her tall figure a bit of an unfamiliar oddity in his private space. He watches as her eyes scan over his stuff — it makes him vaguely wonder just how much Jaime or Missandei have talked to her about him. Whether she knows about the whole drug use thing.

“You’re really neat,” Brienne finally says. “Jaime must drive you nuts sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” he says, keeping his voice bland.

Brienne casually tells him that she’s a neat freak, too. She generally likes to over-prepare and really fixate over stuff. Jaime’s so spontaneous and improvisational — and sometimes, a lot of the time, it works for him. Sometimes though, what a shitshow. She tells Grey that her obsessiveness is probably all a bit of a nervous tick.

“Have you had dinner?” she says suddenly. “Do you want to go grab a quick bite? With me? My treat. I have a job, now.”

“Um —”

“I’ve already decided that you can’t say no. I mean, you almost stabbed me, so you kind of owe me one.” He sees a small, shy smile creep over her face, as it lightly turns a bit pink.

She directs him to the mall food court where they grab some tacos, some unsweetened ice teas, and an entree salad to share. It was her idea to share the salad. She tells him that she needs to eat veggies with every meal because of her family’s background — being from an island. She finds the way people around here eat to be . . . too cheesy? And excessive. Sometimes wasteful.

He reluctantly tells her that he’s from an island, too. And he gets what she means — about how people here eat.

She tells him that she knows he’s from an island. Missandei told her. And Jaime told her. Actually, they both talk about him a lot, so there’s probably a lot of stuff that she knows about him. Like, she recently learned that he is uncircumcised. She tells him that she wants him to know that she knows this — so she can finally look him in the face without blushing.

He says one word. He says, “Missandei.”

Brienne laughs. “Yep.”

She tells him she used to work at Banana Republic at a mall. He tells her that he used to sell women’s shoes — also at a mall. She dryly comments that they have so much in common, before she shovels some of the salad onto her paper plate.

And then she tells him that she has very few friends. And it’s not because she was gone for a year — she didn’t really have a lot of friends before she left either. Her friends with Missandei are the ones that she tags along with. They invite her when they invite Missy. And her friends through Jaime are like — a bunch of dudes who are friends with Jaime first.

“And I’m not telling you this so you’d feel sorry for me,” Brienne says. “Like, who cares, right? But I told you so you’d understand why I wanted to have dinner with you. You know. Even after you
had a knife at my throat.”

He laughs, shaking his head. “I did not put it to your throat!”

She smiles. “Well, that’s how I’m going to tell the story.”

They are aimlessly wandering around the mall because she says that she likes to walk after eating dinner. It’s a habit that she developed in Yin. There, she didn’t have a car and she had to take the subway and the bus everywhere. She had to hoof it to do almost everything. And it was very warm there, so it was really nice to just take after-dinner strolls around the city at night. She admits that it’s very different than walking around a mall — but still.

She tells him that she has to buy new pants for work and it is the worst because it’s really hard to find slacks for really tall girls. Sometimes she just relents and buys men’s slacks, which garner her some looks at stores sometimes. She tells him that she did absolutely no clothes shopping when she lived in Yin because the sizing there was crazy. The people there are tiny, especially compared to her. And there was already a language barrier.

“Do you want to . . . go buy pants?” he says. “Right now?”

“I mean, I didn’t bring that up so that you’d go shopping with me,” she says. “I honestly have no idea what to say to you sometimes. You are really intimidating.”

He lightly laughs, feeling awkward over her confession, touching the back of his neck. “Uh, let’s go buy those pants.”

As they flip through men’s slacks on the sales rack, she asks him why he doesn’t naturalize and become a citizen. At his quiet gaze, she sheepishly admits that Jaime talks about it a lot.

He shrugs and flips past all of the extra-large sizes. He says, “Because I didn’t choose to come here. I didn’t choose to live here. It was just . . . circumstance that led me here. And the place I come from — it doesn’t exist anymore.” He laughs humorlessly, quirking a brow at her. “I don’t belong here.”

There’s actually not much of a difference between men’s and women’s slacks. The differences are very subtle, often based on aesthetics like material, pattern, and color. Women tend to wear pants with lower rise than men, so he steered Brienne toward the medium-rise pants because she has very long legs.

In Low Valyrian — because he can tell she speaks it — he asks the tailor to take in the waist about two inches. She looks relieved that he switched to the language she’s fluent in and looks him up and
down. She balks, telling him that it’s not right. He tells her that the pants are not for him, but for his friend, gesturing to Brienne, who looks wary and guarded. Understanding dawns on the tailor’s face and she nods vigorously. She grabs her measuring tape and grabs Brienne by the arm. She tells him that she can have the pants ready the next day.

He translates the conversation for Brienne, as they leave.

“Did she think it was weird that I was buying men’s pants?”

“No,” he says. “She probably sees tall women come in to alter men’s slacks all the time. It’s fairly common.”

“It is?”

He looks at her. “Yeah.”

Missandei texts Grey when she and Jaime get back to the apartment and they find it dark and empty. Jaime looks all disoriented coming out of his bedroom, stating that Brienne’s not in there. Her phone buzzes in her hand and she pulls it up to her face, murmuring to Jaime that Grey and Brienne are on their way home, from dinner.

“That bitch,” Jaime says in awe.

“Who are you referring to?”

“Both. Either. They’re both bitches.”

She’s nervous that he’s going to look murderous and Brienne’s face is going to be purple, when they get back to the apartment — but actually, when he opens the door for Brienne, he looks like, normal. He looks like himself — devoid of homicide. And Brienne’s skin is only faintly pink.

Jaime holds out his arm to Brienne, and she sinks down on the couch next to him, telling him that they ate tacos, shared a salad, and went shopping for pants.

Grey stays standing, with his hands shoved into the pockets of his hoodie, and he’s balancing on one leg as his foot lifts and comes around to scratch at the back of his shin. He confirms that what Brienne said was exactly what happened.

Brienne makes a move to hug him after she hugs Missandei goodnight. He doesn’t expect it at all, and that’s why he freezes before stoically taking a step back, away from her.
“Oh, okay,” Brienne says, voice high and girly. “We’re not at that level yet. That’s cool. That’s cool. My feelings aren’t hurt. You know, we’ll work up to it.” She pauses, stretching out her mouth in a grimace. “That is, only if you want to. I am cool . . . with whatever.”

He feels Missandei’s hand discreetly skim over his butt before she pats it, probably encouragingly.

“Babe,” Jaime cuts in, advancing on Grey. “You just have to force your love. Is how it works.” Jaime jumps on him, squeezing his hip bones with knees. “He also has this awesome tendency of catching people whenever they jump on him.”

After she shuts off the lights and curls her body into his, rubbing circles on his bare chest, she tells him that it was really nice of him to have dinner with Brienne. He tells her that it was no problem at all. Brienne’s nice. He understands why she and Jaime care about Brienne.

He tells her that Brienne knows that he’s not circumcised. The statement makes Missandei’s hand pause over his sternum. She asks him if he’s mad. He tells her that he’s not — he doesn’t really care what she says about him — when it’s true. He is uncircumcised. Really, the thing is that he doesn’t really understand how these things even come up in conversation.

“Organically,” she whispers into his ear, before kissing it. Her wandering hand starts drifting lower, ducking under the elastic waistband of his boxer briefs.

“Babe,” he says softly.

Her hand stills. “Not feeling it tonight?”

“I’m kinda tired.”

There’s a long pause. And then she says, “Okay.” And then she rolls off of him.

And then she rolls so her back is to him. He touches her spine. He asks if everything is okay. And she tells him that everything is okay.

He wakes up really early on Saturday — at 4 a.m. — while she’s still sleeping, to get his run out of the way. He has started training for a full marathon and her fairly minor complaints are that he’s always tired, his diet generally sucks, and they never get to sleep in and cuddle up in bed on weekend mornings anymore.

He’s damp from a little bit of rain and from sweat, when he re-enters the dark apartment at 6 a.m. He quietly yanks off his running shoes before padding into the bathroom to silently wipe himself down
with a towel. She will wake up if he turns on the shower.

It’s hard to get back to sleep after a run. There’s too much adrenaline coursing through his body.

He crawls back into bed, his aching body immediately encased in all of the fluffy warmth of the sheets and of her. He gently pulls her in her sleep, tucking her against his body. He places his mouth at the base of her neck.

“I woke up, and you were gone,” she sleepily murmurs.

“I was running,” he says.

“So early, baby.”

She slowly comes out of her sleep-haze when she feels his palms running up and down her bare legs, when she feels his fingers tugging down her underwear.

Her hand clamps down on his wrist. “Wait a second,” she mumbles, blinking against the bright morning light, rubbing the salt out of the corners of her eyes. “Babe?” she asks questioningly, trying to get her eyes to focus on him.

“Come on,” he says, his voice deep and rough, clenching the material of her undies in his hand. “Let’s get this off you.”

Her hand on his wrist tightens when he starts to pull again. She shoves his hand completely off her body. She says, “Stop.”

She hears him lightly scoff, before he shifts around on the bed, sitting back on the end of it, facing her. He brings his knees up, resting his elbows on them.

She pulls at the sheet underneath the comforter, pressing it over her cleavage — an action he doesn’t miss — as she scoots back and up into sitting position, leaning against the headboard. She pulls the scrunchie out of her hair and tiredly scrunches her hands in her curls. She looks at him. “Is this about last night?” He doesn’t answer her. He just continues looking at her despondently. So she says, “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, Grey. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember,” he says, his face darkening. “It’s never that clear-cut, though.”

“What are you talking about?”

He scoffs again, shrugging. “You want to have sex more than I want to have sex,” he says. “What am I supposed to do about that?”

She sags, feeling her body compress downward. Her mind grasps at something to say, something to think, something coherent — and she says, “It’s okay if we don’t have sex every time I feel like having sex.”

“Is it?” he says.

“Yeah,” she says, staring back at him, feeling helpless.
He quietly shakes his head. “I’m never going to be normal,” he says. “Sometimes I think you’re operating under this misunderstanding that — if you just love me enough and if you just wait things out long enough — I will be eventually be healed and cured and normal. And that’s just not going to happen. Ever. Can you honestly live with that?” He sighs, rubbing his face with his hand. “I just want you to be happy.”

Tears are pricking the backs of her eyes, but she’s working really hard to hold them back. She picks at some pilling on her comforter, and she quietly tells him that he makes her happy. He asks her — for how much longer?

She really wants to cry. And she looks off to the side, at the pile of clothes on her floor. And she musters up the guts to tell him that she hopes that the answer is forever.

It’s way too early on a Saturday morning, and she’s miserably hunched over the dining table as he sets a steaming cup of coffee underneath her nose. The sizzle of oil, of frying eggs, and the running fan are the only sounds in her apartment.

She actually starts sobbing when he puts down some salt and slides a plate of two sunny-side-up eggs and a torn hunk of crusty bread in front of her.

He looks alarmed, and he asks her what’s wrong.

“My grandma makes breakfast like this.”

After he clears the plates, she asks him if he’s going to leave her. He pauses. He holds her face in his hands. And he somberly tells her that he’s not going to leave. They are just talking some things out. He leans down to give her a comfort-kiss. Just a simple gesture of reassurance. The touch of his lips to hers makes something burn inside of her. She holds onto him tightly as she deepens the kiss, as she stands up and pushes him toward the couch.

He presses his wet mouth to her collarbone, and he tells her that he wants to have sex now. Like — for real — like, it’s urgent. Like — it needs to happen soon.

His hand blindly reaches for her as she gets off of his body, as she gets off the couch. She stands up and she bends over, yanking his boxers down, sliding them off. She knows he’s expecting her to pull down her underwear and climb on top of him — so she watches his face carefully as she sinks to her

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Surprise and fear pass over his eyes. “Missandei,” he says.

“I don’t want you to be normal,” she says. “I honestly love you because you’re just you.” She swallows, blinking back her tears. “Now will you let me suck your cock?”

His laugh is loud and punctuated.

He’s only had fucking terrible experiences involving his dick and someone else’s mouth. Across the board. He’s really tense and digging his fingers into the couch cushions as he blows out a breath and tells her to go for it — with this resignation.

“Uh uh,” she says, scrutinizing him carefully. She stands up. “Okay, let’s work up to this. I can tell — you are freaking out right now.”

They climb back into bed, without having sex, but still completely exhausted. She burrows into him and rubs her hand up and down his back, lightly running her hand over the bumps and ridges of scar tissue. She reminds him that he still owes her a non-sexy back rub, thirty minutes worth. She tells him he’s just going to have to keep putting up with her constant fear of him leaving. She tells him she remembers when she boarded a boat and said goodbye to her parents — and they lied and told her that they would see her soon.

“I love you,” he says. “I would die for you. I would kill for you.”

She exhales out her tears. She smiles at him, kissing his hand, which is clenched around hers. She says, “The first part of that statement was really great. The second part was thrilling and unnecessarily violent. I love it. I love you.”
She tells him that she wants to slow down sex sometimes. She tells him that the kind of sex they have is really fast and aggressive and rough and hot — but also that sometimes it feels like it’s a race to finish because they’re running against this clock. He chuckles at that, glancing down quickly at his lap. She slyly grins and runs her hands up and down his thighs, digging her fingers into his muscles, telling him that maybe sometimes, sex can be a marathon, not a sprint. Just a meandering marathon where they take in their surroundings and smell the flowers.

With a smile, he tells her that he doesn’t really smell flowers on long distance runs. Because he’s still keeping time and stuff.

She smiles back at him softly and tilts her head to the side, saying that the metaphor sort of fell apart at the end there, but he knows what she means. She leans forward in her chair and smears her nose into the crook of his neck. She cups his crotch through his running shorts, gently rubbing up and down, feeling that perky thrill when she feels him expanding and hardening underneath her palm. “I mean, to be transparent, I would eventually like to be able to give you a blowjob that doesn’t make you look like you’re being tortured.” She lightly laughs at his expression, pressing the sound of it into his jaw. She loves the smell of him. She loves the feel of him. “But for now, maybe we can just work on getting you comfortable with me touching you down here. Maybe we can try for a handjob?”

Her hand stills and lightly squeezes down on his erection. He lets out the quietest moan. She can feel herself throbbing, getting wet. She can smell herself — she’s sure he can smell her too, with her legs spread out the way they are to be close to him. Their synchronized breathing has become thick and audible. She finds her own resolve shaken. She kind of just wants to strip them both naked and have him take her dirty and hard on the floor.

As if reading her mind, he says, “I thought we’re going slow and gentle?”

She follows his gaze, down to where the hand that’s not on his dick is clawing into his bare leg.

The topic of his penis has always been a loaded one for them. She has generally walked on eggshells around him and it — perhaps always hyperconscious of avoiding triggers. One thing that she might not understand is that her soft-footedness just makes him feel guilty as all hell. He feels bad that she has to be so careful.

It’s as if him verbalizing to her that he loves her strengthened her resolve, fortified her. She boldly tells him she loves the sex that they have. She tells him that even so — it can be better. He thinks about the context in which she says this — he thinks about whoever it was that has taught her that sex can be better than what she and he have. And he feels shitty and angry about that, too. He tells her that — honestly — he’s never had sex as good as the way they have it. He’s kind of cautiously telling her to manage her expectations, to not get her hopes up. He is limited in what he is capable of.
And he can’t believe that he keeps asking her — through his actions and his selfishness — to put up with it.

“Why does this matter so much to you?” he asks, tilting her chin up, raising her eyes from his dick to his face.

“Because I love you,” she says simply. And then she realizes that the response isn’t very clear. She grins and says, “When we have sex, it is great —”

“You don’t have to keep saying it’s great,” he interrupts. “You don’t have to be delicate. Just tell me what you’re thinking.”

She gives him a look. “Okay, for the record, it is fucking awesome when we fuck. Also, noted! Thanks for your feedback! Look at us, communicating!” She gets off of her chair and moves the very short distance to him, planting herself on his lap, winding her arms around his neck as he gently shifts her weight around so it’s balanced.

He’s getting used to how much she wants to touch him all the time. He derives comfort from it, too.

“So,” she says, leaning forward, pressing her body against his, “I’m like, really good at giving head. It bums me out that you don’t get to experience my awesome skills. I’m like, amazing.”

“Oh, you’ve polled people on this?”

She gently swats him. “Baby, you’re like, really selfless in bed. You might be too selfless. Which is the weirdest thing, that I am saying. But when we have sex, it’s always about me,” she says softly. “I want it to be about you, sometimes.”

He just doesn’t understand this. “Why? I don’t care.”

“Why? Because I love you.” Her voice lowers. “Because I want to make you feel good. Because I want to watch your face as you lose control and know that I did that to you. Because I want to hear you beg for it.”

She’s getting a physical response with the words. Which, he supposes, is her goal. He sighs, orienting her weight around his hard-on with his hands on her thighs and her hips. He rocks her backward a little, keeping her steady, pressing his mouth to hers, a kiss with just their lips. And he tells her that he feels deeply uncomfortable with blow jobs because they make him feel very unprotected and vulnerable. He feels dread at the thought. He feels like the other person just holds so much power over him. He feels sick over his body’s physical response to that kind of subjugation. He tells her he doesn’t need nor does he want blowjobs. They are demeaning and dehumanizing. It’s such a weird thing to say out loud, and he never thought he’d ever have this conversation with anyone in his life.

“Baby,” she says. “Please trust me on this?”

After the long flight — one in which he repeatedly told her that she was talking to him too much — he’s irritated and cranky as they fight their way through customs. In Summer Tongue so that no one can eavesdrop, she tells him that being an asshole to the customs agent isn’t helpful. His back straightens — his spine tenses up. And he says, “Whatever.”
She started off really excited about their first overseas trip together. And that descended into hell pretty fast when she discovered that they have pretty different travel styles. She likes to pass the time by chatting. He’s insanely quiet. He is serial killer quiet. He can sit and do nothing easily. She supposes that’s why he’s so great at running, which she finds to be the most mind-numbing activity ever.

He also doesn’t do well with being contained — being in claustrophobic spaces — so she has to put up with his bitchiness whenever his elbow accidentally hit the wall of the plane or her arm.

They are bickering as they exit out of customs. She’s telling him she has to pee. He’s telling her that they should walk further out, away from the fucking crowd of people — and go find a restroom that is quieter so he doesn’t have to wait forever for her to pee. She tells him that she actually has to pee right now. It’s urgent. He asks her how it got to be so urgent — why didn’t she fucking pee on the plane, then? She tells him she hadn’t needed to pee on the plane. He releases an impatient breath and gestures to the overstuffed restroom nearby. He tells her he doesn’t know how these things happen. He tells her to go ahead and pee then.

“I want to strangle you,” she says tightly.

He rolls his eyes.

She angrily drags her suitcase behind her, pushing her way through a bunch of loitering people, blowing past Grey. She stomps off to get to the baggage claim area, near where Moss is picking them up, so that she can go fucking pee there and save them a whole whopping five minutes of time that they could spend idling in the waiting area, looking for Moss’ SUV, which is always late to things.

She spots Mossador’s car and she enthusiastically waves him over, bouncing on the heels of her feet because it’s been over a year since she’s seen him. Ever since the end of college, her summers haven’t been her own. The time off she is afforded is limited.

His smile is huge and wide as he pulls up to them. He gets out of the car after popping the trunk open, even though it’s not necessary. She yelps and throws her arms around his broad shoulders, smelling the petroleum in his t-shirt, feeling the slight dampness of his skin combined with the heat, holding onto him tighter as he grunts and lifts her off her feet. “Oh my gosh!” she gushes. “I’ve missed you!”

“You look older,” he says.

“Shut up! I do not!”

“I mean that in a good way!” Mossador says, laughing. “You’re not a little twerp anymore.” He pauses, a bit hesitant. “You look like Mom.”

She doesn’t get a chance to say anything to that, because he drops her back down to her feet and turns his attention to Grey, who is watching them silently. She had notified her family that she was bringing someone — she kept it vague like that. Her grandma asked if it was a boy, which Missandei confirmed. This is the very first time she’s brought a boy home. She was too young with Neal — they never had the chance to do certain things with purpose. Her family has had a month to draw
their own conclusions about Grey.

Moss reaches out to shake Grey’s hand. “Good to see you again.”

It’s always interesting to him to see where people come from. When he crossed paths with Jaime’s dad the one time Jaime’s dad came to their apartment, ostensibly to drop off some of Jaime’s mail, Grey found through the small pieces of conversation he had with the man, that certain things about Jaime became clearer — the tension in his voice, the way his affable manner always feels like it can turn on a dime, his impatience, and also his drive and ambition. Grey felt the same way when he met Drogo’s mother, stepmother, and sisters. Drogo’s protective streak and his tendency to steer people suddenly had this context around it.

When he gets hit by a bunch of running, laughing kids, as they walk up to Missandei’s grandma’s house — when he smells the spices filling the house, and hears it loaded to the brim with chatter from Missandei’s grandma, her sisters-in-law, and Marselen — a lot of things about Missandei come into focus for him.

He feels Mossador’s strong hand hitting him on the shoulder, knocking him a little bit forward before it clamps down, digging into his skin and holding him steady — this actually also reminds him of Missandei, of her physicality. “Brace yourself, brother,” Mossador says.

They are hanging out in the kitchen, still with their luggage, as Amiri and Okha sit at the table with plastic tubs and colanders, picking leaves off of washed greens. They are going to save the fibrous stems to flavor a vegetarian broth for her grandfather’s altar. Her grandma is squatting on the floor with a cleaver, some pages from the local pennysaver laid down, and a boiled duck on top. Her loud and precise hacks punctuate her soft spoken, casual words about Missandei’s appearance — her skin that has gotten too much sun, the way she still oddly dresses herself, her wild and messy hair making her look like she’s a foundling.

Okha laughs and in Low Valyrian, tells grandma to lay off Missandei. Okha’s eyes scan Grey up and down, before smiling and saying that Missandei seems to be doing alright.

He watches Missandei complain when she sees that her grandmother had cleared out all of Moss, Mars, and Melaku’s old stuff and had set up him in her brothers’ old bedroom. He can’t tell if she’s annoyed because they are sleeping separately or if it’s because he’s going to be sleeping where her dead brother used to sleep.

Missandei’s grandmother says that they are unmarried, and it’s not proper for them to sleep together in the same bed. Missandei rolls her eyes and she says something unnecessarily semi-vulgar to her grandmother — about how certain ships have sailed. They bicker about it for a few seconds before
her grandmother gives up in a huff and says they might as well just do whatever they want in her house.

In Low Valyrian, he quietly tells Missandei that it’s fine — he’s fine in her brothers’ old bedroom — maybe consider dropping this because it’s not worth fighting over.

“Babe,” she says, frowning.

It’s as if hearing him speak suddenly reminds Missandei’s grandma that she has met him before — but she must have already remembered that. She brightens a little bit and lightly swats her hand in the air, telling Missandei that he is sensible. Missandei’s grandmother tells them that she has to get back to the kitchen to finish up dinner. She squeezes a bit of the skin on his arm on her way past him, telling him that he’s lost weight — that he’s so skinny — warning him that it’s not very becoming for a man to be so thin because it looks weak. The random criticism from an elder throws him — he straightens and he hears himself apologizing for it. He tells her that he knows he’s lost weight — and he doesn’t like it, either.

“Hashtag Grey probz,” Missandei says, holding her phone up, aimed at him and her grandma. He hears the digital sound of a shutter clicking. Upon his look, she says, “Jaime asked me to.”

He’s sort of half-heartedly fighting her off but the problem is that she feels so good, as she uses her body to press him into her childhood bed, looming over him after shutting the door behind them, after he left his suitcase in her brothers’ old bedroom. She tells him not to listen to her grandma because his fucking body is the only reason she’s with him. She sighs in this sinister kind of amusement, as she straddles him on the bed and sinks down over the zipper of his pants, grinding herself into his jeans. She pushes up the hem of his shirt with both of her hands, scratching her nails into his stomach, making him convulse.

“Hello there,” she says, grinning slyly down at his contracting muscles, pressing herself harder against his erection.

It drags out something visceral and primal in him. And, as is his habit, he wonders how long this heady feeling is meant to last. “Missandei,” he finally says. “It’s your grandmother’s house. She asked us to sleep in separate rooms. I’m guessing that extends to . . . other things as well.” He sits up, carefully shifting her off of his dick.

“Baby,” she whines. “She’s old. She has no idea what she’s saying. She’s crazy.”

“We better get back out there,” he says lightly. “It’s rude if we hide out in here for too long.” He remembers his own grandmother, too. She was hard as nails and dragged him everywhere by the hand as she did her shopping in the open-air markets.

“Baby, you don’t have to kiss ass,” she says. “You’re already loads better than Neal in their eyes, just by being darker.”

He sighs. “I’m not kissing ass,” he says. “This is actually just who I am.”
He notices that a lot of Naathi customs and mannerisms distractingly remind him of where he came from. He supposes that it shouldn’t be too much of a surprise. The two island nations share similar climates, similar flora and fauna, the same history of relative peace and isolation. He’s read that Naath and the Summer Isles — along with other scattered islands — were frequent trading partners. It makes sense that there are subtle similarities, due to the blending and influences from cultures over the centuries.

They eat dinner on the floor, for one. They, too, move with ease, low to the ground and close to walls. He hasn’t eaten dinner on the floor with other people since he was a very young child. The way that Missandei’s relatives touch and move food around is very deft and economical in movement, reminding him of how he used to sit and wait as his mother and sister precisely peeled fruit with knife tucked in the palm of their calloused hands, cutting him off slices from the flesh and saving the cores for themselves, wasting nothing. He can see the same unconscious habit of preservation in the food that Missandei’s grandmother and sisters-in-law made.

He was never so struck by the commonalities before, other than an errant thought here and there, because these characteristics are diluted in Missandei.

Marselen has a young daughter that seems to be very shy. She keeps watching him though, peeking at him from behind her mother. She keeps getting to her knees to whisper things in Amiri’s ear.

“You’re very light-skinned for an Islander,” Okha says to him suddenly. “When you walked in, I thought that it couldn’t be right. The Islanders we know are dark as night. You look like you could be one of us.” She smiles. “Not that we’re pale.”

Missandei pauses in her eating to pull up the sleeve of her cardigan. She gently tugs his arm out from his lap so she can compare it to hers. “He’s still a little darker than I am. He’s also . . . yellower? His tone is warmer. I’m . . . bluer? Or ashier.”

“Are you sure you’re an Islander?” teases Marselen. “Maybe there was a mix up at some point.”

“Maybe,” Grey says neutrally.

“Are your parents light-skinned, too?”

“Um.” He hesitates. Because honestly — sometimes he has a really hard time remembering what his parents looked like. “My father — I think there was — intermixing over generations. Due to the slave trade.”

Understanding appears behind Marselen’s eyes. “Ah,” he says.

“What’s intermixing?” Hassan, Mossador’s son, asks.

“He means that a long time ago, Islanders and Valyrians made babies together,” his mother answers. “What happens when you mix brown paint with white paint?”

“You get tan paint,” Mara, the little girl, says faintly.

Missandei’s grandmother tuts through her teeth and tells them to speak in Low Valyrian so that she can understand what they’re saying.
She watches in amusement as he starts clearing plates after dinner — because that’s just what he does. He always clears the plates, and he always washes the dishes. In her grandmother’s house, though, the action is scandalous. Cleaning is women’s work. For decades, her grandma cooked and served her grandpa dinner every night. Inside the house was grandma’s domain. Outside the house was grandpa’s.

Her grandma makes a choked noise in the back of her throat — clearly flustered — and tells Grey to sit back down. She adds that he’s a guest, and it will be faster if she, Amiri, Okha, and Missandei do the clean up.

Missandei hears Moss laugh, because he’s well-aware that she’s horrible at cleaning, as she sheepishly gets to her knees — stacking bowls — before getting to her feet. Grey looks utterly lost, his mouth open and closing as he looks around the kitchen.

As she puts the dishes in the sink for Amiri to wash, she tells them all that Grey actually does all of the cleaning when they are in King’s Landing. Like, he goes over to her apartment and cleans it for her sometimes. Like a maid.

Amiri and Okha burst out laughing, tossing Grey glances as they tease their husbands, telling Moss and Mars that they would love it if Moss and Mars would just simply pick up after themselves.

She doesn’t get any alone time with him to confer with him before her brothers start pushing him out the door, laughingly telling her that they’re gonna go interrogate him and ask him what his intentions are with her. They tell her they’re really taking him out so that the ladies can have time to talk about him behind his back. “I know how you guys love to do that,” Marselen says.

Hassan wants to tag along — and is really disappointed when his dad tells him that they are going to a bar — and Hassan isn’t yet old enough to walk into one of those.

“Spend some time with your auntie. Alright, Bunk-Bunk?” Mossador tells Hassan, hugging his kid. “You don’t get to see her very much, and she’s not here very long.”

“Okay,” Hassan says reluctantly.

“Man,” Missandei interjects, leaning forward to tickle Hassan’s belly a little bit. He jiggles and worms out of her reach. He’s probably too old for her to keep doing that. “I feel so loved.”

“Thank you for dinner,” Grey calls out softly, as Mars shoves him out the front door.

After the men leave, Missandei raises her brows at her sisters and in Low Valyrian, she expectantly asks them what they think — and she doesn’t really give them a chance to answer. She’s already telling them that she knows that he doesn’t always make the greatest first impression. He’s very quiet, and he exhibits like, no personality sometimes. And he has resting bitch face. And he’s overly serious.

Amiri holds up a hand to interrupt, biting back a laugh. She speaks for all of them and she says that they all actually really like him. He’s so polite and respectful.
“He’s a good-looking kid,” Okha says. And upon Amiri’s pointed look, Okha lets out a squeal that’s mixed with laughter and says, “I don’t want to sound like a perv! I’m someone’s mother!”

“Okay, so you will sound like a pedophile instead?” Amiri snickers before turning back to Missandei. “I miss being young — younger,” she says, correcting herself. “I miss being younger. He must be fun. You know. At night.” She glances into the living room, where the kids are playing, and she widens her eyes comically. “You know what I’m talking about, right?”

“No,” Missy says in a deadpan, shaking her head. “Will you spell it out some more?”

Grandma sets down mismatched mugs of tea in front of all of them and a plate of sliced oranges. Clutching her hot cup with her asbestos hands, Gran tells Missandei that she really needs to be quieter around Grey. She needs to let him talk sometimes. She also shouldn’t tease or make fun of him in front of other people — even if it’s a joke. Because it’s important for men to feel like they are men and have that status. Gran tells Missandei that she can certainly wield a lot of influence — but behind the scenes.

Missandei tilts her face back so that she’s staring directly at the ceiling. She groans loudly, and she tells her grandma that it all sounds like a really good idea, but the issue is that . . . she really just wants to be alone and stay unloved forever. Like, that’s her goal in life.

Grandma snorts in disapproval, shaking her head in exasperation as Missandei laughs and touches grandma’s forearm, squeezing it affectionately.

When Amiri brings up the topic of marriage, Missandei mimes a big explosion coming out of her head, before falling facedown on the kitchen table, fake-dying.

The house is dark and quiet and she’s already in bed, when she hears him creeping in. He’s nearly dead silent, and she only detects him because she’s been listening for him. She also texted him so she had a general idea of when he was coming back.

The lights are on in his room when she quietly opens the door.

She says, “Hi,” after she closes the door behind her.

He’s sitting on a bed — the bottom bed of a bunk bed — Mars and Moss’s beds. Melaku had the single bed pressed against the wall. She’s relieved that he’s not sleeping on that one. She has too many memories of Melaku detoxing on that bed. She’s not in the mood to juxtapose those mental images with those of him, of Grey, also lying in agony.

He holds out his hand to her. “Come here,” he says softly.

She smiles. Because she always loves it when he wants her. She can smell beer on him. She can taste beer on his tongue as she touches his cool skin and feels him wrap his arms around her.

“Grandma wakes up early,” she tells him, yawning. “Like, at six, every day. Will you let me sleep with you if I get outta here by five?”

He smiles at her sleepily — warmly. “Yeah,” he says. “But let’s go to your room.”
He doesn’t realize they have overslept until the sound of a running vacuum snaps Missandei right up into sitting position. Her hand is pressing against his shoulder, and she’s whispering, “Oh my gosh!” over and over in a panic, scrambling to reach her cellphone to check the time.

She tells him it’s 6:15 in awe, stating that the woman cleaning the house is like a machine. “Uh,” she says, with wide eyes. He can see the whites all around her irises. “Uh.” She blinks. “Oh crap. I’m like, broken. I can get up and try to distract her as you sneak out?”

“Or we can be adults.” He shrugs.

She rubs her face tiredly and says, “Of course you’d say that. You don’t have parents.”

He smiles. He reminds her that she doesn’t have parents either. She crawls over him to hop off the bed, muttering that she remembers that she doesn’t have parents. And she hates it when he answers her jokes all seriously. It makes them unfunny. And sometimes his responses make her feel awkward, and then she like, doesn’t know what else to say.

He finds the whole being scared of losing esteem in the eyes of parents or parental figures to be something he intensely identifies with — yet also something that is strangely alien and esoteric. Bieber has a visceral, sometimes physical reaction, whenever his father is brought up. Addam and Daven shrink like wilting flowers. Drogo defers to his mother and sometimes sounds bizarrely demure when speaking to her.

Grey remembers these moments when his own father’s approval was his entire existence, eclipsing everything else. His father’s approval was what gave him the strength to kill Momo. It was with adult hindsight that he realized how fucked up that was, that a test of strength was requested of him — in preparation for what they knew was to come, in preparation for something he could not even have conceived of at that age.

He tends to operate under the assumption that — had he stayed with his parents — his desire to earn their approval would’ve died as he aged — when he gained this autonomy and this wisdom and this knowledge of their fallibility.

It makes sense to him that helpless children seek out the protection of adults. It doesn’t come together for him — when he sees adults bend under their mothers and fathers. He doesn’t understand why Jaime — who purports to have a difficult relationship with his dad — will rearrange his entire schedule to have dinner with his dad on his dad’s nameday.

Ultimately, he doesn’t understand the notion of forgiveness, when applied to people who are monsters.

They quietly dress and when they open her door, they see that the door to her brothers’ room is wide open, the stark light of the morning slicing out of the jamb in a sharp angle.
Missandei’s grandmother is angry with them — it’s very obvious. Her mouth is drawn in a thin line and she refuses to acknowledge them as she continues pushing the vacuum against the worn carpet, navigating around a coffee table, turning her back to them.

He watches Missandei’s face, scanning her blank, drooping eyes and her neutral closed mouth as she stares at her grandmother — before she catches him looking at her. She flips her mouth and shows her teeth to him, smiling. She makes a big show of shrugging as she starts walking backwards into the kitchen, tilting her head silently, beckoning him to follow.

There’s no coffee machine that he can see on the counter. He’s silent as she turns on the faucet and fills up a tea kettle.

“Are you okay?” he says quietly, reaching out to touch her bare shoulder. He’s surprised to see her take a step back, toward the fridge, just out of his arm span. She realizes her misstep, and she tries to hide it by immediately going to a drawer, opening it and digging around for some tea.

She throws him another smile. “What kind would you like?” She opens a few small tins and shows him the loose leaf teas. He doesn’t know anything about tea, so he points to the red tin. “Ah, nice choice,” she says, putting the other tins away. He watches as she pulls the kettle off the stove, before it boils. She puts a healthy pinch of tea into a cast iron teapot and pours in a little bit of water — just a few ounces. She swirls the heavy cast iron around before she walks over to the sink and pours out the hot water. And then she fills the teapot to the top with more hot water from the kettle.

“Why do you make tea like that?” he asks softly.

She cups the body of the teapot with her hand. She kind of laughs. She says, “You know, I actually don’t know why. It’s just what I’ve been taught. And I just got into the habit of doing it.” She purses her lips, thinking. “Maybe it’s to get rid of impurities?”

This moment completely reminds Missandei of when she crawled through her bedroom window in the middle of the night, after leaving Neal’s house. Neal’s parents were totally okay with her being at their house, sitting on their couch and playing video games with their son like a huge slut.

She remembers how her grandma immediately started yelling at her and slapping the crap out of her as she pushed her body through the open window, screaming that it was too late for her — no one will want to marry her because she had been stupid enough to ruin herself. She also remembers blocking her grandma’s slaps with her arms and screaming back at her grandma — telling her gran that she gets treated like a prisoner in her own house and that all of her friends are allowed to go to school dances and do homework assignments with classmates who happen to be male.

It was the wrong thing to say because it incensed her gran. Her gran started saying Melaku’s name and then started anger-crying over it all, until Missandei’s grandpa rushed into the room, after coming home from a night shift, asking them what the hell was going on.

In her brothers’ bedroom Grey strips off the t-shirt he slept in — she really doesn’t think he’s too thin. He’s strangely obsessed with his infinitesimal drop in mass, which she finds really rich because he was decidedly unsympathetic when she gained weight. She’s generally okay with however he looks as long as she never outweighs him. If that ever happens, he’d have to become obese, she’d
have to get her stomach stapled, or they’d have to break up and she’ll just buy twelve cats to love her.

After he pulls on a cut-off shirt, he says, “Wanna come with?” He told her he’d like to stick to his training regimen and get his runs in, even though they’re on vacation.

“Like, follow you in a car as you run all over town?” she says, raising a brow.

He kind of makes a noise that sort of sounds like a quarter of a laugh. “It’s just a short five miles today.”

For her, five miles is not just. Five miles might be beyond her limit. She can jog on a treadmill for 45 minutes. And that is definitely less than five miles. And he is way faster. “Babe, I’m not like . . . an athlete like you.” She blows out a breath. “I’m just going to slow you down, and you’re gonna get all annoyed at me for being slow.

“Probably,” he says. Upon her miserable expression, he says, “I’m kidding. It’s an easy five miles. Conversation pace. Jaime runs this with me all the time. And if Jaime can do it —”

“Oh really?” she interjects. “Your tall friend Jaime with all the visible muscles like he’s special or something? Yeah, I bet it sucks running with that fatty.”

He chokes, biting down on his bottom lip as he struggles not to laugh. He lightly coughs with his mouth closed before saying, “I meant that all he does all day is sit. He’s not in the habit of working out like you are. You’re cranky.”

Her jaw slackens and drops as her eyelashes flutter blearily. She’s surprised. “Am I being cranky?” she says. “Oh, man. I didn’t realize. I’m sorry, babe.”

“No, no. It’s fine. I was just observing, not criticizing.” He waves her off. “It’s funny,” he adds.

On the way out of the house, she drags her feet and thinks about how bored she’s about to be and how annoying it’s going to be, fighting to breathe — so distracted that she doesn’t see Grey walking up to her grandma until it’s too late. She cannot jump in front of the bullet in time and scream NOOO in slow-mo.

In Low Valyrian, in his Astapor accent, he tells her grandma that they feel bad for lying to her and that it was not initially their intention to break the rules of her house. It was just so late when he got back to the house and they were both very tired from the flight. It was just a comfort and familiarity kind of thing. That doesn’t make lying right, though. So going forward, they will respect her rules.

Her grandma completely freezes him out and does not respond to his words at all. And he’s dumb enough to attempt to wait it out, just standing there, expecting for some sort of acknowledgement.

Missy grabs the bottom of his shirt and just pulls him, tugging him backward and out of the kitchen. She pushes him out of the front door. And she says, “Thanks for telling my ultra traditional grandma that we sleep together on a regular basis. That was really great. Why don’t you also tell her that you like to kiss my butthole, too?”

“I mean, you pulled me away before I got to that part,” he says, stepping down from the front stoop.
Running with him isn’t the horrific thing she was thinking it was going to be. It’s still pretty tiring, though. She was thinking he’d be a drill sergeant, constantly calling her a maggot and barking at her to pick up the pace, but he’s actually nice to run with. He’s gently encouraging, telling her when hills are coming up — even though she can see them with her own eyes and this is her town, her city — but she finds his steady voice to be a source of comfort, sometimes inspiration. She tends to look at hills and go, oh fuck no — right before she slows down and walks up them.

He keeps pace with her — and it’s a snail’s pace. He flips over, running backwards to face her, as sweat just drips down her nose, her chin, as the sun continues rising higher in the sky. She asks him how he even does this nearly every day. It is horrible and uncomfortable and painful. He smiles — salt stings her eyes as she looks at him — and he tells her that at some point, it starts to feel good. It starts to feel really good when everything is in tune — the muscles, the technique, the mental strength, the scenery.

“Is that a metaphor for something else?” she cracks, huffing out a choked laugh, regretting it right away as she fights for air.

“Yes,” he says, staring back at her steadily, looking serious for a few beats. Then he grins slyly and flips around, running up the rest of the hill — just a few more yards — with this effortless ease. Her heart drops as she watches him hit the top. Her sore, burning legs buckle and she wants to just forget it all and just slow down to a walk as she gulps in warm marine air. But he’s waving at her from the top, rolling his hand and signalling to her that she’s almost there.

She actually collapses and sinks to her knees at the top, bending over to plant her hands on the hot ground.

He nudges her leg with his foot. “Nuh uh, you don’t want to come to a full stop like that. Get up and walk around a bit.”

She glares at his outstretched hand before she grabs it, letting him help her back onto her feet. She’s so hot and her heart is pounding like it wants to explode. Blood everywhere in her body is throbbing. And she feels water break out on the surface of her eyes as she paces back and forth.

“Last night,” she says between gasps, “I had this dream — that I was changing this baby — it wasn’t my baby. And after I cleaned up the baby’s poop with just one wet wipe — just one because I’m stupid in my dreams, too — I tried to throw it into a garbage bin — but I missed. And then there was poo everywhere. And I was on my hands and knees — scrambling to clean up all of this poop with my bare hands. It was vicious and black like used motor oil — and chunky. It smelled bad — and it just kept on growing. I couldn’t clean fast enough. And the baby was screaming his head off.” She shrugs. “I know you love it when I tell you about my dreams.”

“She does.” It’s a lie. He hates it when she tells him about her dreams. He finds them inherently uninteresting, by virtue of the fact that nothing in dreams actually happened. She’s made a case for the symbolic nature of dreams. He has told her that it’s short-sighted to draw too many obvious parallels. The human brain is complicated and a lot of things are unknown. He walks over and puts his hand on her sweaty, sweaty shoulder, getting her attention. He’s barely broken a sweat. She hates him. He says, “I’ll make you a deal. You start running with me. Three days a week. And you and me can try new things in bed.”
She drags the back of her hand across her forehead. “Also three days a week?” she jokes.

He shrugs, grinning and turning his face away at the same time, trying to hide his amusement.

“What do you want me to run?” she asks.

“Why do you want me to do things that make me uncomfortable?” he throws back.

“Touche,” she says, sighing, before she puts her hands on her hips to air out her armpits, walking off toward a greenbelt.

She shows him some of her old haunts. She tells him that she always went to these places with her brothers because she was never allowed to go out alone when she was little. So a lot of these places were things that Moss, Mars, or Melaku introduced to her. She shows him this wooded area that opens up to the water, with a rope swing hanging from a tree. She tells him not to swing from the thing, though. Melaku told her that a kid broke his back on that rope and lost the use of his legs.

“How?” Grey asks, picking up a crooked tree branch to reach out to hook onto the rope.

Which stumps her. She fights to recall details. And then she’s hit with this stunning realization. “He lied to me,” she says softly. “So that I wouldn’t go on it.”

“You were probably too small back then,” Grey says. “He was probably just watching out for you. Take off your clothes.”

“Baby,” she says, tilting her head looking at him wryly. “We’re in public. Come on now, perv.”

“Want me to go first?” he asks. “See if I die or break my back?”

She pulls off her tank top, revealing a day-glo orange sports bra. “I hate it when you joke about dying,” she mutters, before she nudges off her shoes, her socks, and peels off her shorts. She drops her clothes in a pile on the dirt ground. She hesitantly walks toward the edge of the bluff — though it looks intimidatingly like a cliff. She reaches for the rope that he’s holding out for her with a branch. She has to get on her tiptoes to get her hands over the knot.

Before she goes for it, he says, “You know I wouldn’t actually let you do something dangerous, right? The water is deep enough. I can tell. This rope has been used frequently — and recently. The tree is sturdy.”

She loves him. And she says, “Let me? Puh-lease,” with this confidence that sounds really convincing, even to her. She lets out a high pitched squeal as she looks down at the water. And then she loses her resolve. And after a few deep breaths, she gains it back. And then she looks down again. And she decides that it’s better not to look down. She looks ahead at the horizon, at the clear, cloudless blue sky and the cityscape across the way.

Holding her weight with her hands as she’s swinging is way harder than she thought. She feels way heavier than she anticipated she would. And she panics for a moment at the end of the arc, not sure when to let go. She suddenly worries about letting go too late. And she’s terrified of letting go, too, because it means falling.
But she lets go anyway, and the drop is fast and the water stings. She feels bubbles all around her, as she kicks off and suddenly remembers that she’s not the greatest swimmer that has ever lived, her arms reaching for the surface. And her hair is wet now.

When she breaks the warm water with a gasp, the first thing she does is claw some of it out of her eyes. She hears a shout — a joyful shout — and then sees Grey pulling off his shirt and kicking off his shoes, bracing a hand against a boulder. He’s moving really fast and her mind is like, oh shit, as she scrambles to swim out of the way so the idiot doesn’t like, land right on top of her.

He flips off the rope — because of course he does. The splash is immense and it hits her in the face. When he doesn’t resurface right away, her heart starts pounding, and she’s spinning in place, trying to spot him.

And then she screams when she’s lifted out of the water and thrown. Bubbles come out of her mouth on the exhale before she clamps everything shut and pushes back to the surface.

“You ass!” she shouts, to the sound of his laughter. She shoves out a handful of water in his direction.

He swims up to her, and she’s still a little annoyed and sore about the whole thing when he grabs her and smoothly pulls her legs around his waist, holding her to him as he treads water. He spontaneously kisses her, with his hand pressing into the back of her head. She doesn’t know how to deal with this sometimes — the insistent way that he makes her feel. It makes sense to her, when people align an addict’s vocabulary to love.

She’s still a damp mess as they trudge back to her grandma’s house. He — being mostly devoid of hair — looks just dry and fantastic and beautiful and carefree. Which makes her want to — literally — kick him in the ass.

The house smells antiseptic when they enter it — and citrus-y — Lemon Pledge — and he’s immediately sheepish and on alert, stepping immediately back out onto the stoop to yank off his shoes. He has a lot of these tiny gestures and tiny habits, that differentiate him from Neal. And she can’t help but compare because now — they have both occupied this intimate space in her life. Neal used to just walk into the house with his shoes on — loud and friendly and clueless.

They find that her grandma had moved his suitcase into her bedroom, while they were out.

He goes out into the living room as Missandei showers. When the dog barks at him, he gets down low to the ground, sitting cross-legged, before he ignores it. He asks Missandei’s grandmother what she’s watching on TV. She tells him she’s watching wrestling — which he finds funny, because white people really love professional wrestling — but this is not something he shares with her.

Instead, in Low Valyrian, he asks her if she likes him.

The direct question surprises her. Her eyes transfer from the screen to him. She asks him why it even
matters to him, if he’s just going to go off and do what he wants anyway. Her response has these strange echoes of things he remembers his parents saying to him, when he was a child. He tells her that it matters because Missandei matters to him.

Her voice is clipped and fierce as she asks him if he’s here to ask her for permission to marry Missandei.

He is so caught off-guard that he blurts out, “What?” in the wrong language.

Curious, he asks her if she would, hypothetically, give him permission.

She tells him that they will do what they will do — her word on the matter is irrelevant.

Hiding out in her bedroom in the evening, she’s lying down on her bed with Lucy, the dog, on her stomach, raking her nails over Lucy’s face. Her legs are across his lap and he’s leaning back against the wall, occasionally reaching out to touch Lucy’s fur. She asks him if he’s having a great time in this tense and awkward house of despair and death. He tells her he’s been in worse, so all in all, it’s actually not too bad. It’s nice to not have to go to work. It’s nice to just take things slowly and relax all day.

She asks him if it’s difficult to be around a dog again, as she smushes Lucy’s face and pulls it closer for a kiss. He tells her it’s very strange. It’s been decades. He’s numb to a lot of the memories. But maybe that’s a defense mechanism. He tells Missandei that Lucy is very cute. She asks him if he’d like to play with or hold Lucy. He cautiously says that he might. And Missandei’s smile is real and bright as she sits up, removes her legs from his lap, and gently transfers Lucy over. Lucy immediately jumps for his face — for his mouth — because Lucy is a French kisser. He lets out a chuckle as he carefully holds down Lucy’s body, her wagging tail swishing against his leg, so she doesn’t jump on him again. Her little body is warm, and her fur is soft underneath his hands.

“Would you ever want a dog of your own?”

“You know, I’ve thought about it,” he says. “Maybe. But with my work schedule, it would be hard and the dog would be alone all day.” He laughs when Lucy escapes his wussy hold and leaps to shove her tongue into his mouth. He pulls her closer against his body, turning her around so she’s facing Missandei.

“I know, baby,” Missandei says to the dog. “He likes to play hard-to-get.”

“God,” he says. “She’s so cute.”

Her weight and the smell of her is this constant and consistent thing for him. He thinks about it — aimlessly running his fingers up and down her back as she sleeps on his chest — remembering the nights he used to watch her all night, so scared that if he let himself sleep he’d wake up with a dead girl and blood on his hands. Those thoughts were probably wildly unrealistic — but he finds that it’s hard not to go to the deepest, darkest dredges sometimes.
He thinks about the meaning of things — the meaning they apply to words. And the transient nature of feelings. Jaime has told him that just as feelings of happiness are temporary, so are feelings of sadness, shame, guilt, and rage. Nothing is here to stay and nothing is permanent.

“Hey,” she says softly to him. He didn’t realize she had woken up. “I’ve been thinking,” she says, her voice a disembodied thing in the dark. “I’ve been thinking about going to Naath. And seeing my parents.”
Naathi parties naturally segregate along lines of gender and lines of age. The children scarf down the lovingly made food at breakneck speed before they bounce on their heels and ask their parents if they can be excused. Then the girls go off and play hide-and-go-seek among themselves as the boys set up a game of soccer.

The adult women, married and unmarried, sit apart from the men, gossiping around the kitchen table with the door to the backyard open, overlooking the kids playing in the backyard. The men are crammed into the living room, just some ten feet over, food loaded onto a too-small coffee table.

She keeps sneaking glances at him, sandwiched tightly between Mossador and Marselen on the couch. Her brothers have been pressuring him to drink and there’s a flush on his face — there’s a sheen of sweat on his skin. He went for his long run over the course of an hour and a half after breakfast and before the start of the day-long party. He has told her that it’s amazing how hard alcohol hits him, when he’s dehydrated after a run. He has told her that sometimes he has one beer with Jaime — one beer — and he’s lying useless on the couch, buzzed and warm and unable to focus very well.

He told her what he and her grandma had talked about. She told him that her sisters-in-law interrogated her about the same thing. She told him that her family is absolutely obsessed with marriage. She told him to ignore them because they’re being nuts. She also told him that girls from her community can earn good grades in school up to a certain point. And then they hit 17 years old and are unable to afford university. So instead, girls get pregnant. She had already told him, years ago, that that could have been her life, if not for the intervention of her brothers. They themselves weren’t able to go to college.

To this day, she’s not completely sure what the impetus was behind their advocacy. For every horrible story about a young woman who is beaten by her husband in a marriage arranged by her parents is a happy story about people who marry young and raise happy children together.

“Yeah, that sounded like a crazy game,” Moss says before tipping his beer bottle back. “I heard they came back with like, eighteen points.” Moss was telling them that he couldn’t be glued to the TV last weekend because his wife made him take her and the kids to the beach.

“They’re a really fun team to watch,” Mars says, quickly unfolding his hands and gesturing with his wrists before clasping his hands back together. “But we had three fouls.”

“That is a common problem,” Grey says. “We keep fouling out.”

“What’s that new guy’s name?” Mars says. “That guy Cris?”

“If he can figure it out,” Moss says. “He’ll be really good.”
“He’s kind of a punk,” adds Grey. “But he plays pretty aggressively.”

“He’s a punk?” Moss asks.

“Well, maybe not in a really obvious show-off kind of way,” Grey explains, leaning forward to scrape bits of salted and dried fish into his small bowl, before he holds the bowl between his knees, his fingers getting to work picking the flesh off bone. “He’s really quiet, but he’s also really young. He kind of like, cops attitude and gets upset easily.”

She finds that after her grandma has one glass of wine, things warm up considerably. Her grandma actually acknowledges her existence and asks her if she wants more cucumber salad before scooping some onto Missandei’s paper plate without waiting for an answer. Her grandma and the various auntsies around her have been casually exchanging cooking techniques and recipes, trying to nail down how to make the best fried fish, how long to ferment mustard greens before they turn too sour.

One of her grandma’s friends teases Missandei, asks her if her man is okay with her not being a very good cook. Missandei ends up answering the question seriously — sometimes the Naathi sense of humor escapes her. She often finds herself understanding the words and the inflections, yet a room will erupt into laughter unexpectedly, and she still won’t know when the punchline dropped. She tells Aunt Verna that Grey doesn’t seem to be bothered by the fact that she’s not a good cook. She tells them that he actually enjoys cooking, so he ends up doing most of it.

Aunt Verna tone is still teasing when she tells Missandei that she is so lucky — a man who cooks and cleans and has a good job. She tells Missandei to lock him down and marry him and have his babies, before she gets too old and his attention starts drifting toward someone younger. Missandei — again — answers seriously. This time, she feels strangely defensive and protective of his character. She quietly tells Verna that he’s not like that.

Verna cracks that all men are like that. All men are like dogs, panting after shiny new toys.

“He’s really not,” Missandei says in English, directed to no one in particular.

The conversation shifts to her naivete. She half-heartedly tosses out weak rebuttals every now and then, careful to not speak to the point that she’d offend her grandma’s friends and land back in the purgatory of her grandma’s silent treatment. She tells the women that Grey probably likes her for her personality — which probably includes her outspokenness. He’s probably not too bothered by her lack of wifely skills.

She is told that all men are the same, and that she thinks the way she does because she’s too young and inexperienced. She will later learn that her auntsies all know what they are talking about. It’s hard to keep a man. Missandei must adjust — or she will surely lose him.

Missandei aimlessly picks at the individual slices of brined cucumbers, occasionally sticking one in her mouth. She’s getting really sick and tired of this conversation topic.
After he and Missandei finish washing the dishes, as he is exiting out of the bathroom, Missandei’s grandmother says goodnight to him before disappearing into her bedroom, which makes him feel pleased. He walks into the bedroom to tell Missandei about it, but the thought shoots out of his head when he sees her sitting on the bed with her knees pulled up to her chin, holding her phone up to her face, the light sound of chiming bursting out randomly. She’s been playing a game on her phone a lot during the trip.

He can sense the heaviness. For a bit, he decides to ignore it. He asks her if it’s okay to turn off the lights. She tells him it’s fine, and she’s almost done. She shuts off her phone screen and places the phone on the window sill. He can hear her mutely shuffle the blankets around, crawling underneath of them.

After lifting up the comforter, he slides in next to her and hugs her body to his, fitting her spine against his front. The fit is snug — perfect. He asks her if everything is okay. He finds he’s been doing that more and more the longer they are in Myr.

Her voice is light and breathy and upbeat when she says, “It’s all good. Everything is fine. I’m just tired.”

“You — you don’t have to pretend. With me. I know that you’re not okay,” he says into her neck. And he feels her body stiffen in his arms right away. “What happened?”

He doesn’t understand it at first, when he feels her body shaking. It takes him a beat to realize that she’s silently crying. Her crying is rare enough that it makes him pop up to look at her face, which she turns away from him, pushing it into the pillow.

“Come here,” he says, putting a hand on her shoulder, gently getting her to flip around and face him. “It’s okay.”

He pulls her tightly into his body when she turns around — and it basically serves to make her sobs more substantial and louder. Her breath is hot and damp on his neck as he squeezes her as hard as he can muster, into his chest, holding down her heaving shoulders. He feels her clutching onto the back of his shirt, as he whispers to her — repeatedly — that she will be okay.

She is devoid of makeup and is dressed in black lounge pants and a sweatshirt as they quietly pack in the morning. He’s been cautious with her. She has told him the bare bones of what was said at the party — kind of frustrated and perplexed by her response to it. She told him that her grandma and people say shit to her all the time — and she usually doesn’t care — she usually doesn’t let it get to her because she knows that they are wrong about certain things. She usually finds the whacked out things her grandma says to her to be funny. She told him it’s so dumb — that she’s getting so worked up over something so minor and stupid. She told him that she’s being such a freaking girl.

After zipping her suitcase shut and pulling it off her bed and to the ground with a thump, she lightly hops on her feet, throwing air punches like a boxer even though she probably looks like a dork and she doesn’t know how to actually throw punches, lightly singing, “Fake it ’til you make it,” to herself as Grey finishes up folding things and putting them into his suitcase. She’s only slightly faster than he is at packing because she throws everything into her bag like a messy dump pile and leans her weight on it to zip things up.
She shrieks and grabs onto him when he sweeps her legs out from under her and lightly tosses her in his arms before he holds her like a baby, which honestly, is not her favorite. But then he lays on her bed and climbs on top of her, caging her body in with his limbs and that really is her favorite. He ducks his head down to kiss her, a sensual but brief one with his face pressing hers into the mattress, with a soft sweep of his tongue in her mouth, tasting of mint from their toothpaste.

“You like it when I’m weak and a huge bummer,” she says when he pulls away, as she frames his awesome face with her hands.

“Correction. I love it when you’re weak and a huge bummer,” he says, punctuating the statement with another short kiss. “I just like it when you’re being real with me,” he adds, seriously. “You should do that more. Or always.”

She groans. “Oh my God, you don’t even know how hysterical and depressed and annoying I will get if I don’t police myself. I’m an awful shitshow. You don’t want to open this Pandora’s box, dude.”

He lowers his forehead to hers, still careful to keep most of his body weight off of her. “I do, though.”

She gently nudges him off of her. “Famous last words,” she says, smiling softly at him before she hops off the bed, grabs her suitcase, and pulls it into the kitchen, where they can hear Mossador’s and her grandma’s voices murmuring to one another in conversation.

Her grandma is in a good mood when they enter the kitchen. She greets them and asks them how they slept, before asking them if they’re hungry as she simultaneously gets up to head to the stove. Grey intercepts her there and tells her that he will make breakfast. He tells her to sit back down — and she kind of narrows her eyes at that, and he’s expecting her to raise a stink about it and invoke some more of her household rules — but she acquiesces and heads back to the table where her tea and Moss are waiting for her.

The stove already has lukewarm leftovers from the party in various pots and pans. All he really needs to do is warm up some of the stuff. He opts to plate up the stews and the starches before nuking them in the microwave because he doesn’t want to heat up everything only to eat a little bit and let grow bacteria that grandma will put into her body. He clears out space in the fridge and tucks the pots and pans into the overflowing thing, as Missandei’s grandma tutts behind him in disapproval — that he’s microwaving the food. She tells him that men don’t know women’s work, and it would have been very easy and just as fast, if he had let her prepare breakfast for them.

Missandei tiredly says, “Thank you, babe,” when he sets a hot plate down in front of her. She holds up utensils and a napkin in her fist, softly smiling before handing them over to him. There’s a cup of tea ready for him.

“You sure got the crap end of the stick, brother,” Mossador says, reaching out to fondly run his knuckle down Missandei’s cheek. He proudly and laughingly says, “My sister can’t clean worth shit, can’t cook worth shit. I remember when she was little, and I was supposed to be watching after her — I was being a twerp and slacking off. And she tried to heat up food for herself on the stove and just charred the shit out of it and filled the house with smoke. Our grandparents came home to the alarms blaring.”
“And you took the blame,” Missandei says to Mossador, smiling sheepishly into her plate. “And got punished for it.”

“We kept her away from the stove after that,” he says, laughing. “Which I suppose, is why she can’t cook worth shit.”

“Sometimes we just lack an aptitude or an interest in certain things,” Grey says mildly. “She’s good at other things.”

In Low Valyrian, Mossador asks their grandma if she remembers when they almost burned the house down, when they were children. Their grandma gives them a toothsome smile and says that the house smelled like charcoal for days afterward. It gave her a headache, and she was so angry with him for letting Missandei use the stove when she was just a little baby.

On the way to the airport, with Grey quietly in the back seat, Missandei runs down a mental list of grandma-things with Moss, checking in with him on medications, doctor appointments, the finances associated with all of those things. They lightly chat about grandma’s independence and her autonomy — their conversation centered around how many more years they think grandma can handle living by herself. Mossador tells her that he and Marselen have talked about it a lot, and they think that to start, Moss would like for grandma to move in with him and his family — see how that goes. He tells Missandei he’s been thinking about building a little house in the back of his property for grandma to live in.

“You’re going to get permits before you start building, right?” Missandei says dryly.

“Well, yeah,” Moss says, grinning easily. “I’m not going to go full-immigrant with it, if that’s what you’re asking. I’ll give my money to those useless city chumps so they can tell me what I already know, no problem.”


“We’re going to take a little trip up north in three months,” Mossador says lightly, changing the subject. “Us and the kids. Okha’s been stressed out at work and well — the kids have never been anywhere. We’ve never had a family vacation. I want them to see that there’s a whole other world outside of Myr, you know?”

“Yeah,” Missandei says, putting her hand on his driving arm, smiling softly at him. “I do know.”

“Okha and I have been able to save a good amount of money, you know,” he says, staring ahead at the road. “Because you’ve been helping so much with grandma’s bills.”

“Dude,” Missandei says earnestly. “That’s so awesome. That makes me so happy to hear.”

She told him she’d like to slow it down, and he has no problem with that. He doesn’t know why they constantly drift to her couch when they have a perfectly serviceable bed just a door away. But the
TV is droning on in the background — this started because she got bored and started to fall asleep during the movie. He told her not to fall asleep because she’s just going to harass him into telling her how the freaking movie ends after she wakes up — and it’s irritating because he’s not good at storytelling, and she just wants so many details.

And somehow that turned into the both of them, naked, with her in his lap. Somehow, it turned into sex.

He’s seated deep inside of her, just casually languishing there. Her breasts are in his hands — he’s already told her, again, that they are the perfect size, the perfect fit. She makes a cute little noise every time his thumbs sweep over her sensitive nipples. She keeps whispering things to him, building on her whole metaphor about marathons and not sprints — which doesn’t do much to serve her purpose. She doesn’t really have a clear idea of what long-distance running entails — and her voice in his ear just makes him want to flip her on her back and rut into her until it’s done.

“Can I get some lube?”

Missandei twiddles her thumbs and exhales out her nervousness, as she stares up at the ceiling, legs bare and splayed out far apart.

“Okay, this might hurt.”

Missandei winces because she’s dry as the desert, as a speculum gets pushed up her vagina. There’s a lot of friction, and it’s kind of cold. And she breathes through the discomfort.

“Almost done.”


Her doctor laughs.

She doesn’t expect Jaime to be home. She expected him to be off somewhere with Brienne. But Jaime is eating a sandwich across the table from Grey — probably something that Grey pilfered from work — and both of their heads perk up when she walks through the front door. She tells them that they really should get better security in the building because the door guy just let her walk on through. Also, they should lock their doors? Do they want to be murdered in the night or what?

“I put you on the okay-to-let-in list,” Grey says, fighting with the tiny smile on his face. “So you don’t have to keep sweet-talking Lloyd.”

She decides that she doesn’t care if Jaime knows. She pulls an orange plastic bottle out of her purse, and she sets it down on the table. Jaime immediately reaches for it to read the label on it, because he just does not give a fuck.

“I told my doctor about how I’ve been PMSing like a hag lately, and he had me fill out a questionnaire and then we talked for a bit and then he gave me that stuff for my brain.” She frowns,
looking at Grey, whose face is blank. “What the hell?”

Jaime lets out a low whistle. “Aw, sweet,” he says to her, eyes still on the bottle. “Amari actually wanted to put me on these a while back.” Turning to Grey, he holds up the bottle and says, “Antidepressants.”
After Jaime says that sertraline is a really common medication that people take, and it’s completely non-habit-forming — no one ever goes to the pharmacy to beg the pharmacist for their next hit — Grey has a stunningly cut and dry way of responding to the sertraline. He articulately tells her that if she’s sick in the brain, then she should take medicine that makes her brain feel better. He says it like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. And then he stands up from his seat and grabs his and Jaime’s plates, taking them into the kitchen to wash. He asks her if she’s had dinner yet. She exchanges a look of disbelief with Jaime — who laughs — and in a daze, she tells Grey that she hasn’t eaten yet.

“Why did you fill it?” Jaime asks. “If you aren’t sure you want to take it?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I was kind of just on autopilot.” She pauses, tapping a nail on the table nervously. “My doctor suggested that I go see a mental health professional.”

“Yeah?” Jaime says, sipping from his water glass.

“How did you start seeing your therapist?”

Jaime gives her a half-smile, waiting until Grey sets down a hot cup of tea and a plate of hummus, vegetables, cheeses, and cut-up orange segments in front of her. Grey puts his hand on the back of her neck and explains that he could only steal two sandwiches from work. She swipes a carrot through the hummus and crunches on it as Jaime tells her that he started seeing Amari when he was 17 years old. And it was actually Brienne that got him to do it. He started seeing Amari because of these lingering issues with his ex-stepmother — and his toxic relationship with his twin, Cersei. And then through therapy, he ended up talking a lot about his mother’s death and his dad and working through those issues.

“And therapy helped?” she asks.

“Oh my God,” he says. “It changed my life. I didn’t even realize how unhappy and angry I was back then — until I was happy and could look back on it with hindsight.” He assesses her. “What’s your reluctance? You think only crazy people need therapists?” He grins.

“No, no,” she says. “It’s just . . . therapy is so white.”

Jaime shrugs. “True. I’ve read that less than two percent of therapists are Black.”

“Yeah?”
“Yeah. It’s a mish-mash of a bunch of things. Black kids aren’t exposed to the field the way whites are — they aren’t familiar with therapists or therapy so they don’t seek it out as a potential career. And mental illness carries really negative stigma in a lot of Black communities, where the idea of being strong by bearing through things is really interwoven into Black identities. And affordability is an issue — I’m betting that’s why therapy tends to be seen as a white people thing. Often the people who need help the most are getting help the least. And then lastly, cultural competency is always an issue. Black people are naturally very sensitive to racial microaggressions, and their counselors and therapists, who are most likely white, can definitely exhibit these microaggressions and even re-traumatize Black clients. And when trust isn’t there, then therapy won’t work. A lot of people of color discontinue therapy for this reason.”

She stares at him. “Jaime. It’s insane to me. The things in your white male brain.”

He smiles winningly. “I know, right? It’s a great party trick. Really sucks up all the fun and makes people want to go home.” He leans forward and steals a piece of cheese from her plate, popping it in his mouth, holding it in his cheek. “You know, if you’re interested, I actually have a referral. You can’t go to my therapist because I’m possessive. And I don’t want you to talk to him about how you’re only with Grey because you’re secretly in love with me. The referral is a chick. She’s Black. Not immigrant-y like you — born here, many generations deep. But still — Black. I hear she’s very good.”

She looks at him skeptically. “How do just have the name of a Black therapist in your back pocket, dude?”

Jaime juts his chin out at Grey. “Because your baby and I have fought over this every few months for like, years now. How long has it been, boo?”

“About three years,” Grey says casually, wiping his thumb lightly back and forth across the back of her neck.

She bends over and puts her hands on her knees, sweating and panting through the pain. She asks him what shin splints feel like, because the area between her knee and her ankle is on fire. He loudly pops his hand on her butt, making her stumble forward, hands flying out to grab onto a metal pole holding up a crosswalk sign, so that she doesn’t plant face-first into the sidewalk — and he tells her that she doesn’t have shin splints.

He tells her that she’s improving really quickly — her mile time is inching down and her endurance is getting good. Her lungs are getting strong.

“Thanks, babe,” she says, still gulping in air as she paces back and forth on the sidewalk, barely managing to avoid pedestrians. “It still feels fucking horrible, and I want to puke. When does this runner’s high kick in, bro?”

“It doesn’t happen for everyone,” he says. “And not before the pain stops. The pain is overriding the pleasure centers of your brain.”

She laughs. “Oh, great.” She follows him as the crosswalk light turns white — a chirp rings out from the machine — and she groans as she starts jogging again. “Grey!” she shouts after him. Jesus, asshole is so pointlessly good at running. “I just remembered! You never told me what you thought
of the mix I made for you!”

He’s worried he’s over-training because he’s been tacking on extra short runs with Missandei throughout the week. He’s managed to learn from the half and has curbed most of his hunger by shifting to more protein and a little bit of animal fat for the bulk of his calorie intake. He finds that training for a marathon leaves him substantially more tired than the half. He’s ready to crash at around eight — every day. It’s been a little annoying for Missandei, because he’s too tired to do much on weekends. Hell, it’s been annoying for him. His whole existence seems to pivot around his meals and his runs.

The orange prescription bottle sits on the corner of her kitchen island. There are still thirty pills in it. She’s asked him if he thinks she’s being dumb, if he thinks she should just take the pills. He has told her that he can’t say — he can’t tell her what to do. But he repeats to her that all he ever wanted and wants for her is her happiness.

It took him a little while to realize that this whole business runs deep for her. Where he sees pills as benign little bits that he pops into his mouth to experimentally see where they take him — she sees drugs as the poison that killed her brother. She hasn’t even ever smoked weed. She’s operated under a very binary view of drugs.

She shakes the bottle like it’s a rattle, before she flips off the lights in the living room and makes her way through her dark apartment, meeting him where he is sitting on her bed, under the covers, flipping through a book. He’s been rifling through the self-help stuff that she keeps on the floor — there is a mixture of books from Jhiqui and books that Missandei picked herself. He can easily identify the ones from Jhiqui. Those are the ones about embracing and harnessing female power and owning one’s womanhood.

Missandei has told him that she doesn’t particularly enjoy reading Jhiqui’s books, but sometimes friends do shit they don’t want to do and talk about it over brunch so that their other friend is happy and will shut up about her bullshit for a little while.

Missandei is always simultaneously reading a bunch of different novels in a bunch of different languages. Her novels are interspersed with books about the psychology of sex. He has told her that he has no clue how she can deal with words all day for work and then come home and read a shit-ton more. She’s told him that she really doesn’t do that much reading at work anymore.

He holds up the book cover to her after she shuts the door behind her. “I’m on the chapter about sexual anorexia,” he says.

She gives him a smile and yawns. “That’s a good one.”

He’s exhausted, and he knows that she’s exhausted — but she’s been running like a really good sport — and they’ve been so busy and tired that all they do when they’re together is eat and then sleep. Slow is still the operative word as he runs his fingers down her spine, feeling for the slight
bumps and dips of her bones. He tells her that he still owes her a non-sexy back rub, which makes
her softly laugh in the dark. She tells him that she had forgotten.

He asks her if it’s okay to take off her shirt — and she answers wordlessly, by tugging off her
oversized tee and dropping it to the floor, exposing her bare back to him, that he can feel far better
than he can see. He brushes away the loose tendrils of hair at the nape of her neck, and he asks her
why it has to be a non-sexy back rub, with his warm palm passing heat into her skin. Her voice is
breathy, and she sounds a little unfocused, as she tells him that he’s sometimes so lazy with back
rubs. He just rubs her down for five minutes before he grabs onto a boob and presses his dick against
her. Then the back rub is over because they are like, having sex.

She wants a non-sexy back rub because she wants her money’s worth. She wants the full half-hour.

He buries his laugh into her hair, pulling her body to his. His knuckles inadvertently brushes the soft
underside of a breast — and he goes with it, even though he had originally intended to just
innocently help her get to sleep. He firmly cups her and then presses his still-soft-but-not-for-long
dick against her butt. It makes her crack up, her voice strong and loud, her body shaking against his.

“Sex or a non-sexy back rub?” he mutters into the back of her head, before he brings his teeth down
to bite at the base of her neck, trying to sway her in a particular direction, as he feels his body warm
up, as he feels himself harden.

“Oh my God,” she gasps, still laughing. “It’s a Sophie’s Choice.”

They are so tired that they might have looped back around to alert. Or they are delirious. He groans
and exhales, looking up at her as she slowly and thoroughly lowers herself onto him again, clenching
her inner walls around tightly. He presses his fingers into the fleshy part of her naked hips to help
guide her, and he breathes out, “Oh my God. It feels like you’re trying to break my dick off.” By
that, he means that it’s really, really fantastic stuff.

He can see her smile in the dark by her white teeth. And for a few minutes, they just aimlessly say
sexual things to one another. Some of it so bizarre and weird that it makes him laugh. She tells him
that her first memory of sex was when she was little and watched two stray dogs mate. And it was so
crazy-looking and so terrifying that she ended up bawling her eyes out on the lawn until Melaku
came out to retrieve her, telling her she was nuts and that the dogs were just boning — that’s all.

He puts his finger to her flat stomach, drawing a random pattern on it, pausing at points to ask her
where she thinks he is, inside of her. He touches her belly button, asks, “Here?”

She snorts. “You’re not that big, baby,” she says slyly, leaning forward to put her hands on either
side of his head, letting her eyes flutter shut and making the both of them groan as she grinds down
on him.

“Lies,” he whispers, making himself twitch and expand just the smallest amount, inside of her. He
can see it on her face — that she registers the movement. Her mouth breaks out into a smile and a

“I love watching your face,” she quietly says back to him, shifting to this grave seriousness, getting
her face close to his, changing the angle of the penetration, dragging herself up, pausing at the top as
she kisses his face, and then whimpering as he holds onto her, as he slowly pushes her hips back down, wanting to just beat the shit out of this moment — the warm, mind-breaking wet push and pull of pleasure. He has been really digging the shit out of slow.

Some of what she says to him is so honest and raw that it makes him want to lose his mind. She tells him that sometimes it feels painful to love him, because she just hopes for so much for him — and she’s always hyper-aware of the risk that entails. She tells him that her love for him is at the point where — if he feels like their relationship isn’t working for him or isn’t making him happy — she wants him to leave her.

She’s crying as she says this. He’s inside her and frozen into silence, as she says this. “Love is a choice, I think,” she says. “People choose to stay. And they choose to leave. And maybe you staying doesn’t mean anything — if I can’t bring myself to let you go.” She tells him that she’s been thinking about her parents so much lately. And this is just a ridiculous conversation to be having while they are fucking. She says she’s sorry for this.

He snaps his hips up, shoving himself deeper into her body. She’s not expecting it. She has to bite down a screech, one that sounds uncharacteristically weary. He sits up and wraps his arms around her, keeping her in place as he rolls them and flips her onto her back.

He kisses her at the same time he brings her right leg higher up on his hip, at the same time he slowly thrusts back into her. His heart is throbbing in his chest. He doesn’t even know what to say to her to make her feel better.

Instead, they are nose to nose, and his mouth skims hers, as he whispers to her. He tells her about how he felt, when he first met her. He tells her that she was so nice to him and so friendly and so beautiful that it made him feel deeply unworthy. And the reminder of his unworthiness made him angry — with her and with himself. He tells her that anger manifests itself, inside of him, when he catches himself hoping. He tells her that they have that in common — at the very least — this stupid hope even though they both know that it’s painful, and that it hurts to hope. He tells her that over time, she has helped him learn to better manage this kind of pain.

Consciousness comes slowly, over the course of an hour. When he stretches his arms out, he finds her side of the bed empty — and it’s disorienting because she is almost always there when he wakes up — whether she is awake or not.

He pulls on a pair of pants before stepping out of the bedroom because he feels vulnerable. He finds her dressed and on the couch, cinching her prescription bottle between her bare feet, which are pulled up on the cushion. Her toenails are painted a deep burgundy.

“Missandei?” he says.

She snorts, her shoulders tilting up a little. “Geez, I’m so fucking dramatic and ridiculous,” she says, pushing her messy hair off of her face. She clears her throat. “Today, I’m going to book tickets to Naath. And I’m going to try to make an appointment to see that therapist Jaime recommended. And I’m going to start taking this medication.”

She picks up the bottle and presses the top and twists to get the cap off. She carefully taps out a tablet into her palm before she puts it in her mouth and swallows it dry.
“Cool,” he says, picking the bottle out of her hand after she re-caps it, so she can’t dwell too much. He walks over to the kitchen and replaces the bottle in its spot on the corner of her island. He fills a glass with water, and he takes it back to her on the couch, holding it out to her.

She kind of smiles, taking the glass. “You’re always forcing water down my throat.”

“It’s really important to stay hydrated,” he says.

“My doctor says that this stuff can take four weeks before I feel a difference. And one in three people on the drug notice a decrease in libido,” she says, after taking a sip of water. She sets the glass down on the coffee table before she holds her hands up, crossing her fingers.

“Dude,” he says, shaking his head at her. “I fucking love you.”

She lightly laughs. “Well, wait until you meet the real me. She could be psychotic.”

“Babe, that’s not how the medication works.”

She pretend-sneers. “Ugh, science. Whatever.”

“Hey.”

She stretches her arms out in front of her, reaching for him. “What?”

He grabs her hands. “Book two tickets for Naath?”
Her doctor told her she has to work her way up to a 100 mg dose of the sertraline. She’s meant to cut her 50 mg tablets in half and start at 25 mg for a couple days, then 50 mg for a couple, then 75 mg for a couple — and by the time a whole week passes, she should be ready for 100 mg. Her doctor told her it’s called titrating. It’s a term that she was already familiar with — but only applied to Grey and Melaku.

And, when applied to them, discussions were around titrating down — not titrating up. She’s doing everything backwards. She has noted all of these hilarious parallels with grimness. They are why she reserves most of her questions and confessions of worry — and she has many — for Jaime. She talks to Jaime because he has the broadest, most detailed working knowledge of drugs of anyone who is not a drug user that she knows.

“I mean, alcohol I understand,” Missy tells Terri, an ambiguously aged, elegant-looking light-skinned Black woman with relaxed hair, in a sweater and skirt combo. Missy felt real dumb when she showed up to her appointment expecting someone in dreads and smelling of patchouli.

“Yes,” Terri says. “Because alcohol is social and therefore socially acceptable. You can have a glass of wine with your dinner and no one thinks anything of it.”

“But you can’t like, do a line of coke right before you cut into your chicken, you know?” Missy interjects, smiling in habit. “At least, not in public.”

Missy finds that she cannot even stop herself from lightly laughing at her own stupid jokes like an idiot. She finds that she’s deeply uncomfortable talking to a stranger about her business. She finds herself putting on a cheerful face whenever she opens her mouth to say things. She watches as Terri’s expression stays steadfastly and unnervingly neutral.

Twenty five milligrams initially seemed like a puny dose. Jaime told her that the usual is around fifty to a hundred. She had asked him, how will she know if it’s even affecting her? She rambled on about placebo effects. She complained that four weeks is a long time to wait for something to work.

The questions were stupid. Because she feels the drug — there’s no mistaking it. It actually knocked her right on her ass, a few hours after the first dose. Since then, she cannot be farther than fifty feet away from a toilet for more than ten minutes. Since then, she cannot even eat a piece of fruit without running to shit hot water twenty minutes after. Since then, a sip of water makes her feel like her stomach will revolt on her. Since then, she’s been waking up in the middle of the night in a sweat — body-tired as hell — with her mind finding it impossible to get back to sleep. Since then, she’s been dealing with tremors in her hands and an ever-present cloudy, depressive state. She has wondered if she will be the freak statistical improbability that spirals further into depression and becomes suicidal on an antidepressant.

A first session with a therapist is very much like a first date. She doesn’t even know where to begin. Her life also sounds utterly bananas when she lays it out, out loud. Her brother is a dead drug addict. Her boyfriend is a former drug user. Her parents abandoned her and her siblings. She fled her home as a child because of violent political unrest and a slave trade.
It sounds crazy to follow up all of that by sounding defensive, saying that she thinks she’s well-adjusted and not that depressed, that she’s a bit unsure of why she was directed to see a therapist. Everything is fine. Everything is great.

She has a winning strategy. Her winning strategy is that if she doesn’t eat or drink anything — the chances of her needing to sprint to the women’s toilets decreases significantly. She took extra care applying her makeup in the morning because it used to be her technique in college — to show up to class or meetings looking like a schlub whenever she was under the weather so that people would give her a wide berth. It’s always scary to people, when a vain, girly girl shows up looking like garbage.

That stuff doesn’t fly in adulthood. If she were to do that at work, she’d be deemed unprofessional. Caitlin caught Missy fanning the sweat off of her face in her office right before lunch. There have been jokes about her being hungover, which she’s been half-heartedly playing into. Her boss told her to go home, but they’re behind schedule and if she takes a sick day, she fucks over the rest of the team.

One of their clients — a fast casual restaurant that aims to be a global chain — has a conference in Dorne in the next month. Dorne is an emerging market for the client and they’re making some inroads in an arena traditionally dominated by Dornish companies. The last year has been about localizing everything, from culturally translating the food offerings to marketing and advertising, to fit and appeal to the Dornish palate, buying habits, and language. They’re in the final stretch, about to head into production. She’s been living at the office. She’s been so tired and feeling so shitty.

Before lunch, Gemma had laughingly teased that Missandei’s frequent bathroom trips could be morning sickness. Which was something Missy responded to entirely too seriously — she stonily declared that it is not morning sickness while tightly gripping the back of a chair — which made things pretty awkward with Gemma afterward.

Her phone vibrates, rattling against her desk. She yawns before she flips it over to read the text message coming through. It’s from him. It’s just a hello. But it makes her smile anyway.

“What do you mean the insurance is not covering the exam at all?” Missandei asks, speaking into her warm cellphone, punching buttons on the vending machine for her lunch. “It’s supposed to be covered. It’s always been covered.”

Moss tells her that he was told that grandma has to meet some sort of deductible because of the new year. Missy had changed their grandma’s plan because her old one was discontinued.

“That’s not right. I read through the plan brochure so carefully. This procedure is not subject to the deductible.” Missy presses her knees together as she stoops down to claw the ramen packet out of the vending machine, trying not to flash the whole break room in the process.

Moss tells her that he’s not sure what to tell her. He’s been on the phone with the insurance
company. He’s been on the phone with the outpatient center. He’s just relaying to her all the shit that he’s been told. He’s getting short with her on the phone — he’s frustrated, too.

The metal flap of the vending machine slaps back down and she’s not paying attention. “Dammit,” Missandei says, looking down at her suddenly broken, bleeding nail. She shoves her thumb into her mouth, sucking up the salty blood, wincing at the sting, fighting the wave of sertraline-tinged nausea. “Look,” she says, talking around her thumb. “Don’t worry about it for now. I’ll look into it this afternoon, and I’ll text you.”

He’s been getting over a slight cold — which has been affecting his training. His lung capacity is more limited, and there’s an annoying, lingering mucus situation. Jaime’s been telling him to take it easier and to rest more, which is really rich considering Jaime is in the thick of studying for the bar and has become a cranky zombie person that only gets up to go use the bathroom or shove calories into his face. They’ve been barely speaking to one another, just silently passing by each other now and then like ghosts.

Grey’s been exhausted and going to bed at 7 p.m. every night, chipping away at only a few paragraphs, in the running memoir he’s been reading.

With Missandei being so busy at work and him being so busy with work and his training, they haven’t been able to see each other. He’s asked her if he could just come over and sleep next to her at night, but she’s been telling him gross bathroom stories, and he’s been wary about spreading his virus to her. He doesn’t want her to have a cold on top of all of the other shit she has going on.

She’s in the midst of smearing the makeup off her tired eyes with her bandaged thumb, at her desk, in her tiny office, in front of her glowing computer screen — when she hears a knock on the door.

The door opens before she can call out.

A plastic bag pops through the door first, attached to a pale hand. And then Missy’s stomach lurches when she smells the warm salty, meaty smell of something yummy. And then Brienne’s smiling face and big blue eyes pop through.

“Hey, babe!” Brienne says, stepping fully into the office before shutting the door behind her.

“How did you get in?” Missandei says blearily. It’s dark out and the office is closed down.

“How did you get in?” Missandei says blearily. It’s dark out and the office is closed down.

“Please,” Brienne says dryly. “I was a journalist in another life.” And then she rolls her eyes sheepishly to the ceiling. “One of your departing coworkers let me in after I told him I was bringing you dinner. He was leery about it, but I showed him a pic of me and you together on my phone, to prove we are friends. And then he told me that you’ve been really burning the midnight oil?” Brienne sets the plastic bag on Missandei’s desk. “I brought teriyaki.” Then, Brienne’s smiling face falls, as her eyes rove over Missandei’s face. “Hey, are you okay?”

“What the fuck?” Missandei whispers, reaching up to wipe the tears out of her eyes. Everything is blurry as she hears Brienne rummaging through her purse. And then she feels Brienne’s knuckles
lightly nudge her hand, firmly placing a wad of tissues into her palm.

Missandei remembers how embarrassed she had felt, when Brienne surprised her with tickets to original pronunciation Shakespeare for her nameday and how she had responded to that immense gesture by bawling. She’s not even a crier. She’s barely talked to Brienne in the last month. She has no idea how Brienne knows she’s been working late. She just doesn’t expect for people to be so kind to her. It feels weird to be taken care of. These insane gestures just break her inside.

“God, I’m so dumb,” Missandei says, pressing the tissues to her sweating face, blinking up at the ceiling, sniffing. “I feel so stupid.”

“What’s been going on with you, Miss?” Brienne says, dragging one of the office chairs across the carpet. “What’s been happening?”

Missandei miserably continues crying as she tells Brienne about how she’s a druggie now. She’s on fucking drugs and she doesn’t even know why or for what reason — other than she must be punished by feeling awful. She just thinks that — she just thinks that Grey has done so much for her — he fucking gave up one of his most favorite hobbies for her — because of her rigid and uptight viewpoint on drugs. And so the least she could do for him is do this — but the gesture is so bent so nonsensical and warped.

She tells Brienne that everyone thinks she’s depressed. Her doctor thinks she’s depressed. Grey thinks she’s depressed. Jaime thinks she’s depressed. She barely knows her therapist, but she probably thinks Missy is depressed, too. People keep telling her how she’s feeling and the person they are all describing is really not how she sees herself. She’s not this pathetic and weak person. She’s not this sad person. She’s just been feeling like this loser charity case that is a drain on other people. And she misread and misunderstood her grandma’s new insurance plan like an idiot. So she owes some people thousands of dollars because she’s just a fucking idiot.

She tells Brienne she purchased tickets to go visit her parents, and she’s scared to tell her brothers because they will be angry with her. She’s scared to tell her grandma because she doesn’t want to hurt her grandmother. She doesn’t know why she has this compulsion to know her parents — because Moss and Mars are fine and good and they have all of this anger — and it all seems warranted. Her brain understands that anger but her heart just hurts sometimes. And she was just so young when she left them — so maybe she is just stupid there, too. Maybe she’s making herself walk into a goddamn viper’s nest on purpose, because she’s just so fucking stupid.

“Why am I going back to people who left me?” she says, with tears streaming down her puffy face. “Why do I always force my way into the lives of people who don’t really want me? I’m just so stupid.”

When Brienne moves to hug her, Missandei holds up a hand, stopping her. It’s an instinctive motion. And when she recognizes it, her jaw trembles and her vision blurs again. Brienne’s arms come around her after she drops her hand.

She’s too weak and cloudy to scream at the intruder when she hears the front door to her apartment open. Also, she generally expects it to be him, because he has the key that she gave him.

“Hey,” she says from her prostrate position on the couch.
“Brienne told me to check in on you,” Grey says plainly.

“God, what a blabbermouth.”

She tells him about the dream she just had while she was napping — even though she knows that he hates listening to other people talk about their dreams. She tells him that she was waiting in line for a long time to get into a kayak and paddle around Westeros. It was something fun that she could do in a few hours — dream-her was dumb with geography — but when it was her turn to get into a kayak, the sun set. And instead of paddles, she was given rope. And then she was told the trip was cancelled. She took a picture of really cute turtles and birds in the water, as the sun set. And then she had to go back into the kayak office. The end.

“I thought being drugged up is supposed to be fun,” she tells him. “Why do people get high when it feels like this?”

“You’re not high,” he tells her, standing over her, blocking the light.

Her place is a mess — more than usual. There’s a mountain of dishes piled up in the sink and things vaguely smell of stale pizza and dirty clothes. She doesn’t look good — she’s still in her wrinkled work clothes and her makeup is half-wiped off. Her hair is all over the place and she’s sweaty. And her eyes are puffy and red.

And the sight of her so wiped out just makes him feel like shit. It makes him feel selfish and self-involved. He had no idea. He’s in the mode of assuming people will just ask him what they require of him. He remembers when Jaime was a sad sack of a human being after his breakup with Brienne, and how it took some gargantuan effort on Grey’s part — to show up. It took him so much effort to do something that was so innate and natural to Addam.

He leans over, tucks his arms underneath her neck and knees, and he lifts her up. She is damp all over — and he’s in disbelief. He starts feeling the tug of anger — at her doctor and her new therapist — at himself. It’s unfathomable to him, that this is supposed to make her feel better.

When he starts unbuttoning and unzipping her clothes, he hears her weakly laugh. Her clammy hand touches down on his wrist, not stopping his motions, just placed there.

“Baby,” she says, smiling a little bit. “I can’t believe I’m saying this. But I’m not really in the mood for sex. I know I’m hot stuff, especially right now. But you need to control yourself.”

“Have you eaten?” he asks, peeling off her near-translucent shirt, holding her up with his palm against her spine. His other hand is working with her unzipped tight skirt, trying to pull it over her hips.

“Yeah,” she says. “Brienne brought me dinner. Some if it is still in the fridge, if you’re hungry.”

“That’s not why I asked,” he snaps, lightly placing her torso back on the bed, clad in just her bra, so he can use both hands to tug her skirt off. “Why didn’t you call me?” he says, feeling the frustration bleeding through his voice. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s not a big deal,” she says — her mood shifting along with his — darkening, too.
“Missandei!” he shouts, yanking at her damp skirt, bouncing her body against the mattress. “Why are your fucking clothes always so fucking tight!”

“You like how I look in tight clothes,” she says, voice low and tense. She shoves out a sigh. “Why are you here? If you’re just going to yell at me and be angry?”

“You need to fucking take better care of yourself,” he says accusingly, finally pulling her skirt off.

He’s holding onto her tightly. He’s plastered to her bare back, which still insists on sweating out of every pore. His fist, closed over her hand, is wedged between her breasts, keeping her body close to his, compressing her lungs down so her breaths stay shallow. It’s honestly — a bit uncomfortable. But she keeps blinking back tears and keeping her breathing steady and even so that he can fall asleep.

He had apologized for being a dick to her just because he was frustrated and feeling helpless. She had tiredly forgiven him. Because she gets it. Sort of. He has been strangely clingy and afraid to let her go. She cannot pinpoint her exact feelings — a gauzy cloud has settled over everything.

“I’ve been thinking,” he whispers into her ear suddenly, his breath warm and damp.

She waits for him to finish his thought.

“About the future.”

Missandei tells Terri that there’s 100 milligrams of sertraline raging through her body. And her body is getting used to it. She still wakes up in a sweat and the bathroom situation is sometimes touch and go — but she’s a functioning adult again.

“How was your week?”

Missandei pauses. “Honestly? It was pretty miserable.”
She clamps her hand down tightly over the seam of her lips, pinching the tip of her nose in between her forefinger and thumb. She harshly holds her breath, lungs burning hotly from the exertion, tiny pinpricks of sweat beading on her skin. Her thighs and legs around his head are clenched ramrod straight, awkwardly throwing off the angle. She forces herself to concentrate, directing all of her thoughts to the center of everything. She makes herself think about his wet mouth on her body being the source of her whole universe.

She conjures up an image of him behind her closed eyelids, tells herself to remember how he had looked when he walked back into her bedroom after his morning run. His skin had this wet warmth, lightly flushed from blood near the surface of his skin. She caught his eyes skimming over her cleavage quickly. And then she had reached for him. He had told her he was stinky. She had refrained from telling him that she thought the sweat made him smell and look like man, that she wanted him to rub his scent all over her body.

She thinks about how she has to remember to create an automated message for her work email, by the end of the week. She thinks about how she better write it down while she remembers — or else she will forget.

The corners of her eyes sting as the air in her lungs becomes too much and releases in a loud whoosh. She starts gulping in cool air, her chest rising up and down rapidly and her pulse running as she loses all of the progress on her climb toward an orgasm. Her body slackens in exhaustion.

She lightly reaches down and taps his cheek with her fingers. She feels his mouth lift. The cool air that replaces his warm breath draws goosebumps on her thighs and arms. He’s staring up at her with a blank, but patient look.

“I don’t think it’s gonna happen, babe,” she finally says. “I mean, short of a jackhammer to my clit.” It’s a joke. Truth be told, she’s very sore — on top of being bummed about being lame — and that is why she’s calling it quits. They had been going at it for a while.

“Are you sure?” He pauses. “I don’t . . . mind. I wasn’t tired.”

She shakes her head. “It was starting to hurt a little,” she admits.

He looks mildly surprised.

She keeps relearning that sex is one part emotional and one part physical. Her doctor told her that this is a possible and also a common side effect of her medication. She’s pored over numerous online articles, ones that tell her that she will never have sex the same way again, unless she changes drugs — and others that tell her that things normalize in a few months. The medicine has been fantastic otherwise — helping her feel more . . . authentic and honest. She’s reluctant to change it up.

She kind of tries to smile away some of the awkwardness, maintaining eye contact with him as he pushes his body off the mattress and gets to his knees. She can see the tenting in his running shorts in her peripheral vision.
He lightly falls down onto the bed, lying next to her, his fingers and blunt nails automatically running down the length of her bare thigh.

“Do you want —” she starts to say, as she pivots toward him, laying her head down on the pillow, too. She tucks her legs, her naked bottom half, under the blanket. She sneaks a hand in between the waistband of his shorts — still damp from sweat — and his warm skin. “Um — can I?” She lightly skims her knuckles against him. He’s sticky and humid. Her hand is unwashed and full of friction. She’s trying to treat him carefully.

He doesn’t answer her in words. His arm comes around her, pulling her close. His mouth presses against hers, his tongue automatically pushing past her teeth. She can smell herself on his breath. She can taste herself on his lips. It brings up these secret insecurities — and she tries to push the thoughts away for a moment, as her hand softly closes around him, as he helps her by pushing down his shorts.

He sees Jaime loitering casually in front of a cheese shop at the bottom of the hill, sunglasses obscuring his eyes, red hat flipped backwards, hands in the pockets of his plaid shorts. The noon sun has cast this golden glow off of his tan.

He can see the familiar rows of white teeth as Jaime flashes a smile at them, watching as Grey slowly leads an unsteady Missandei down the steep sidewalk, with her swearing under her breath and clutching onto his arm. They are late because she couldn’t decide on an outfit — also because he insisted on finding street parking because he didn’t want to pay garage rates.

“I told you not to wear —”

“Grey!” Missy says snappishly. “Come on. I didn’t say anything about you circling the block fifty times, okay? Give me break. I’ll be fine once we get to the bottom.”

He knows Jaime can hear them, based on the triumphant smirk on his face. Missandei immediately drops Grey’s arm — because she’s annoyed at him — once she can walk on her own. Jaime opens up his body for a hug, and he grabs her — looking so natural and so at ease.

“You’re too good for him,” Jaime says, grinning widely, eyes flickering to Grey.

He rolls his eyes.

“I like the dress,” Jaime says, holding out their arms, tilting his head down to assess the yellow. “It looks like summer.”

“Thank you.”

Jaime gestures to the open air shop next to them, packed full of people — which is probably the reason Jaime is waiting outside. “Brienne’s getting her cheese-nerd on, inside,” he explains. “There are samples.”

“Oh my God, why didn’t you lead with that?” Missandei mutters, pushing past him, her wedge sandals thumping against the wood floorboards of the deck that leads into the shop.

They both watch as she uses her elbows and shoulders, politely saying, “Excuse me,” over and over
again as she pushes herself into the mass of bodies, disappearing into the crowd.

Jaime snickers and leans against a bike rack, adjusting his sunglasses.

““You look like a monstrous douchebag in this get-up,” Grey says, positioning himself next to Jaime against the bike rack. He hears the metal creak, and he feels the light give as it holds their weight.

“My sister bought me these pants,” Jaime says, crossing his arms. “She’s . . . going through something right now. And it involves spending her husband’s money like there’s no tomorrow.”

They lapse into comfortable silence, people-watching, sort of looking for a mop of blond hair and swatch of yellow in the crowd. Grey can’t recall whose idea this was — Brienne’s or Missandei’s — but sometimes he blinks, and he is in disbelief — that this is his life.

“We’re at a farmer’s market,” Grey says. “On a Sunday.”

“This is so fucking white.”

She’s apparently taking another vacation at an inopportune time, a fact her fire-breathing dickhole of a boss keeps throwing in her face, time and time again. Missy has stopped reminding him that this is actually her first vacation in two years. She was away with family earlier in the year because her grandma was in the hospital. The last time she was in Myr was over an extended weekend.

She will miss a campaign launch and a trade show, which is not really a big deal, as she doesn’t really have much to do with either — logistically. It’s something her team agrees with, waving her off and telling her not to worry whenever her micro-managing machinations start annoying them.

But — her boss has made it into a huge deal and has thrown a massive new project at her right before vacation. She will have to work a bit on vacation — if she wants to get it done by deadline.

He squints against the bright sun, pacing back and forth on a strip of gravel in front of a park bench, slowing down to walking pace. His heart pounds hotly in his throat, and Missandei’s playlist continues to throb in his head, even after he has pulled out his earbuds.

He pulls up the loose, damp hem of his white t-shirt, stretches it, and uses it to wipe his wet face.

“Hey!” he hears. “You!”

He drops the shirt fabric and swivels his head around. He sees a tall woman in a sports bra and a dark ponytail running up to him. A flash of silver is dangling from her outstretched arm.

Grey immediately touches the back of his running shorts, feeling for his keys.

When she reaches him, she immediately curls over with her hands on her knees, still clutching his keys, sucking in air rapidly.

She laughs when she tilts her head up to look at him. “Oh my God,” she says, in between breaths.
“I’ve been chasing you for a mile!” She holds up his keys. “You dropped these.”

He’s stunned. He thought he’d feel the keys drop out of his pocket. He didn’t hear her calling for him because he was listening to music on his run. He holds out his hand, and she drops his keys into his sweaty palm.

“Thanks so much,” he says. “Really. Sorry about making you chase me.”

She laughs again, straightening up to her full height. She’s almost as tall as he is. She tells him that it’s not a problem — that it was good exercise. She tells him that her name is Rachel. He lamely and belatedly tells her his name. He doesn’t know how to gently extricate himself out of this conversation, especially since she has done him a real solid. He would’ve been crazy pissed if he had ran all the way to Missandei’s only to realize he can’t get into the building.

Rachel pulls in the flaps of her light vest and zips it up over her sports bra. She tells him she’s gonna grab a water from a nearby coffee shop — does he want one, too?

“I have a girlfriend,” he blurts. At her hard blink, he mentally kicks himself — for being such an awkward, friendless, weirdass motherfucker.

“Oh, okay,” she says. “I mean, we can still get water together — if that’s okay? You’re a really fantastic runner. I was working really hard to catch up to you.”

She tells Terri that she never thought of herself as a control freak. She has always thought of herself as a go-with-the-flow fun and spontaneous person. But then, her idea of it all has probably been based on stereotypes.

Terri tells her that control is a way for people to manage their anxiety.

Missy says that she never thought of herself as a person who has significant anxiety. She really did think of herself as a go-with-the-flow, chill person.

“I’m really pushy,” Missandei admits. “I don’t like it when people don’t do what I want them to do. So I try to force it. And I try to lessen the impact of that by being cute and funny and girly.”

She drinks up all the tiny sex details about him like it’s water — because they are hard won. She’s learned that he likes it slow — he likes it comprehensive and lingering — long strokes, inch by inch. He likes it when she pauses at the top, at the tip, and clenches her muscles around him, holding on for a while. She’s learned that they used to go fast and furious because they were afraid — of many things beyond the obvious. She used to think that they maintained passion by creating desperation.

She hasn’t orgasmed in a month. She hasn’t wanted sex like she used to — it hasn’t been urgent. But — as she has told him repeatedly — it’s really, really nice just to be close to him. She likes the feel of him inside of her. She likes the intimacy. Most of all, she really likes to watch him in these moments — more vulnerable than he is normally, sweeter than he is normally.
He drops her hand when they arrive at customs. He makes a show of digging for his passport, but in truth, he tends to resort back to conservatism when he is stressed out. He is also prone to thinking the worst of things — so if he gets randomly detained because of some bullshit reason — he doesn’t
want her to be so clearly associated with him.

“Babe,” she whispers softly, skimming her hand against his shoulder, looking around the room on bewilderment. The space is tight, and they’re getting jostled by the impatient hoard of people around them — all cranky from being enclosed in an airplane for long hours. She bumps into him with a soft squeak, grabbing onto his shirt.

She’s already told him that her family was too poor when she was younger — so they never went anywhere. They never took vacations. They just went out into the woods — the desert — to camp. That was what her grandparents — who grew up agrarian — did to give them a change of pace from the city. In college, they spent all their travel money shuttling her back and forth between King’s Landing and Myr. And although her job gives her a good amount of paid time off — she’s always worried about the consequences of taking that time off.

Her experience — in this respect — is limited.

Fans whir noisily around them — the sound of hens clucking isn’t far off — and they can see the golden flicker of dust in the air — which smells of salt and body odor. A row of kiosks separate them from Naath.

He slips his sweaty hand into hers — she immediately grabs onto him.
She’s alarmed when the woman at the front desk of the hotel doesn’t give them back their passports — but Grey is steady and unfazed, standing patiently with his elbow on the counter as the woman clicks at her keyboard. In Low Valyrian, they are told they’re on the third floor, and he grabs the proffered key card. After that, he hooks his hands on the handles of both his suitcase and hers. Her face flushes, and she hikes the computer case and camera bag up higher on her shoulder, silently following him up the cramped staircase, their sandals lightly slapping on the tile.

She’s been on autopilot, just bewildered and stunned at the eeriness of being back on Naath. Her heart has not stopped pounding from the moment she stepped off the plane. She had asked Grey to go to the hotel, before anything else, because she was feeling light headed and wanted to rest up a bit. There are fine tremors in her hand whenever she clenches her fist, unsure if it’s a side effect of the sertraline or not. Terri has told her that the medication doesn’t erase feelings of sadness — Missandei will continue to have moments.

Grey goes to the air conditioning unit, stoops down a bit to read the dial, and — with a click — the machine whirs noisily to life.

“How come she kept our passports?”

“To make sure we don’t leave without paying,” he says with his back to her, raising his hands up to the blowing air.

She grabs a black binder containing laminated papers — hotel rules — and sits on the bed with it.

Since stepping foot on Naath, all they’ve been hearing are different accents and dialects of Valyrian — mostly Low Valyrian. It’s a language she’s eloquent in — one Grey is merely fluent in — but they generally refrain from speaking to each other in anything but the common tongue — English. She finds that languages come with their own personalities — based on personal history and context. She associates Low Valyrian with her family and uses more honorifics and hierarchical terms — words she doesn’t want to use when she talks to him.

“It says here that unmarried couples cannot stay in the same room at this hotel,” she says, running her finger over a plastic page. “Is this for real? But they didn’t ask us if we are married.”

“It’s more a problem if you’re Naathi.”

“But I am Naathi.”
He turns around and half-grins at her apologetically. “I meant if you’re a local, not a visiting tourist.”
She doesn’t understand what he’s saying — and he can tell, because he elaborates. “They’re trying
to curb prostitution.”

Realization dawns on her. “Ah.”

“Are you disappointed that you don’t look like a prostitute?” he asks, walking over, the half-grin still
a fixed feature on his face.

“No.” She blinks rapidly, slow to pick up on his deadpan teasing. She’s thinking about how obvious
it must be to everyone — that she’s no longer from Naath.

He touches her face with the tips of his fingers before his warm palms slide against the sides of her
jaw. He tilts her head up, pulling her attention away from the binder in her lap. “How do you want to
beat jet lag, baby?” he asks softly.

She smiles weakly. Terms of endearment from him are few and far between, reserved for meaningful
moments. She feels tired. “By napping?”

Her grip on him is tight — in more ways than one. But he tells her he’s going a bit stir-crazy. He
states that he’s going to take a quick walk around to stretch his legs.

When she asks him if it’s safe, in a small voice, he bends down and kisses her fully, his chest lightly
pressing against the screen of her laptop. She has to finish up some stupid thing before end of day in
King’s Landing before she can relax for the day/night. He tells her, “I’ll be careful.”

And she says, “I love you.”

It’s still something that’s difficult for him to say back to her — especially in ordinary moments. It’s
not that he doesn’t feel it. It’s just — there’s just a blockage. “I’ll bring you back something to eat.”
He might have this irrational fear that if he voices his feelings out loud, too, someone will hear him
and punish her for it, will snatch her away.

Her hands are shaking as she struggles to pop the international sim card into her cell phone. She’s
been putting this off all day. She supposes that Grey somehow knew it — and that is why he left to
take a walk. This is something she’d rather do privately anyway.

Her heart throbs in her throat and her face, as she pulls up the phone number she had typed out in an
email to herself.

The phone feels hot on her sweaty face, and for a moment — she almost tricks herself into calming
down, as the phone rings. She’s just thinking that maybe they are out, and they won’t answer, and
she will try again later — she feels relief — when the line clicks.
Warm skewers of meat and a bag of hot rice are wrapped tightly in a bundle of paper in his hand, as he ascends the stairs. Unsurprisingly, Naath reminds him a lot of the Summer Isles — its slow night rhythms, its charcoal smell, its temperature. He’s sure Missandei would like a lot of it — if she can bring herself to relax enough to take a look around.

She’s sitting on the end of the bed, with the lights on, when he opens the door. “What’s wrong?” he says immediately, taking in her puffy swollen eyes and her red nose. “What happened?”

Her face immediately crumples, screwing up with fresh tears.

He deposits the meat and rice on the desk on his way to get to her.

She tells him that she talked to her father and mother on the phone — to arrange a meeting. She tells him that it was actually a rather pleasant conversation, and she kind of just floated through it like it was the most normal thing in the world. But it was also the very first time she’s heard their voices in decades, and the sheer normalcy of it all was just so fucking messed up. They asked her how she is handling the heat and the sun. They told her to try to get a lot of sleep, or else she might get sick. She tells Grey that it’s so fucking crazy — that they are not constantly talking about how they had abandoned her and explaining why it happened. She asks herself — more than him — what she’s doing here, if she’s losing her mind.

“Distract me,” she says softly, drawing circles on his chest. “Tell me a story.”

“I’m no good at telling stories,” he says, brushing his lips against her forehead. “You always complain about my stories not having enough suspense and detail.”

She lightly laughs. “Tell me about when you knew — that you loved me.” Her face heats up against his skin, and she’s glad he can’t see her face. Each ultra sappy murmur from her always feels like it’s costing her something — they always feel like confessions.

She feels him lightly pinch the skin near her hip, on her back. “You already know that story,” he says quietly, his voice a low timber.

“I love that story, though,” she says. “Tell it again.”

“Well,” he says. “It was a dark and stormy night —”

She giggles. “No, it wasn’t.”

“I’m trying to make it sound dramatic,” he says wryly.

He remembers this one time when he was buzzing from painful withdrawals — when he was
seventeen years old. He was following his friend at the time, Jorah, through the abandoned shacks in the old trailer park — empty because of a fire that got out of control. They were searching for some kid that owed Jorah all of forty notes, walking through the charred remnants of homes, gravel crunching underneath their sneakers.

He had been impatient and irritated — for being led on a wild goose chase. He kept pushing Jorah to hurry it up, impatiently opening doors, stating that the kid wasn’t there at all, in the trailer park. They should go to the kid’s house and wait for him there instead.

Jorah had told him that the kid’s been kicked out of his house. He won’t go back there. They were standing in the middle of the most unscathed mobile home, fire only having kissed the kitchen cabinets.

Grey remembers how Jorah had nudged a piece of plywood on the ground. Underneath the floor, they found the kid, wide eyes in shock.

Later, Jorah told Grey that the downside about having no fear is that he has forgotten how people hide. He has forgotten what actually motivates people to do the things that they do.

He supposes that’s when he knew that he knew that his feelings for her were different from any other feeling he’s ever had before for another person — when he felt that constant sense of dread and fear — over her well-being. It was when he found himself making these long-reaching plans for the future with her — to ensure her well-being and happiness. One day he woke up and he found that he suddenly had something big to lose. And then for months — maybe years — he pushed her away, figuring that the cost of such a thing is too great.

It’s something he grapples with everyday — the risk in it all — maybe he had been so stupidly wrong about everything. Maybe he’s not really meant to die young and alone.

She rolls the tablets in the palm of her hand. With the time difference and jet lag, she has lost track of the day. Her birth control pill is rounder and smaller than the sertraline. Grey has made a throwaway comment to her one time, in reference to her birth control pills. He had said: What’s even the point anyway?

The moment was over before she could register what had been said. Had she caught up in time, she would’ve said something like: So we don’t have babies unexpectedly?

As it is — it remains an issue, a conversation, that they have not even come close to touching. And it’s only on her mind because Jhiqui, being married and in the mindset, has been obsessing about babies, twenty-four-seven.

They hire a driver, even though her parents offered to drive the two hours into the city to come get them. The cost of the driver is something that stuns her, that anyone can actually live on these kind of wages. She lightly slaps Grey’s arm, because he has the audacity to start haggling with the driver on the price.
“Missandei,” he says with his voice low, glancing at the dark-skinned man in front of them. “You’re really undermining what I’m trying to do here.”

“Dude, just pay the guy what he’s asking,” she says in a huff. She’s a little bit short with him because he’s delayed the trip fifteen minutes already, because he won’t settle on price. “We can afford it.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Oh, you’re taking a principled stance on this?” she says sarcastically. “Really?” She switches to Low Valyrian and turns to the driver — she’s already forgotten his name — and tells him that they will pay his asking rate. She refrains from apologizing for Grey’s attitude, knowing that he will lose it if she does.

She honestly cannot tell how much of the common language their driver, Teton, can understand, but she and Grey still continue switching to it whenever they talk amongst themselves.

The driver compliments her Low Valyrian and asks her where she’s from — because he can’t place her accent. She tells him she’s actually from Naath, a fact that shocks him. It’s a response that interests her, so she probes. It’s also a good distraction — Grey is painfully bad at making conversation sometimes, even with her — and so she asks the driver what is it about her that makes him surprised she was born here.

He tells her she is tall, which makes her laugh. Then he tells her that Western women carry themselves differently. She lightly corrects him, telling him she actually grew up in the East, in Myr. He kind of laughs it off, but the commentary kind of continues to sink in, making her feel unsettled.

She’s grateful that it’s not the same house that she and her brothers grew up in. She doesn’t think she would handle that well.

She leaves Grey to pay Teton, walking up the dusty path lined with stone. She’s wearing open-toed leather sandals and a simple, modest linen dress. She didn’t bother with makeup — it’d melt off her face in an hour anyway. She’s erring on the safest side, trying her best to blend in — something that would kind of amuse her grandma, as her grandma has spent years trying to get Missandei to de-slut herself. As it turns out — this is what it took.

She sees bicycles lining the side of the house, under an awning. She feels nervous as she recalls the long stories that her mother had written down for her, about her younger sister and brother.

The floorboards creak as she steps onto the porch. She hears Teton’s car start up to life again, hears it reverse before it slowly makes it ways back to the main road, over the bumps and potholes that litter the dirt road.

“Ready?” Grey says, materializing next to her.
“I should really be drunk for this,” she says, smiling at him.

The door opens before she can knock on it — they must’ve been waiting.

She’s frozen, as she stares back into a mirror of sorts. It’s her first thought — that her mother really does look like her.

A cry escapes from her mother’s throat — high pitched and unexpected. Her hand flies to her mouth — as if she surprised herself. A few steps behind her is a man — light-skinned and bald. Her father. And Missandei’s daze is so strong that she almost misses it — how her mother cries out in Low Valyrian, saying that her little girl has come back.

Missy's composure breaks.

He has to keep reminding himself that this isn’t about him. It’s about her. His purpose here is to be around, for her, for whatever she needs.

He awkwardly sits across from them, in a rickety wooden chair, as Missandei is flanked by her parents on a long sofa in the main room. He watches despondently as her mother continues sobbing, alternating between clutching Missandei’s hands and touching her face. They keep staring at each other, keep declaring that they look so much alike. Her father is beaming, kind of struck quiet by awe.

Missandei wipes her eyes with the heels of her hands, before she chuckles and tells them that it’s so crazy that she’s here with them. She almost can’t believe it. It feels like a dream.

Missandei’s mother is talking a mile a minute, pulling out these stories and these observations out in a stream of conscious blur. Her mother tells Missandei that she thinks about her, every day.

They keep lightly referring to him as Missandei’s husband. Missandei has corrected them, stating that they are actually not married — a fact that got brushed off with definitives. Her mother told them that in their culture, he and Missandei are husband and wife.

Missandei was too distracted and too overwhelmed with the meeting to really respond. He — on the other hand — had to bite back a sharp response. He had wanted to say that culture doesn’t explain away shit.

It’s when her mother and father start rambling about dinner, asking Missandei if her favorite foods are still the same — that he interrupts. In Low Valyrian, he quietly says that their driver is due back in two hours. They cannot stay for dinner.

Her mother pulls her head back in surprise. She says that she has prepared a special meal. And she wants them to meet Missandei’s brother and sister — who are due home from school at the end of the day.

Grey apologizes and says that perhaps they can reschedule this to another day. They have an itinerary to keep. Missandei had made these plans before meeting her parents, unsure of how the meeting would go. She had accounted for jet lag and also for all the work that she has to get done before end of day, King’s Landing time.
Missandei’s father observes that this visit is so short, and it’s been so long.

“Can we maybe tell the driver to come back later?” Missandei says hopefully, switching to English for his benefit.

“Is that what you really want?” he asks. When she doesn’t respond right away, he says, “We have two weeks. You have time.”

He feels like a douchebag standing slightly behind her, as he watches her embrace her parents. He freezes up when her mother steps forward and grabs him by the arms, standing on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheeks. She tells him that she’s so glad to meet him.

He clears his throat, and he stiltedly says that he’s glad to meet them, too. He leans forward to shake her father’s hand, maintaining distance, in Westerosi fashion.

The drive back to the hotel feels short. The sun in the sky is still bright and Missandei’s sweaty fingers are tightly intertwined in his as she excitedly talks away, alternating between addressing him and Teton, who, at this point, knows the whole story.

He wonders what the fuck is wrong with him. And he looks at her face — which he is incredibly fond of — and he tells himself that he has never seen her so happy. He tells himself that this is what happiness actually looks like, on her.

Back in the confines of their hotel room, she shyly smiles up at him. She asks him if she can take off his clothes for him. His pulse is banging in his chest, and he reluctantly reminds her that she has work to do. She smiles at him and says, no, she doesn’t, as she runs her hands down his body. And then her smile turns dopey and she tells him it’ll just be late. Work can wait.

He bites down on his bottom lip, as she envelops him in the tight, hot, heat of her. This — sex — has been going really well lately. He can’t pinpoint why.

She bends over him, cradling his head in her arms, her breath wet and ghosting over his skin. She groans before she says, “God, I love you. I’m so lost in love with you.”

He digs her into him, grinding her body hard against his. “You’re mine.” His tone is guttural and raw.

He wakes up with a jolt — the sound of his name ringing in his head. He’s wet with sweat, and his blood is pounding in his ears and throat.

The room is dark — but he can see her in the shadows, on the other side of the room, off of the bed. She’s naked, and her eyes are wide and white.

He already feels fucking horrible.
“You were having a bad dream,” she says thickly.
<3 <3 All I want to do is just sprinkle hearts all over these notes and waste your time by saying a lot of nothing. HEARTS HEARTS HEARTS LOVE! <3 Thanks for reading.

She rubs her hand up and down her forearm in the dark after pulling on a long, white t-shirt — one of his. He hasn’t said a word to her — there is just the sound of their soft breathing, slightly irregular and syncopated. The hotel tile floor feels sticky underneath her feet and there’s the sound of metal clanging and motorbikes running in the not-so-far distance, drifting through the single pane window. She wonders if anybody else heard his shouting.

The bed rustles — she can only make out his silhouette in the dark — she can’t see his expression. She sees him standing up, pushing himself off the mattress. The springs squeak, and she hears his feet hit the floor.

He’s naked as he brushes past her, walking to a table to where they keep a skinny two liter plastic bottle of water. He uncaps it, raises it to his mouth, and takes long, audible gulps.

The sound that came from him, the one that woke her up — was a sound that she had never heard before. It was a sound that was almost inconceivable, something she couldn’t have even imagined. It didn’t even sound human. When she was awoken by it — she was confused, unsure of the source.

He’s talked about this before, referenced this before — and she had always brushed it off, thinking he was being a bit paranoid, which is his tendency.

“Are you hurt?” he finally says. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she whispers. “You didn’t touch me.” And she inexplicably finds herself feeling overwhelmed — she finds herself tearing up. She didn’t anticipate she’d also be dealing with this during this trip, on top of everything else having to do with her family.

“Oh,” he says softly, capping the water bottle and placing it back on the desk. “I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“It’s okay,” she says, equally as quietly.

“You should go back to sleep.”

“You, too?”

He pauses. She can hear him breathing deeply. She can almost hear the cranking gears in his head. Finally, he says, “You know I can’t sleep after that.”

She does know. And when she sees him bend over to pick out some clothes from his suitcase, her
eyes feel wet again. She just feels sad. “Do you want to talk about it?” she asks.

“No,” he says.

His answer is not at all surprising.

Missandei reaches out and peels back the top blanket — a scratchy threadbare blanket made from muslin — and punches one of the bed pillows. The air in Naath is warm and humid, and it’s more out of habit than anything else, that had her covering herself with a blanket.

“Come back to bed,” she tells him, as she quietly crawls back onto the damp sheets, kicking the top blanket to the foot of the bed so it can all air out.

“Missandei,” he says, just a dark shadow watching her from his standing position, near the end of the bed. She knows he’s about to suggest that he sleep on the floor — to shield her from how dangerous he thinks he is. This kind of protectiveness has become something that has started grating on her nerves — because of what it has come to mean.

With everything else that’s going on, she doesn’t really currently have the capacity to be the thing in his life that believes in him and them so hard — enough to balance out how little he believes in them and himself — to make up for every shitty thing that has ever happened to him.

She shrugs in the dark. “You’re not going to sleep for the rest of the night anyway. But — do what you want.”

He watches a little girl playing with a toy boat in a fish pond — it’s actually a makeshift plastic tub where her parents store the catch of the day — a holding area for customers to come in and point to their dinner. He feels like a creeper — and he wonders how other adults benignly watch kids without looking like pedophiles. They must smile, which is not really one of this strengths.

It’s such a white thing to do — such a Western thing to do — but he walks the short distance up to her parents — fishmongers — during a lull in activity. He points to a pile of banana-leaf-wrapped bundles and asks them what’s in the small packages. The father tells him that it’s steamed tubers, beans, and fish — very, very delicious. Grey really doesn’t need the sales pitch. He says he will buy two. And then he tells the man that his daughter is really cute.

The man grins and thanks him for the compliment. Holding up his phone, Grey asks if it’s okay for him to take a picture of their daughter — because she’s so cute. Grey presses an extra coin into the man’s palm after he’s given permission.

He feels ridiculous — when he Instagrams the picture, tagging Jaime. He remembers that Jaime liked to take photos of children when they were in the Summer Isles together.

Grey tells the girl that he likes her boat, sounding entirely too adult — solemn and serious. He gravely tells her that if she adjusts the sails so that they line up with the body of the boat more, she will have better luck getting her little boat to move.
He catches Missandei watching him a short distance away, from the jewelry and metalwork shop that she had just come out of. He clears his throat and tells Amma that he has to like, go. He tries to hand her back her boat. She is totally weird and gushy and shy about it, crossing her little feet together, frozen in place, avoiding eye contact. She had been chatting with him up until then.

Amma’s mother laughs and tells Amma to say bye to him. And then she explains that Amma is in this phase where she gets embarrassed suddenly and easily.

He knows it’s totally stupid, but he shakes the seven-year-old’s hand on his way out.

“You made a new friend,” Missandei observes as he walks up to her.

He lightly chucks a small banana leaf bundle at her, which she catches with one hand awkwardly. “Breakfast,” he says.

She sniffs the warm, green wrapping before she transfers some bags between her arms, freeing up her other hand. “Relax, man,” she says, as she peels back the leaf. She unceremoniously takes a big bite from the cohesive starchy mound of stewed fish and beans. “My ovaries weren’t quivering at the sight of you playing with a little kid,” she says with food crammed in her mouth.

They are sitting on the small front stoop of their hotel, waiting for Teton to pick them up. Missandei took such a liking to the guy that she booked him as their driver for the entire stay.

She’s aimlessly running her hand softly up and down his arm, knuckles, and hand. They’ve had a bit of a stilted, quiet morning — not saying much to each other. He’s pretty sure it has a lot to do with last night. But she’s finally warming back up to him.

“Are you pretty tired?” she asks.

He hadn’t gone back to sleep at all, after he had woken up. He had been too anxious and paranoid to sleep — his mind wouldn’t shut back down. He just laid in bed, listening to Missandei’s breathing, her light snoring.

And truth to be told, he has been working overtime to not let the fatigue it show. But he is exhausted.

“You can stay here, if you want,” she says. “We don’t have to spend every waking moment together. You should take a nap and rest up. I can go see my parents today by myself.”

“Oh my God,” he mutters, leaning over to shove his hand underneath her butt, between her pants and the warm, dusty tiled ground. “Don’t be stupid,” he says, burying his face into her neck, lifting her a little bit with his hand, pulling her body closer. “I go where you go.”

She laughs lightly, grabbing onto the fabric of his shirt. “You’re being so schmoopy today.”
She’s always had this identity associated with being youngest child. Whenever she does anything even mildly self-serving — like if she accidentally picks the meat from the communal dish or accidentally starts eating before grandma — Mars and Moss always tease her mercilessly about how she’s definitely the baby of the family. She’s also very used to being under the protection of a man, being taken care of. Part of it is built into her family structure, another part of it is cultural.

Kamil is thirteen years old, and he’s goofy, outgoing, and adorable. He immediately takes a liking to her, hooking his arm with hers, dragging her all around the house to see his stuff — his bedroom, his drawings from school, his bike. He talks about her with this familiarity, as if he already knows her — she surmises that he’s been told a lot of stories about her. In his enthusiastic chattering, he also refers to Marselen, Mossador, and Melaku in an abstract way — like he asks her if she thinks he will be as strong and as tall as they are.

The way her mother and father address her in front of her younger brother and sister is real weird. They use these honorifics that Missandei has never had associated with herself ever, referring to her as their eldest sister, to be honored, followed and respected.

It’s also really weird that she has a sixteen-year-old that kind of looks like her brother's female doppleganger.

Adara, in contrast, is very quiet. Their mother tends to speak for Adara. Their mother tells her that Adara is a very good student, just like Missandei was. Their mother tells Missandei that Adara is learning the common language, and they should practice together, sister with sister.

Grey is awkwardly sitting on a stout stool in the other room with her father and Kamil. The two men are drinking cans of lagers and she sees Kamil running back and forth between the kitchen and the main room, retrieving new cans of beer. She can’t make out their conversation. She can’t even fathom what they might have in common.

Her mother fingers get snagged up in Missy’s hair. She tugs her hand free of the tangles. Missandei’s head tilts with the motion, and she grimaces at the light pain. Her mother apologetically reaches out to pet her face, her cheek. The physical affection is something that she’s unfamiliar with. Her grandma — her mother’s mother — is not so touchy feely.

Her mother squeezes her cheeks together. Her mother tells her that she’s so beautiful. Her mother turns to Adara and asks her if she thinks her elder sister is beautiful. Adara faithfully says that Missandei is very beautiful. Her mother traces the bridge of her nose, her cheekbones, her lips — murmuring that they have the same face — the same nose, the same skin, the same mouth, the same nails.

The cemetery is more like a mausoleum — different from what they’ve seen in Westeros. The sun is bright and hot against her back — she’s still a little dizzy from jet lag — and at an altar, she kneels down next to her mother — after being told to. Next to her is her sister. And in front of them are her brother and her father.

Missandei’s pulse is already racing before the conversation starts. Her mother tells Grey to kneel down at the altar of their ancestors. Missandei’s heart skips a beat when — after a short moment of deliberation — he blandly says that this seems to be a family affair, so he will take a walk outside and give them some privacy. Her mother calls out to him and tells him that he is family, but he is
already gone.

“Who is this?” Missandei says, walking up to Adara from behind. She gestures to a framed faded black and white photograph of a clean-shaven Naathi man. He’s the dead man whose altar they had just kneeled at.

“It’s grandfather,” Adara says, glancing at Missandei quickly before averting her eyes shyly.

“Father’s father?” she asks.

“Yes.”

Missandei nods. She has never known her other grandfather. He had died before she was born. She and Adara stand awkwardly in front of the altar by themselves as their parents and Kamil leave the room, seeking out Grey.

“Your English sounds good,” Missandei says.

Adara’s cheeks flush pink. “No, it’s not,” she says quietly. “I have trouble with a lot of words. I’m not the best student. Not like you.”

“It’s very good,” Missandei says firmly.

Her parents tell her that it’s so much trouble for her to travel two hours each way every day, just to see them. They tell her that she and her husband should just stay at their home with them. They can sleep in Kamil’s room, and Kamil can sleep on the floor in the main room.

Kamil bounces on his feet excitedly, and he tells that he can definitely sleep on the floor if it means they will stay. His voice kind of makes her gut flip — it makes her insides pang. And she stops him before he inadvertently makes her misty with just how earnest he is. She tells him that she will be back before he knows it. He will go to sleep — and then he will wake up, eat breakfast, go play — and she will be there before he can even miss her.

Her mother holds onto her tightly when they say goodbye for the day. Her mother whispers that now that she has gotten her daughter back, it’s hard for her to let go. She whispers to Missandei that Missandei must understand — when her mother lost her, her mother prayed to the gods every day that Missandei would return to her someday. It took years — but her prayers were finally answered.

Her mother looks into her face and repeats to her that she is so, so beautiful.

He leans back in his chair and tilts his head up at the sky, trying to crack his neck. He’s gone almost
an entire day without sleep. All he really wants to do — honestly — is to curl up with her and spend the next twelve hours in bed. But here they are, in an open-air restaurant, batting away the smell of cigarette smoke, two tiny glass cups and a scratched bottle between the two of them on the plastic table.

In his travels, he finds that each culture, each locale, has their own hooch, their own special brew that is unique and intrinsic to them. It’s hot and it’s humid, even in the dark. He smears the oily remnants of sweat across his face, trying to rub some life back into it. Firelight from a ways away flickers against her face, as she leans forward to refill their cups with the milky rice liquor.

“Last night, I dreamt that you left me,” he says. “I was a kid in my dream. And you were saying really mean stuff to me as you were leaving forever. Stuff about how you never — that you didn’t want to be with such a horrible person like me. You were leaving me like how my parents had left me. And in my dream, I felt like it was all my fault — like I had done it all to myself.” He laughs humorlessly as he brings his glass to his lips. “My brain always comes up with the most awful, torturous shit.”

They had been slowly heading to this conversation all day.

Missandei pauses, watching him before she throws back her drink. After swallowing and placing the cup back down, she says, “I actually did not expect that.” She blows out a long breath, flipping her hair all askew on her head.

“What did you think it was?”

“I thought you dreamt that you had accidentally killed me or something like that.” She refills their glasses again.

He hasn’t even brushed his teeth yet, but when his head hits the pillow — fuck — he wants to just succumb to oblivion. He is beyond tired. He feels Missandei clawing at his chest, grabbing his shirt by the fist, surprising him with her strength by lifting him up off the bed a few inches.

“Baby, no,” she says. “Don’t go to sleep yet. We were having such a great conversation. I don’t want it to end just yet.”

His laugh is almost silent. Just a drunk rasp of air. After they got all the heavy stuff about his fears and her family out of the way, they started joking about how they want to die and what they want their funeral rites to be and how they want the other to carry it all out. Missandei had told him that she wants him to upload her funeral mix onto his phone when they get home — she wants him to have it handy — because for real, she wants that shit played at her funeral.

“I like you on your medication,” he mumbles, as he lifts his arms up so that she can pull off his shirt.

“You didn’t like me before?” she says teasingly. He can feel her hands unbuttoning his pants.

He reaches out to touch her blindly. His hand collides with her nose lightly, before he brushes his fingers over her full lips. He settles his forefinger in the slight dip on her bottom lip. She’s gone a moment later, a whoosh of air where her warmth used to be. He feels her hands tugging off his pants, leaving his boxers on. She pulls off his stinky socks, then his shoes.
“How are you doing this?” he says, his breathing evening out. “Aren’t you plastered?”

“Oh, totally wasted,” she says. He hears the rustle of her taking off her clothes. “But I’m finding that a cool thing about us is that both of us are never incapacitated at the same time. There’s just something that clicks — that ensures that there will always be one of us that has their wits about them.”

He doesn’t realize he had fallen asleep — not until he bounces into consciousness again, when the bed dips, when Missandei, smelling minty, climbs over him to her side of the bed.

He rolls into her, shoving his leg in between hers, enveloping her tightly in his arms. He has been waiting for this all day — just the feel of her body pressed up against his — just them against the world. He was thinking about this when her dad brought up politics — regurgitating back to him his own history. He was thinking about this when Missandei’s mother said that he should call her Mom.

“Oh my God,” she says. “You’re so hot and sweaty.” He’s metabolizing the alcohol. And he feels her mouth lightly biting his cheek, before her lips find his. He kisses her slowly and thoroughly, winding his tongue against hers — sensually, but without urgency. He’s really too tired to fuck. He’s more seeking out that anchor — that feeling of connectedness.

“Why do you love me?” she whispers, when they pull apart.

“Huh?”

He can feel her smile on the skin of his neck. “I’m not questioning it,” she says. “I know you love me. I can feel it. But how come? Was it because I wore you down? Was it because you scared all the other prospects away, and I was the only one stubborn and horrible enough to not take no for an answer? Did you just default to me?”

“Great,” he mutters, looking up at the ceiling. “I am wide awake now.”
She offers him her women’s sunglasses as a joke because his eyes are bloodshot, but he plucks them out of her hand and puts them on his face, the neon pink aviator frames with mirror lenses looking comical on him. She can’t look at him with a straight face. She keeps having to cover her mouth with her hand, to hide her smiles. She can see her reflection failing at it on his face.

They are standing around waiting for Teton, goofing around because they are hungover and delirious from being sleep-deprived. “What’s so funny?” he says, the corner of his mouth quirking up.

“You are,” she says, winding her right arm around his neck.

He hums appreciatively, palming around for the loops of her jean shorts. She can feel him hook his fingers before he drags her body into his. He sniffs her hair, next to her ear, watching her raise her phone with her other hand, trying to angle it in a selfie. She tells him to hold still — and to smile for the camera. He hides his face against her cheek, softly accusing her of trying to embarrass and emasculate him. His fingers lightly trail up her hips to tickle her ribcage.

She yelps in a laugh, squirming away from him, nearly dropping her phone in the process.

His hand flies out and he swipes her iPhone in one swift motion. Then he holds it up to her forehead, screen facing him. “Hold this right here and look at me,” he commands.

She’s still fighting a smile, as he toggles her screen, pressing buttons. She hears the shutter on her phone click, and then he lifts the device off of her forehead, checking the screen before he hands it back to her.

He took a photo of a close-up of the his face, of the glasses — with her face reflected in the lenses — just beaming happiness with an iPhone on her forehead.

“See?” he says. “That’s better than a selfie.”

She sips cold pennywort juice through a straw. Teton told her that his wife makes it really well. They spend the early parts of the drive talking about Teton’s kids — his son is giving him a little bit of trouble because his son is more wrapped up in hanging out with his friends than he is in his studies. Teton checks Grey out through the rearview mirror.

When the car pulled up, Grey had gingerly crawled into the backseat of the car, muttering a hello to Teton from behind her sunglasses before he flipped onto his back and started snoozing, leaving her to awkwardly explain to Teton that Grey is having trouble getting ahead of jet lag.

She twists her head around to glance at him. His long body is uncomfortably crammed in the back seat, his knees bent and splayed out. His sneakered feet rest awkwardly against the car door. Her glasses on his face are askew, and he has probably bent them a little bit. His mouth is ajar, and he is
just beyond dead to the world.

As they flip through old family albums, her mother lingers on pictures of herself in her youth. Her mother and father married when they were young — so her father has these memories of her mother as a young woman. He tells Missandei that her mother was so popular in school and every male student wanted a chance with her. Somehow, he was lucky enough to be the one married to her.

Then, her mother shows Missandei a glamour shot, face all made-up and whitened with powder. Red lipstick. And artificial backdrop of a waterfall. Eyes simultaneously expressionless and triumphant.

In Low Valyrian, her mother tells Missandei that Missandei should get her photos taken while she’s in Naath. It’s much cheaper here than in Westeros.

“Yeeeah,” Grey draws out in English, still wearing her sunglasses even though they are indoors. “I bet you’d look real cute twirling one of those umbrellas around.”

Grey’s sense of humor is quiet and subtle — and Adara must have picked up on something in his tone, because she smiles shyly, her dark, straightened hair falling over her face in a curtain.

The exchange is lost on their mother, who runs her finger down the length of her own nose in a photograph. She tells them all that she was born with a high nose bridge, a royal nose. It’s something Missandei inherited from her, something Adara unfortunately didn’t get. Adara’s nose bridge is flat. She takes after their father.

The days start to bleed into one another. They simultaneously move by fast and slowly. She feels like she’s been Naath forever — and it also feels like she has just arrived.

Swinging on a hammock on the beach — so idyllic, so perfect, so blue, so glad she let him convince her to take one day off from visiting her parents to sightsee other parts of the main island, so bone-tired from the surfing lessons — she’s just about drifting off to sleep with a book on her chest when he walks up, dripping wet, looking very pleased.

He holds up a sea cucumber, alive, shiny, slippery, and squirming in his hand. “Check it out. I got you a snack.”

“Oh my God, you’re joking, right?”

He looks at her like she’s nuts — of course he’s not joking. He tells her that she’d have to pay good money to get sea cucumber at a fish market in King’s Landing. Here, it is free.

She gathers driftwood and little dry twigs. She starts a fire by smearing a bit of her chapstick on a
Grey hovers behind her, backseat-driving the fire when he’s not cleaning the sea cucumber with a pocket knife.

He rigs up a small soup pot with their plastic bottle of water, using some of their jerky, spicy corn chips, and edible seaweed she haphazardly cleans in the ocean, to flavor the chopped up sea cucumber. They bicker over how to hang the water bottle over the fire she made and where.

She experimentally takes a spoon and sips the broth as it simmers over the fire. She cracks up after the first bit of hot broth makes its way down her throat. “This tastes fucking crazy!” she declares, giggling. “It tastes like corn chips, meat, and the sea.” She catches him staring at her with this pensive expression on his face. She touches her face self-consciously, before she looks down at her boobs, to make sure they are still in her swimsuit. Finding nothing amiss, she says, “What?”

Her skin is burning — from the sun rays, but mostly due to her sore, overworked muscles — she’s being fussy and whiny because she’s uncomfortable, kicking all of their blankets and sheets to the ground. He’s holding a bottle of green goo — he tells her that she should’ve been more judicious in applying the sunscreen, like he had told her to. She mutters that she normally never burns. He tells her that the sun is different here. He tells her to roll over onto her stomach. The bed dips. She gasps when he squirts the aloe vera gel onto her back. His touch is rough and perfunctory on her sensitive skin — she groans.

He ignores her pain. Instead, he reaches out to untie her string bikini. He says, “Do you think this will ever stop being novel?” He smooths his hand down the entire length of her back, just dragging fire. His hands stop at the small of her back, finger lightly dipping underneath her bottoms. He unties them, too, flipping over the flap, exposing more of her body.

Her breathing has gone heavy. “Are you talking about sex?” she says.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’m talking about sex.”

She can’t see his face because hers is pressed into a pillow, but she can hear the smile in his voice. A squirt of cold gel hits a buttcheek, and it almost makes her crack up. “We been having sex with each other for like . . . years now,” she says, laughing into the bed. “If it’s not boring yet —”

“It’s definitely not boring.”

When they are both naked, he tells her that all of that aloe vera was a mistake. It tastes so bitter. She laughs quietly and she gently encloses his hard-on in her hand, lightly stroking him as she asks him if he knows that sea cucumber is supposedly the ocean’s Viagra. Because it totally looks like a dick. He groans through the feel of her hand, and he tells her that he totally did know that — it was something funny to him — it’s partly why he brought it up for them to eat.

“And you really just wanted a snack,” she supplies, breathing hot into his ear.

“Yes,” he says quickly, before he bites down a groan.
She reminds him that they first met when they were nineteen years old. That was nearly eight years ago. She reminds him that people change in such a long period of time. She’s not the same person she was — the same girl that she used to be. She asks him if he thinks he’s changed a little bit or a lot.

He tells her that he can’t tell sometimes. He just feels like himself most of the time.

She tells him that lately, she’s been feeling more like herself than she has ever — at any other point in her life. She tells him that when she appears happy — she is legitimately so happy that she cannot contain it. She tells him that she used to pretend to be happy all the time, because she fell into the habit of it. It was this put-upon persona because she didn’t think people would like her if they knew what she is really like.

He gasps, and he tells her that he can’t really have this conversation properly, not with her fucking rolling his balls in her hand.

“Are you happy with me?” she whispers, lifting her hand off of him, suddenly serious.

“Are you happy with me?” he echoes back, feeling oddly emotional, too.

“Are you happy with me?” she says again, her voice getting choked up.

He’s trying to keep track of his feelings — which has always been a complicated endeavor. Everything that is filtered through him has tinges of fear, if not outright terror. He feels afraid — whenever he thinks about her — her smile, her face, her body, her warmth. He can’t always remember that his fears are mostly irrational — his defense mechanisms going haywire. He can’t always convince himself of this.

She asks him — not for the first time — if he likes hard strokes or light strokes, as her hand experimentally loosens its hold on him. His mind is so inundated with thoughts and noise and feelings that all he can push out is a vague statement. He tells her that it’s all good — that she’s perfect. Her laugh is for effect only — it’s hollow. She reminds him that she’s not at all perfect. She’s been using copious amounts of aloe vera on his dick. It’s a weird, not at all unpleasant burning and cooling effect.

He sucks in a harsh breath and jerks when she grips the head of his penis in her small hand. He shoves out that it’s too much — grabbing her wrist with his hand — he tells her he’s too sensitive there.

She immediately corrects herself. And his tense body gradually relaxes a bit — he sinks into the mattress — his mind of blisses out — white — and he can sort of hear her repeat herself. She’s always telling him that she loves his face — that she loves to watch his face.

There are lots of things he should probably say to her at some point. It never feels like the right time. The thought of releasing the words from his head seems entirely awkward and lame and childish. Like, hypothetically, he should tell her that he never, ever thought he’d have this — this level of familiarity and comfort with another person. He used to think that his body was just fucked — just going to be a burden. He used to think that it was impossible to even meet her halfway. It continues to be this stunning, ongoing revelation — this, the possibilities, the permanence of such a thing.
When Daven got that puppy and was gushing about it all over Skype, all Grey could think about was that Daven just bought himself severe heartbreak. That dog is going to wreck him by dying one day. It’s a foregone conclusion.

He gently pries her hand off. He grips her hand tightly to his chest and pulls her up, makes her rest her head on his chest, knowing she can hear his hammering heart. She sighs softly, and her tone is light and airy, when she tells him that he just compared her to a dog.

“Whenever I catch myself being happy — I am already scared of the ending,” he tells her.

He asks her if they can try it again — probably not tonight, but he’s willing to give it another shot — and she’s surprised by the question. She kneels in between his legs, staring at his erection, and she asks him what it is about oral sex — on him — freaks him out so much. He’s such a giver — never a taker.

It’s been a puzzle he’s been working over in his head. He tells her it’s not so straightforward, otherwise he would’ve already cracked the case. He tells her he’s not sure if it’s the right answer, but he tells her that it makes him feel so useless, on top of making him feel so young and vulnerable and controlled.

“God,” she says, sighing.

“See, no,” he says. “Stop that. Don’t feel sorry for me.”

“I don’t feel sorry for you,” Missandei says, with this air of bitterness. “I just hate them. I want to kill them all in your name. I want to choke the disgusting life out of all of them — including your shitty fucking parents.”

He sits up, and he immediately kisses her, pushing forward all of the good things about her that he cannot articulate. “Let’s move in together,” he says when they break apart. “I’m — I want to.”

He’s spent — physically — boneless — drifting in and out of sleep as she shuffles around the hotel room. He makes a short, soft noise, when he feels her fingers carefully pick up his soft penis, lifting it up before she wipes him down with a warm wet washcloth, trying to not disturb his sleep. Her stealthy machinations almost make him burst out laughing. She is adorable. This is one of the reasons why he loves her.

She risks it and wears a dress that presses into her feminine body. It’s a departure from the shapeless sack dresses and linen pants she’s been wearing over the last ten days, but they are going to a party and she’s been getting caught up in how fantastically she and Grey been getting along together, how
ensconced in love she feels.

He’s waiting for her on the bed when she exits out of the bathroom, releasing the musky floral cloud of her perfume. She does a little twirl for him, as he simultaneously rolls his eyes and reaches for her, easily spanning the distance between them in the tiny room.

The hot topic at the party is how strikingly similar she looks to her mother. A bunch of women — related to her or not, she cannot tell — she still calls them all some variation of auntie — keep pawing at her, grabbing her by the arm and turning her like she is a doll, marveling over how there’s no doubt, who she belongs to. The talk about her features to one another — her legs, her mouth, her brows, her lashes — as if she’s not there.

The party has naturally segregated, and Grey is in the other room.

Her mother calls out to Adara, tells her to tend to the stove and makes sure the broth doesn’t boil over. Adara gets up from the ground, getting to her knees and crawling a short distance before gets to her feet at the stove.

If he can’t be stoned out of his mind, he will get hammered instead. He’s still no good in social situations. He doesn’t understand what joy there is to be derived from sitting around with a bunch of posturing men. The younger ones around his age are all already married. There have been passive aggressive comments about the largess he must have, living in Westeros. It’s a misconception Missandei’s father pushes, grabbing his wrist and drunkenly bragging to them all about Grey’s running watch, which costs an exorbitant amount, dedicated to just running. That is how Grey and his daughter live.

A man to his right grinds out a snort, before making a half-joke about how easy it must be to become self-indulgent in Westeros.

The house looks like a battlefield after the guests have left, with chicken bones on plates and crumpled paper napkins littering the entire table. After Grey comes out of the bathroom, he starts bending over to pick up dishes, shoveling the uneaten food bits into one big plate.

Her mother is immediately appalled — at the sight of a man doing women’s work. Her voice pitches high and she tells him to leave the mess — Adara will get it.

Grey completely ignores her as he scrappes food into the garbage bin before depositing the dishes in the sink. Missandei gently tells her mother to just leave him be. He’s fine.

Her mother doesn’t listen. Instead, she marches into the kitchen and loudly forces some levity in her
tone, telling him that he won’t do it right or get the plates clean enough. He should just leave it because he’s their guest. It’s not a lot, she will do it all later. She tells urgently to go sit down and relax, her voice almost sounding hysterical.

And he is steadfastly unmoved. He flips up his shirt sleeves as she talks at him.

Her mother is pretending everything is normal and okay, when she tasks Adara with supervising Grey, tells Adara to go into the kitchen and see if she can help her elder brother with the dishes. Her mother makes a comment about how . . . funny and odd Missandei’s husband is, for enjoying women’s work.

Adara, having witnessed their mother’s earlier mini meltdown and Grey’s nonresponse to it, is very reluctant as she gets to her feet and drags herself into the kitchen.

Her voice is too soft and he barely hears her over the running water. “Do you need help?” she repeats nervously in English, keeping her distance, standing by the stove.

“Yeah,” he says, not lifting his eyes from the dirty dishes. “Sure.”

Adara meekly picks up the towel on the counter and stands there dumbly until he wordlessly hands her a clean, wet plate.

“What’s your favorite subject in school?” he asks suddenly.

It takes her a bit to answer — she’s so flustered by him — but she finally chokes out, “Math.”

“What?” he says. “No it’s not.” He meant that math is no one’s favorite subject in school — at least, it wasn’t his favorite.

His response embarrasses her. She doesn’t know what to say.

So he says, “What kind of math are you studying right now?”

Her mother is fussing over Kamil on the floor, poking and prodding him, muttering that his shirt is so old and threadbare. Her father is sitting regally in his chair, another beer in hand. He’s telling Missandei about how he wants to expand a room in their house — a family room where Adara and Kamil can play. He tells Missandei that kids need a lot of space to grow and become strong and smart. He smiles at her sweetly and randomly tells her that he’s so proud of who she has become. Then his face morphs into one of regret, and he says that the price of material goods has just increased so much — they’ve been scrimping and saving to try to get enough funds to make the
house a little bigger for Missandei’s brother and sister.

Missandei cuts him off by holding up her hand. And in Low Valyrian, she bluntly asks them if they are asking her for money.

The dishes and their very awkward conversation gets interrupted when he hears a feminine cry in the other room. He’s immediately moving, shutting off the water with his hands still wet, as he runs into the other room and says, “Missandei,” his eyes scanning for her.

She’s on the sofa, looking shellshocked. Her father and brother are hovered around her mother, who is sobbing uncontrollably and incoherently.

Her mother’s makeup is smeared and her eyes are red-rimmed when they hug goodbye. Her mother cups her face and whispers that her baby girl has come back to her, it’s such a dream come true. Her mother grabs her again, and into her ear, she quietly asks Missandei if Missandei knows how much her mother loves her.

She kicks off her shoes and shoves her bare feet in his lap, slumping tiredly against the car door as Teton drives them home. She’s recapping to the both of them what happened to make her mother lose her shit — Missandei’s exact words.

He grabs onto her right foot and presses his thumbs into her arch, causing a hiccup in her story.

He lies down first and clears space for her expectantly. She crawls onto the mattress and situates herself next to him, using his arm as a pillow, throwing a leg over him. He turns her face, guiding it with his thumb, kissing her minty mouth softly.

“Love you,” she says.

He smiles in the dark. “I know.”

She lightly laughs and swats him on the chest.

He runs his lips against the soft skin on her cheekbone, silently saying it back.

After a long, contented moment of quiet, she sighs and says, “I don’t know what to do.”
As he gorges himself on a second helping of breakfast — sinful fatty lamb slices from a spit — to ensure that he doesn’t lose weight, she keeps herself busy by prying apart pistachio shells, collecting the salty nut meat into a plastic pouch. It’s his protein snack for later.


He won’t admit it out loud, but she knows that Grey’s been missing Jaime. Enough to wake up extra early to catch Jaime after work, before dinner. Grey told her it was the only way for him to get basketball updates because the internet in Naath is godawful and a bunch of sites are blocked. He and Jaime have been talking about highlights for the last hour because both are too chickenshit to ask the other to go steady.

“Baby,” she says quietly, grabbing his wrist to check his watch. “Wrap it up. We gotta go soon.”

She discreetly bops him on the tush as he climbs into the tour van. They are the last stop and the van is already crammed full of tourists. Their guide folds down a pair of seats in the aisle. She grabs Grey’s hand as he helps pull her into the van. He had suggested they do some mind-numbing, soul-crushing sightseeing with a bunch of strangers to get her mind off of her family for a day.

She doesn’t quite know how to use her camera. She kind of purchased it on a whim, thinking that she’d pick up photography as a new hobby. As it turns out, she never really had the time nor the inclination to learn how to use any of the non-auto modes.

“Babe,” she says, looking through the viewfinder. “Can you fix this? It’s all dark.” Without waiting for an answer, she swats the camera into his chest as she leans forward against the wind, looking down into the valley. She feels his hand immediately snake into the waistband of her shorts from behind, clutching it and holding her in place as she gamely shifts her weight forward even more, the fine sandy ground shifting underneath her red sneakers. “They should really have railings here,” she says, wind fluffing up her hair. “It’s kinda dangerous.”

She hears him snort. She angles her head back to see him fiddling with the camera, the wrist of one arm pinning it to his chest as his fingers press buttons, his other hand still holding onto her.

“You’re giving me a vag-wedgie,” she says. She pauses, staring off into space. “A moose knuckle?”
“You are so lucky I put up with you,” he mutters, holding the camera up to his face, looking through the viewfinder. The camera’s autofocus mechanism whirs, before he pushes down and she hears the shutter — taking a picture of her.

“Man, I wasn’t ready. I didn’t look cute.”

She decides she’s a lost cause. And besides, Grey naturally likes to nerd out. So she just hands over her camera to him for the rest of the day tour. She even tells him that he can have it for good — it’s better in his hands than in hers. It was meant to be a nice gesture, but predictably, he starts getting on her ass about buying expensive things that she doesn’t use.

He is — legitimately — real annoying about it. She crosses her arms over her chest and tries her best not to roll her eyes as he lectures her about being more responsible with money.

“Is this some bullshit sneaky way of you telling me you don’t think I should give my parents money?” she says.

He looks at her with his face scrunched up in like, this disdainful disbelief. “What? No,” he says. “I’m actually talking about you buying a camera you never use. I’m actually talking about you buying shit with features that you know nothing about. I’m actually talking about you buying multiple colors of the same shoe.”

“You don’t get it!” she snaps. “You’re such a dude about this shit! It’s my money! I can afford it! I don’t care! I like what I like! I want what I want!”

“Classic,” he says derisively. “Classic Missandei.”

Something about what he said and how he said it hits her right in her sensitive, sore spot. It makes her want to cry, but instead of crying, she just gets really quiet — stares at him for a beat — and then she walks away from him.

They all climb back into the over-air-conditioned, claustrophobic van for another four hours or so of driving along hillside bluffs. She’s not next to a window, so it’s a very depressing and boring venture. She realizes how much she reaches out to him and touches him at all times — she realizes that especially now — when they’re in a fight, and she’s keeping her hands to herself.

At the end of their journey is a secluded beach with white sand and these amazing rock formations that stand up like scraggly sentinels against the ocean. He knows that people tend to gravitate to Missandei — she’s been chatting up a family of four adults in a language he’s unfamiliar with. The family members look like they’re from Southeastern Essos.
He holds up her camera — now kind of tainted because he’s a jackass — and focuses it on a grouping of rock formations — and snaps a few photos.

Their tour guide is trying to peddle these horse rides, at extra cost. It explains the light barnyard smell and the grassy horse poop here and there that mar the flawless white sand.

She takes a seat next to him on a rock during meal time. The tour had packed these simple, kinda bland sandwiches for them. They are right at the edge of the ebbing and flowing water. The sun is setting, casting a pink and orange glow on the sand. She flips over her small backpack to dig in it for their water bottle because he hates drinking soda.

“Thanks,” he says, taking the clear bottle from her, uncapping it.

“You’re welcome.”

After taking a gulp, he recaps the bottle and holds it in between his knees. “It’s pretty here, right?” he says after a moment.

“Yeah, it’s really pretty.”

Gradually, they start chatting and joking around again — talking about the horse poop, about polluting the ocean, about things they have read about currents and the color of sand. She can’t finish her flavorless sandwich, so she gives it over to him. She tells him that the neon green moss on their rock is so trippy and cool-looking, wondering out loud why it looks the way it does as he stuffs his face with her leftovers.

She tells him she’s bummed that vacation is almost over. There’s a whole mountain of work waiting for her when she gets back, and it’s already stressing her out. She tells him she wishes they can just be on vacation forever, just looking at awesome things and visiting places at their leisure.

He brushes crumbs off of his hands and takes another swig of water before he pops the bottle back into her backpack. The tide has risen and when they get off of the rock, their feet will for sure get wet.

Her heart skips a beat and there are butterflies in her stomach when he reaches over to touch her face, turning it toward his. He whispers, “Come here,” before his eyes flutter shut and he closes the distance, pressing his mouth to hers, softly and carefully — kind of like he’s still testing the waters. They never normally kiss in public. He doesn’t like to be demonstrative around other people.

Her arms automatically come up around his neck as she deepens the kiss, opening her mouth to him. And then the kiss becomes insistent and hungry. Her heart pounds in her chest as her brain marvels over how she can still feel this way about him after all of these years — how he makes her feel this way about him.

She pushes him away with a gasp, breaking the kiss. “No, Grey,” she says, lightly panting. “I will
not have sex with you on this rock in front of all of these people!”

The look of confusion on his face breaks — and then he’s grinning and laughing with her.

She yawns audibly, leaning her head against his shoulder in the dark van as they bounce along the dirt road on the long way back to the hotel. His hand is clenched in between both of hers. His mouth touches her head, and he whispers for her to sleep.

She is wired when they get back to the city because of her super long, fatty nap. His thumbs are digging into her sore neck and massaging the muscles there as he pushes her like a cart, maneuvering them through the busy night market.

“Oh my God, finally,” he says, as the sound of crackling fire and the hiss of searing meat hits their ears. And the smell hits their noses. “A legit meal.”

She loves him in all his incarnations. Except for maybe the anal-retentive bitch-hag one. But one of her favorite versions of him is the drunk version. It’s hard to get him drunk because he’s so uptight that his brain just doesn’t let his body chill enough. Usually, he just gets sleepy — but if he keeps going after that — he becomes a little bit silly, a little bit affectionate, a little bit hilarious, and just a smidge more uninhibited.

Their bodies bump into the sweaty crowd — she loves crowds. She loves being among people. It makes her feel alive. She pulls him onto the dancefloor — really just an area where there are no tables set up.

“Oh, great!” he shouts over the music, letting her lead him into the center. “You want me to humiliate you!”

“How many times have I told you!” she shouts back. “My moves are fresh! To death!” She’s a little bit drunk, too. Or a lot drunk. “Clear me some space, baby! I’m ‘bout to take you to school.”

The door slams shut — loudly — which wasn’t his intention. She giggles in his ear, says, “Oops!” the malicious sound of it seeming to echo everywhere, playing with all of his frayed nerve endings. He’s grabbing her body — her fucking body — anywhere he can touch and reach, squeezing her ass and her tits and then back to her ass when she yelps in pain. He mutters this flat apology that he
doesn’t really mean, his hands scrambling to yank off her clothes so that he can just bend her over and shove himself inside of her already.

They bump into furniture and their luggage on the floor, almost falling over, but he catches her and steadies her, right before he shoves her at the bed. She lands with a soft thump and an, “Oof!” her legs splayed out and awkwardly trying to lift up her body. He wants to bite her ass and eat it, as her shorts and underwear goes down.

“Oh, fuck,” he says, fist clenching in their sheets as her hand heats up, having snuck into his pants. “This never gets fucking old. I’m gonna fuck you into the ground.”

Her laugh is loud, punctuated, unladylike, and very, very inconsiderate. He reminds her that people are sleeping. And she’s swearing and trying to kick off his pants with her feet, just taunting him with these phrases, alternating them with her teeth, sinking into his neck. Her hand is still on his dick and she’s lining them up — he’s telling her to hold on for just a second because he’s not altogether sure the angle is right and he’s worried she’s going to painfully bend his dick in half — but she tells him to shut the fuck up and holds onto him tightly as he tries to escape her clutches because he’s suddenly very afraid for his dick. The heels of her bare feet dig into his butt and she slams him into her and it turns out the angle was right. Very, very right.

“Oh my God,” he grinds out.

“Seriously,” she says. “Oh my God.”

“Jesus fuck,” he says.

“We’re so good at sex,” she says, throwing her head back, shutting her eyes.

“We are so good at sex.”

He’s wearing her sunglasses again, and he will only answer in grunts and shrugs as he alternates between sipping his coffee and guzzling water from their bottle.

“Baby, you better pee before Teton gets here.”

The lenses of her sunglasses flicker back at her. She can see her tiny reflection in them. “I can pee anywhere,” he declares ominously, voice low.

“Okay,” she mutters, bringing her own coffee up to her mouth. “I guess I really meant me. Can you make sure I pee before Teton gets here?”

For a second, it looks like he’s going to say something else. But he says, “Yeah,” instead.

“We drank too much last night,” she says, her hand flying to her stomach underneath the table. She might also try to poop before Teton picks them up.

“No shit, Captain Obvious.”

“Ugh, you’re such a bitch when you’re hungover. And you sound like Jaime.”
She leans the side of her forehead against the closed bathroom door. Her pants and underwear are pooled on the ground, wrapped around her ankles. And she’s miserably hugging her stomach as she sits on the toilet. “What do you think I should do?” she says to him, through the closed door, the sound of her voice echoing in the bathroom.

“I can’t tell you what to do,” he says, voice only slightly muffled. She can tell he’s nearby — maybe too close — maybe they don’t need to be chatting while she’s trying to shit out her pain. “It’s your decision,” he says.

“What? You are constantly telling me what to do.”

“What?” he echoes. “No, I’m not constantly telling you what to do.”

She shakes her head to herself. “Missandeiii,” she says, mimicking him, “you have to stop wearing those stupid shoes. Missandeiii, you have to drink more water. Missandeiii, if you would just clean your shit as you go you wouldn’t have to hire a cleaning lady to come once a month. Missandeiii, if you don’t want to get fat, then stop eating after you are full. Missandeiii, take off all of your clothes and bend over.”

There is a lengthy pause — and she thinks that she has totally pissed him off — when his voice finally creeps back into the bathroom. “Fuck,” he says softly — apologetically. “I really do that to you.”

She miserably pets the door, pretending it’s his face. “It’s okay, baby. I don’t listen to half the things you say. And you have points. Sometimes.”

She’s lying down on the bed as they wait for Teton, to try and settle her stomach as best as she can before the two hour drive to her parents. Grey’s sitting in the desk chair at the foot of the bed, tinkering around on her computer, occasionally breaking the silence with bursts of quick typing.

“Are you chatting with your boyfriend?” she asks.

“No. I’m emailing Drogo.”

“Ha!” she says, pumping her fist up to the ceiling. “So you admit that Jaime is your boyfriend!”

Teton is running late because of something having to do with picking up his son from school unexpectedly — she’s not clear on the details. But she asks Grey how much money he makes in a year. He doesn’t pause in his rapid-fire aggressive typing when he tells her.

And it’s a figure that is like, seventy percent more than what she expected. She says, “Holy shit,” in awe. He tells her that he got a significant pay bump with that last promotion, so that’s why. She tells
him he doesn’t even need to live with Jaime — or anyone else. He can afford to live large by himself, if he wanted. From her vantage point on the bed, she can see him shrug as he clicks her trackpad a few times. He tells her he’s been saving his money — probably to buy a house or something. Renting is just throwing away cash. Also, he turns to her in his chair, “I really do want to live with you,” he says, smiling at her softly.

And it just makes her melt. “I want to live together, too,” she admits. “This vacation sort of proved to me that we can do it — spend lots of time together without wanting to kill each other.”

“So, let’s do it,” he says simply. “Let’s shack up.”

She beams at him. “Okay.”

When he asks her what her salary is, she hesitates before telling him. She hesitates because she knows that brain will quickly budget out her income versus her expenses and it might be a dick to her because she’s not as insane and in control of her money like he is. But she tells him the amount anyway — she doesn’t make as much as he does, but she knows she makes a really good wage.

He surprises her by commenting that it’s really cool that she manages to set aside money to help out her family in Myr on top of taking care of rent and buying a stupid-ridiculous amount of clothes. She rolls her eyes, before she grins and sheepishly tells him that she’s probably not saving as much money in the long run as she can.

“I mean, I can help you with that,” he says.

“You’re gonna make me shop for clothes at the grocery store,” she mumbles. “And make me buy one-ply toilet paper.”

He laughs. “No,” he says. “I wouldn’t do that. You can still use my employee discount to buy your girly shit.”

He must already know this — because he’s sharp — but she says it out loud anyway. She tells him that in moving in together, he’s going to bear some of the financial burdens of her family, whether in a straightforward way or in abstract ways. Like, he might pay for dinner more often when they go out to eat because her budget is tighter. She points this out to him a little bit awkwardly, kind of unsure of what to expect his response to be, unsure of what the expectations are.

She’s already projecting forward to a future where they fight about this — because she’s stressed out because of her grandma’s health care bills and he feels guilty and pressured to help her out financially — and then he comes to resent it, and her. And then he decides her life is too much of a complicated mess, and she’s not worth the trouble. And then he stops loving her. And then he leaves.

“Missandei,” he says, helping her up because he can see Teton’s car pulling up to the hotel. “Don’t worry about what you’re worrying about. I —” He pauses. “I don’t know what I’m trying to say. But just don’t worry about it right now.”
She knows that once they get to her parents’ house, they will have little privacy and little time alone to talk, so she tries to make the most of the drive. In the backseat, as he idly rotates the red hemp bracelet around her small wrist — a trinket she stole from him years ago, one he never reclaimed — she asks him how she can hypothetically make sure her parents use the money on the right things and not on frivolous shit.

“You can’t,” he tells her. He tells her that she can’t level these caveats and apply these expectations to people that she really doesn’t know that well — that’s just asking for stress and anxiety when they don’t meet those expectations. He tells her it’s like giving money to a homeless person and telling them they can only use that money for food, not drugs. First, she can’t really control where that money goes toward once it’s out of her hands. Secondly, it can be said that she’s moralizing and telling them what they can and cannot use money as if she knows their circumstances better than they do — does she want her money to come with strings?

Missandei bends over and puts her face in her hands. She groans, muttering, “I don’t know what to do or what to say to them.”

He reaches over and brushes hair off of her neck, before running his hand up and down her back. His hand curves around and pushes its way beneath her blouse, cupping her stomach. “How’s your belly feeling?”

Teton tells them that he can’t imagine ever subjecting his family to the shame of having to ask either of his daughters for money. He’d rather sell all of his worldly possessions. He has twin girls, and they are ten years old. He twirls a free hand, tilting his head back toward them and tells them that a father’s job is to provide for his children, not the other way around.
When she was sixteen years old, she had moments when she thought her life was really bleak. Most of it revolved around Neal — and whether her grandparents would ever get out of the way of true love. She spent a lot of her sophomore year of high school sneaking around behind her grandparents’ backs, angry at their distrust in her. In her point of view, it was unwarranted. She was a straight-A student, she wasn’t meeting strange older men in parking lots, and she wasn’t doing drugs.

Now, more than a decade later, after meeting her mother, she has this key bit of context — this new understanding that comes with a little bit more maturity gained.

She tells Grey that she can now imagine what her grandmother saw, written on her face, as she transitioned from a little girl to a young woman. She has seen how strikingly similar she looks to her mother. She can now understand the tight hold of her grandmother’s iron fist.

“I’ve been feeling kind of bad, for how annoying and hysterical I was as a teenager,” she says. “How much I lied to her and tortured her sometimes.”

“She really loves you,” Grey says back to her. “That much is really clear. You’ve already been forgiven.”

She looks over at him, with her eyes welling up — wet — and her jaw clenched. She just had a grim thought — she was just thinking about how old her grandma is. She is going to die soon. And Missandei is wholly unprepared to let go.

She’s not quite in the right frame of mind to pay attention to Kamil as he excitedly grabs her hands and drags her to the rabbit hutch in the backyard. He tells her that there are baby bunnies there, and they are really cute. Her parents keep rabbits for food — not as pets — and she wonders how this kid deals with the constant death of his little friends. In the past, Grey has told her, again and again, that kids are pretty resilient. Often more than adults give them credit for.

Adara hovers nearby, standing on the back porch. Missandei gives her a smile and a small wave, before her attention is caught by Kamil again.

He holds up a tiny little fluffball in his hands and pushes it at her face. He tells her that it’s his favorite one because it has spots, like a jaguar!

In Low Valyrian, Grey murmurs that the little bunny looks like it’d be really tender meat — probably delicious on the grill.

Kamil drops his jaw comically and clutches the bunny to his chest, as Grey bursts out laughing and Missandei lightly slaps him on the arm with the back of her hand. She finds Kamil to be endlessly adorable — and she finds herself wishing that he will never change. She has to constantly remind herself that he is her brother. To her, he feels like a little nephew. He reminds her a lot of Hassan. And in turn, Hassan is a lot like his dad, Mossador. She’s sure her brother would really like this kid.

She looks over at Kamil petting his bunny carefully, holding it to his chest. She tells Kamil that Grey is an asshole, and he is totally joking. They’re probably not going to kill his bunny and eat it right away. Not at least for another eleven weeks or so.
Her mother immediately embraces her, calls her darling, before she ushers Missandei inside the house. She has Missandei and Grey sit at the table in the kitchen as she puts clay bowls of food in front of them. She tells them she’s made them a special meal. Missandei pats the empty seat next to her and calls Adara’s name. Their father smiles at them from the head of the table, as he hands Grey a cold beer bottle.

Missandei is hilariously offended when Kamil straight-up tells her that girls can’t play soccer during their late lunch. She just about goes apoplectic, and in English, she tells Grey, “Dude, my baby bro is like, sexist! The fuck?”

Adara lightly chokes with her spoon in her mouth, coughing. And even though Kamil can’t speak English — yet — he knows the bad words. So he perks up at the f-bomb, asking Missandei what she and Grey are talking about.

She points to him, and she tells him they are talking about how she’s going to cream him after lunch. Now — does he own a soccer ball?

He doesn’t know what to expect because he’s never seen Missandei anywhere near a non-human ball. And she generally runs and grabs her nail polishes so she can give herself a manicure whenever he flips the channel to sports when they are hanging out at home. He puts a hand on top of her head as she squats on the ground, tying the shoes she’s borrowing from Adara.

“Are you about to embarrass yourself?” he asks.

She snorts. “Bro, I grew up with three older brothers. Come on, give me a little credit. I know I’m like, so beautiful and feminine that you can’t imagine me doing anything other than calling for you to rescue me from my princess tower —” She stands up, pushing his hand off her head. “But trust, bro — I got skills you haven’t ever seen before.”

“That’s what you said about your dancing,” he drawls. Upon her withering look, he grins at her earnestly. “Babe,” he says. “You are letting a thirteen-year-old get to you — so hard.”

“Dude, men my whole life have been telling me what I can and cannot do,” she says — sounding pretty serious. “It don’t matter to me, that he’s thirteen.”
Their impromptu game doesn’t turn out to be as epic as Missandei would’ve probably liked. Kamil was immediately super impressed when he saw his sister lightly juggle the ball before smashing it on the volley, slamming it against the fence at the boundary of their back yard. It’s probably one of the sexiest things Grey’s ever seen her do — and he nearly misses catching the ball because of his daze, when it ricochets back to him. He remembers one of the things she said to him once — she told him that she’s not athletic like he is.

Kamil runs up to Missandei, excitedly asking her to teach him.

Grey sees Adara a ways off, watching them. He waves her over — insistently when she hesitates.

Their mother and father watch them indulgently, as they run around in the backyard, flipping back and forth casually between different games. It had taken some convincing to get Grey to play games. He told her that games are for children. She sensibly points out to him that sports are games. He makes little sense when he corrects her by telling her that sports are sports.

She has taught her brother and sister how to play tunnel tag and lava monster, games than she used to beg her older brothers to let her participate in. They used to exclude her because she was too young and too annoying and too prone to crying whenever she lost — and of course she never legitimately won against them, being comparatively too young and too small and too slow. She remembers how her grandpa used to yell at them whenever he stumbled on her crying her head off, punishing her brothers for excluding her. And she also remembers how pissed they all were at her for tattling — and how they were so bored and so resentful, as they played these tame version of their games and let her win. She remembers this one time when Melaku frantically patched her skinned knee up, told her to shut the hell up because her crying is going to get him in trouble, when she fell because he accidentally bounced a soccer ball off the back of her head.

She finds she wants to call up Moss and Mars to remind them of these stories — see if they remember them the way she does, too. She finds that she’s been missing her family a lot lately.

There’s something about Adara — he sees so much hesitance, self-doubt, and fear in her — and it inspires him to try harder. She’s very quiet around him, but very diligent, and she listens to him with a supreme amount of concentration, as he teaches her how to dribble a ball. She keeps softly apologizing, whenever she sends the ball off in a random direction — and he keeps trying to keep it light, each time he runs off to chase the ball, telling her that it’s no big deal. He tells her, “This is how we learn.”

He tells her that she’s learning quickly. She ducks her head down, and she softly says that she knows she’s not very good, that she never does this stuff. She kind of gestures to the overgrown yellow grass in the backyard, vaguely leaving him to guess what she means by ‘stuff.’

After they successfully pass the ball back and forth around a dozen times or so, without incident, he straightens up and smiles — not in a forced way — but authentically because he is kind of feeling this pride in her progress.
He says, “Nice! That was awesome!” reaching out to lightly pat her on the back. He leaves his hand on her shoulder. And that is when she shrinks and jerks away from him, glancing around — looking back at the house — with this nervous energy.

Missandei walks up to her mother and she asks her mother if they can talk. Her mother touches her face — Missandei just feels cold inside — and her mother says of course they can talk.

She’s honestly trying only a little bit hard not to flip the fuck out. She could do better. But she’s really glad she’s on sertraline because she thinks that the non-medicated version of her would lose her shit all over her mother, spewing out every truthful thing she has ever thought about this woman.

Her mother can sense something is up — from Missandei’s demeanor — and as a result, her mother is extra upbeat and chipper and forcefully ignoring the tension in the room. And it’s so fucking insane to Missandei — how similar they are, how much of herself she sees in this woman, despite all the years that has separated them. This realization makes her bitter.

Missandei asks her mother if she told Adara to be careful around Grey — to not sit next to him or be in a room alone with him. Missy doesn’t know why she asks this — maybe it’s only to verbalize it and put it out there — because she knows that she’s not going to get a straight answer.

Her mother tells her that it’s not a very big deal — this is getting blown of proportion. She was simply telling Adara to respect her brother-in-law personal boundaries.

In Low Valyrian, Missandei bluntly asks her mother why they lied to her — why they never joined their kids in Myr like they said they were going to. Why did they stay in Naath? And why did they just start a new family like it was nothing?

In her letters, her mother omitted details. Instead, she wrote about feelings. She wrote that it broke her heart and tore her up inside, that they were separated for so long. She wrote that she desperately wanted to be with her children and she cried herself to sleep all the time, because she had lost her children.

Missandei asks why it was so hard to get on a boat or plane? Why was it so hard to find them and to tell them why this was happening to them?

In Low Valyrian, her mother’s tone darkens. And she starts to say that Missandei’s grandmother —” Missandei cuts her off, tells her mother not to dare speak badly about Missandei’s grandmother.

She asks her mother what she felt — when she learned that her father — Missandei’s grandfather — had died. She asks her mother what she felt — when she learned that her youngest son had died.

Missandei kind of laughs humorlessly. She had forgotten that Melaku is no longer the youngest son.
She is numb inside as her mother sobs, fighting to get the words out. In a moment of deep honesty, her mother asks her if she realizes what men will do to them, if given the leeway.

She tells Missandei that she really wanted a better life for her children — a life away from hereditary violence and poverty — but then she fell in love. She tells Missandei that her father is a gentle and a nice man — and their marriage was arranged — and he isn’t the smartest or the cleverest man.

The man she fell in love with was charismatic and knowing — worldly — he made her believe that life could be so much more. On a level, she knew what she was doing — leaving her husband, abandoning her children — but —

Her mother looks at Missandei’s face. And she asks Missandei if she’s happy with her life and her job and her freedom and her autonomy. She doesn’t wait for Missandei to answer. She just simply says that, in a way, her abandonment allowed Missandei to have this life — it must have made Missandei strong.

Her mother tells her that the man she fell in love with was a very bad man. And Missandei’s dad is loyal — heartbroken — he begged her to come back to him. He told her they could start over. Sometimes — when shame is not staring you right in the face, persistently reminding you of its existence — you can make yourself forget.

It’s dark out. The crickets are chirping, and she lays a blanket over both of their feet, as she swings on the hammock in the backyard with Adara. She had asked Grey if they could stay the night at her parents’ house — just for a night, before they go back home. She told him she wanted to spend more time with her siblings.

She links their arms and she tells Adara that she never thought she’d ever have a sister — she always wanted one. Her brothers — their brothers — are a bunch of boys, and they’re so rough and aggressive.

“What’s your house like? What does it look like?”

Missandei laughs. “That’s what you want to know? Of all things!” She palms her pants in the dark, trying to dig out her phone. “I have pictures,” she says.

Missandei has the whole family sit down after dinner to talk about money. Her mother tries to shoo Adara and Kamil off, stating that these matters are too complicated for children. But Missandei insists. Grey is unfailingly steady and casual-looking, sipping from his beer bottle, slouched in an armchair.
She opens it up by telling her parents that she’s actually not rich. She’s totally, totally not rich. Grey backs her up on this, like a hype man, telling her parents that she is really not making it rain — the translated colloquialism is mostly lost on them, but they are following along.

She tells her parents that she really wants for Kamil and Adara to both complete their schooling. Educational opportunities are limited in Naath — she knows — so she wants to help pay for them to attend university abroad — wherever they end up going — within reason.

Her father is stunned. There’s a lengthy pause before he says that it’s too much.

“Our older brothers did this for me, you know,” she says to Adara — who is beyond embarrassed at this spectacle. “They just — gave up so much and worked really hard so that I could go to school. And — I want this for you.”

“Jesus Christ I really hope she doesn’t get teenage-pregnant and fuck up my amazing, self-sacrificing gesture,” Missandei says, fluffing up one of Kamil’s pillows. And then she laughs quietly, mostly to herself. “You know, I bet you my brothers have said the exact same thing at one point — about me.” She shakes her head. “My God, that’s hilarious.”

“She’s a good kid,” Grey says. “And I think she’s too freaked out by men to get teenage-pregnant. Early-twenties-pregnant — maybe.”

Missandei pulls back the covers and slips into Kamil’s bed, sliding so her back is up against the wall. She reaches out a hand to him, as he’s pulling off his shirt. “God, what a fucking day. I’m exhausted,” she says. “All I want to do is cuddle up with my baby and maybe do some light grinding in the dark, some over-the-pants stuff.”

He ignores the come on, mutely reaching over the flick off the light before he crawls into bed. He knows she’s joking. They both know it’s really fucked up to bang in her little brother’s bed.

She sighs, her fingers run over his face, his eyelids, his nose, his mouth. She peppers soft kisses on his jawline and ear, alternating between sniffing him. She squeezes him in her arms, and it takes her a bit before she settles in, before she stops fidgeting.

“Missandei?” he says.

“Hmm?”

“After we get back — after you get your stuff settled and have some time — will you schedule an appointment with your doctor?”

“For what, babe?”

“Maybe to adjust the dosage of your medication — or maybe talk about switching it to something else.”

She stiffens next to him. “Why? Have I been psycho? Have you noticed something off?”

“No no,” he says quickly. “You’ve been great. Awesome.” He pauses, breathing through his muddled thoughts, trying to find the words that don’t make him feel so vulnerable and scared.
He stays quiet for a bit — and she is being patient, intertwining their fingers together in the dark.

“It’s because of sex,” he finally says.

“Sex?” she says quizzically. And then after a beat — he can actually feel her comprehension. “Oh, snap.” And her vicious smile in the dark. “Baby,” she says, lowering her voice. “You’re gonna have to be more explicit than that.”

“Shut up.”

She laughs, shaking against his arm. “I’m joking.” She clears her throat. “Okay. I’ll schedule an appointment so that you can get my rocks off again. God, you’re so romantic. You’re such a feminist,” she teases.

“Thank you for defending me today,” he says quietly, interrupting her gloating.

Missandei is predictably a hurricane of activity in the morning as she runs around, trying to get all her things in order before they leave her family. She fiddles around with the computer in the living room — installing Skype on it so that they can all talk more regularly. She creates profiles and repeatedly explains to her parents how to use it — making Adara and Kamil stand as witnesses — because they will probably be the ones who will actually be manning the machine. She writes down her email and cell phone number on many pieces of paper, making them promise to call her in some disaster happens to befall them. Or just call if they want to chat and catch up.

She also leaves them the contact information of her brothers. She shrugs and tells her parents that Mossador and Marselen might completely ignore any overtures since they have thus far — but feel free to try.

She kisses her mother and father on their cheeks. She wants to be scary and tell them that they better not fuck her over and they better do right by Missandei’s brother and sister — but Missandei refrains from being so heavy-handed. Instead, she tells them that she’s very glad to have seen them again and to have spent time with them.

She clutches Adara and Kamil tightly, hugging both of them. She says, “I love you guys. So much.”
Yo, here’s a pic of a beautiful and talented man with a fashion sense that’s fresh as all hail.

Here's also an update of a story that refuses to go softly into the night. <3

“Hey, Bieber.”

"Hey, Belieber."

Jaime forgets to close his driver’s side door, so Brienne has to reach over and shut it so that it doesn’t get taken off by a car driving by. Jaime reaches up to adjust his hat, lifting it up higher on his head, before he throws his arms around Grey, who looks unsteady and deeply uncomfortable with the profuse display of affection. “Oh my God,” Jaime says, hugging Grey tightly. “I’ve missed you, man. Like, for real. Like, no joke. I am so glad you are home.”

Missandei chuckles tiredly. There were so many new releases on the plane that she kind of forced herself to stay awake on the flight, watching all the movies. She says, “I’m back, too,” dragging their suitcases to the trunk of Brienne’s car.

After she climbs into the backseat, she gives Brienne an awkward from-behind hug. “Hey, girlie.”

“Hey. How was the trip?”

“You know, not bad.”

“I want all the details, but later,” Brienne says. “I have a feeling Jaime’s about to commandeer the conversation with whatever he’s interested in talking about. He’s been really excited for you guys to come home.”

“You mean he’s been excited for his boyfriend to come home.”

“Well, yeah. Obviously that’s what I mean.”

It’s 6 p.m. King’s Landing time. But she has been awake since forever, and it’s the wee hours of the morning in Naath. When Jaime suggests they go grab dinner together — and then interrupts himself by saying that he already made reservations for the four of them — she has to stop herself from
trying to punch him in the face because she doesn’t want him to crash the car. As if sensing her near-act of violence, Grey puts his hand on top of hers, grabs it, and holds it up to his mouth, pressing the back of her hand to his lips. And it’s so fucking ridiculous, how he just makes everything better.

Over dinner, Jaime tells them he wants to see all of their vacation pictures. And he keeps trying to drag out every observation and factoid they’ve picked up about the history of slavery in Naath, like the genocide nerd that he is.

She’s about ready to collapse into the hot bowl of soup — a starter — but she forces herself to at least keep herself upright. She’s not much for conversation at the moment. Brienne notices and is very sympathetic, trying to hurry the meal along by eating quickly, by reminding Jaime to pause in his ramblings to finish his plate.

After dinner, outside of the restaurant, Jaime turns to Grey from the driver’s seat and asks, “So, where to next?”

“Home,” Grey says in a clipped voice.

“Sweet,” Jaime says. “You sleeping at our place tonight?”

“No,” Grey says. “I’m going to sleep at Missandei’s.”

“Man, you guys have spent two weeks together nonstop. You aren’t sick of each other yet?”

She’s leaning hard into Grey, on his and Jaime’s couch — in their fucking apartment — because Jaime is forcing the both of them to stay the night. He and Brienne are in the kitchen, their voices a low murmur as they dig around for a bottle of wine.

Missandei presses her face deeper into Grey’s neck, and she whispers, “I hate him.”

“Yeah, he sucks,” Grey says. For once, he’s more awake than she is, having spent some of the flight snoozing. “Why don’t you go to bed? I’ll come join you after he passes out drunk.”

She wants to say that she doesn’t want to go to bed without him, but it sounds entirely too needy and ridiculous. She reluctantly pries her body off of him — she really, really hates Jaime — and she trudges off toward the closed door of his bedroom — a familiar sight, but also foreign at the same time.

Their shitty used couch feels plush and luxurious underneath his butt — so used he has become to sitting on wooden chairs and squatting on the dusty ground. The glass of red wine in his hand feels
decadent and excessive. The ease in which he can leave on his own schedule — by picking up his keys and getting in his car — feels like freedom. Being back home feels simultaneously uplifting and oppressive.

He tells Jaime and Brienne as much, leaning back on the couch, propping a foot on their coffee table. It’s also weird for him to start claiming ownership over his stuff again — for the last two weeks, he didn’t have stuff beyond his clothes and Missandei.

“You’re calling your girl ‘stuff’?” Jaime says, sipping from his glass, amused. And then — as if remembering something he’s been keeping on the backburner — Jaime leans over and hits him with a throw pillow. “Dude, will you fucking naturalize already? I’ve been dealing with the most atrocious shit at work — and every horror story reminds me of you. Will you give my mind some fucking peace and just fill out some paperwork and take a fucking test? Missandei did it. Look at her now, a productive member of Westerosi society.”

“Jaime —” Brienne says warningly.

“I’m glad I came home so you can pick a fight,” Grey says dully. He sips his wine.

Work has taken on a new inflection. It’s sort of now this prison she’s chained to because she needs to be bringing in money always in order to secure the future of two awesome kids. Strangely, this brings her some comfort as it simultaneously terrifies and stresses out her — it brings a sense of purpose — as she yawns her way through her first day back, fielding a million questions from a million needy people. She’s also constantly adjusting her skirt and her bra because, after weeks of wearing airy, shapeless clothes, being back in her normal clothes feels incredibly restricting.

What she really doesn’t want to think about is the phone call she needs to make to her brothers and her grandmother. Of course she can just hide it and continue lying to them by omission, about going to see their parents — but at this point in her life, she’s an adult — a legitimate adult. She has decided that adults are honest and they own up to their truth.

He has almost forgotten what she looks like, having only met her one other time. But when he shows up at the park, at their designated meeting place, Rachel waves at him enthusiastically, wearing running leggings and a sports bra. He’s told Missandei that he has a running buddy — and it’s a woman or, rather, she’s a woman.

Missandei had given him a thumbs up and told him to go have fun training for the boringest hobby ever with his new buddy.

Ah, the things she does for love. She tells herself this as she flips through a women’s magazine, as
she waits for her doctor.

When he shows up, they chat about how she’s doing on the sertraline — she tells him it’s been amazing. She’s been upbeat and very productive. Her mood swings are gone. She was worried about feeling drugged, but rather, she feels completely like herself. More herself than she did with that cloud of lingering depression.

He asks her if there are any side effects. She holds up her hand and clenches her fist tightly. She tells him that she has these tremors sometimes. She also tells him that sometimes she wakes up really sweaty — also she can’t tell if that’s an effect of the sertraline or if her partner is just a really hot sleeper — he sometimes sweats when he sleeps, too.

Her doctor makes some notes on his computer. He’s serious today, so she resists cracking jokes. He tells her that the tremors and the sleep-sweating are common side effects of the medication. Then, he asks her about libido.

Nice. He brought it up so she doesn’t have to. She tells him that libido is actually pretty good. She has a desire to have sex. However, the problem is that it’s been impossible to achieve an orgasm.

He writes more notes in the computer, and he tells her that’s also a side effect of the medication.

His phone rings because someone is buzzing to come in. He assumes that Jaime lost his keycard, but when he answers his phone, the slow drawl of Jaime’s brother filters through.

Grey tells Tyrion that Jaime isn’t home. Tyrion says that yes, he knows. Jaime texted to let him know that he is running late, and to go up to the apartment and annoy the roommate. Grey doesn’t respond to that. He just hangs up the phone and buzzes Tyrion in.

“No, no, don’t get up,” Tyrion says when he arrives, when he sees Grey make no motion to play host. Tyrion pushes his way into the kitchen, opening cabinets, opening the fridge. “I will make myself at home.”

From his position on the couch, Grey is flipping through channels, watching highlights as Tyrion comes back in the living room and situates himself in an armchair, holding a glass with an inch of amber whiskey.

“I don’t believe we’ve ever been alone together before,” Tyrion says, over the drone of TV announcers. “Jaime is always around directing all attention toward himself, as he likes to do. I realize I don’t even know your last name. I don’t know any of your hopes and dreams and aspirations.”

Grey says nothing.

“Remember when you had that raging morphine addiction, and I brought you anti-diarrhea medication? We bonded over that, didn’t we?”
Missy totally chickens out the first time she calls her grandma. She promises herself that their next call will be more productive, and she will be ready for her grandma’s bitching and threats all the way from Myr.

Instead of talking about Missandei’s parents, they chat about her brothers and sisters in law, her nieces and nephews. She constantly wants to blurt out to her grandma that she has two more grandchildren — and they are great — but Missandei is scared of the consequences of such a blurt.

Her grandma asks about Grey — asks how he’s doing. It reminds Missandei that there’s another important thing she has to talk to her grandma about — the fact that she’s going to live with a guy out of wedlock, like the big ol’ slut she is. She winces at the thought of her grandma’s reaction — the layers upon layers of disapproval.

She tells her grandma that Grey is fine.

His phone vibrates on the conference table during a meeting because he’s an idiot who forgot to silence it. He immediately flips it over, face down, reorienting his attention back to Barristan.

It’s a longstanding habit of Grey’s, to automatically flip over his phone if he’s around other people, whenever a text comes through — whether it’s from her or not. This is a habit built from years of being paranoid and worried that one of his colleagues or his friends will catch sight of the text preview on his phone. He has to remember to disconnect his personal email and chat whenever he uses his work computer for a presentation — because he’s afraid she’ll ping him during the meeting. One of his greatest work fears is that one of her texts or emails will come in during an important moment, lit up huge on a projector screen.

It’s not like he hasn’t told her to knock it off. She just doesn’t listen. He’s pretty sure she wants him to get caught.

He doesn’t remember to check his messages until it’s nearly the end of the day, when he’s back at his desk going over his schedule for the rest of the week.

“Hey!” she says, opening her door. Her eyes scan him up and down — it’s been awhile since she’s seen him in a suit. Her body temperature increases just incrementally. She remembers that she’s a fan. After kissing him hello, she gets out of his way and ushers him into the apartment.

He shoves a bottle of wine at her — probably one that he has pilfered from Jaime — one that Jaime pilfered from his dad. “So you want me to stick it in where?” he says, walking into her kitchen to examine the hot pots and pans on her stove.

She snickers. “Aw, you got my love note.”
Over dinner, he tells her that Jaime and Brienne are planning on renting a house in the ‘burbs. It’s all very domestic and white. They will probably be called upon to help Jaime and Brienne transport and organize their shit. They will probably be called upon to be unwilling witnesses to the petty squabbling Jaime and Brienne will engage in, when Brienne sees the kind of slob she has decided to cohabitate with.

And then he belatedly tells Missandei that dinner is like, good. It tastes good. It tastes like it’s supposed to taste.

The subject of moving in together has been one that they have carefully sidestepped for the most part, since being back in King’s Landing. They’ve been busy ramping back up at work and juggling their various responsibilities again. He’s still completely all-in, though. He wants to do this. It’s just — the logistics of it and the timing of it all seems like a sensitive subject to broach. He already knows there’s going to be so much talking. More talk about finances. And then talk about aesthetic tastes. And then talk about location and amenities. And then talk about whatever the fuck else — closet space, toothpaste brand, threadcount on their sheets, whether or not she gonna blow a wad of cash on new shit, whether or not he’s going to freak out when he is living in the chaos of her clothes on the ground twenty-four-seven, whether or not she’s going to strangle him dead when he forgets to tell her stuff until the last minute, like how he can’t go to some event or show with her because he’s going on a camping trip that he scheduled with his friends a few months ago.

It’s just going to be a lot of talking.

“Dude,” she says. “So I saw my doctor.”

It’s been awhile since he’s seen her in one of her lacy bras and underwear. It’s been awhile since he’s had to fight with the tinyass buttons on her shirts and search for the hidden zippers in her tight skirts. A part of him has missed this — the whole procedure and routine of it all — of unwrapping her. Another part of him still doesn’t understand why women wear this uncomfortable-looking shit.

He knows she’s beautiful. He has eyes. He can see her. It’s something about her that he doesn’t tell her enough — or at all. It’s something nice about her. He would be lying if he said her looks don’t matter to him. But — he has known a lot of beautiful women.

She tells him there’s no magical solution to the climax problem. Her doctor is lowering her dosage a little bit to see if it helps with sweating and the tremors and the blocked orgasm, but apparently with these sorts of things, it can be months before there are results, or before the body acclimates to change, before the brain can rewire its concept of sex. She tells him that her doctor — and Terri — have both said that she and Grey should communicate with each other. She gives him a wry smile. “They said it’s a good idea for me to talk to you about what we want from each other, what our expectations are when it comes to sex, what turns us on.”

“I want you to come,” he says, licking his lips, gripping her skirt tightly, pulling it down her hips. “My expectations are for you to come. And it turns me on, when you come.”

She’s helping him by unbuttoning the cuffs at the wrists, so she can fully take off her shirt. “Dude, first of all — hot. I love it when you talk sorta-dirty to me in your perfunctory way, baby. Second of all, flip that statement and orient it at back at yourself. I feel the same way — about you.”
His mouth quirks in a half-smile. He understands.

“Dude, if there was a drug or an easy solution to achieving orgasms, I’d be on it,” she says.

“Dude,” he echoes. “If there was a drug or an easy solution to achieving orgasms, I’d be on it.”

When she tells him that extended foreplay might help, she was kinda expecting a whole discussion around it, with her cracking open a dictionary to read the definition of foreplay. But he’s blase about it. He says, “Okay. Done,” which more or less signaled the end of the discussion.

She’s on her back, and he’s kissing a line down her sternum. Her voice is stuck in the back of her throat, and she wants to tell him that she wasn’t sure whether she was talking about herself or if she was talking about him. But she lets it slide, as she runs her hands against the shifting muscles underneath his skin, in his shoulders.

It was a no go. She got close once, but then she lost it. It was still fun to try.

She feels a little sleepy, content, sweaty, satisfied, and maybe a little too full because she had too much pasta. She remembers when they first started getting naked together, how comparatively more self-conscious she was about what her body looked like to him. She tends to think that she looks better in clothes than out of them — clothes being this strategic shield that hides her not-perfect bits — but one time she confessed this to him. And he blandly told her that he thinks she looks her best out of clothes.

Tomorrow is Saturday, and she’s glad for it. She’s still somewhat recovering from jetlag, and she hasn’t been able to sleep in with him in ages.

“What’s your favorite position?” she asks, rubbing his stomach, which strangely always feels softest in these post-coital moments.

“Um.” He is uncomfortable, she can tell. “Probably missionary. Or you on top. I’m boring.”

“How come?”

There is a lengthy pause. He fidgets, which is something he does not normally do. There’s often a cadence and a rhythm and a pattern in how he expresses his desire for her. He defaults to what is physical — to what he wants to do to her and how he wants to do it to her. He roughs up his words, wary of romanticizing. Sometimes she mimics his speech because she thinks it helps him feel more at ease — in the face of her natural, oppressive, soft-hearted, infatuated declarations.

Then he says, “Because I can see your face.” He says it to the ceiling. “I like looking at your face, too. And it’s easiest to kiss you, when you’re facing me. And I like to be able to do that.”
She doesn’t know whether she’s offended or flattered, when Jhiqui asks her to come along to a sex shop because — apparently — Missandei is one of Jhiqui’s most “sex-positive” friends.

Missy flips through racks of lingerie, running the gamut between tasteful and frilly and Fifty Shades-inspired. The pun has been something Jhiqui has been leaning hard on, to dispel some of her self-consciousness and nervousness at being in a sex shop. She keeps referring to Grey as Fifty Shades, seemingly liking it the more and more she says it. It’s clear that she thinks she’s very clever. And Missy really hopes that Jhiqui never refers to him as such to his face.

Jhiqui and Nick’s sexiversary is coming up, and that is why they are in a sex shop. The image of sweet, pastry-making Nick getting down on all fours with a ball gag in his mouth is something that Missandei really can’t imagine — it’s simultaneously an image she cannot get out of her head. Jhiqui has assured her that they aren’t going in that direction. Maybe she’ll get some tasteful edible undies, maybe some sci-fi sexy barmaid outfit because her hubby’s such a geekazoid.

“What about you?” Jhiqui says. “What are you getting?”

“Me?” Missy purses her lips.

“Yeah,” Jhiqui says. “What does tall, dark, and mute like in the bedroom?”

She’s been trying to respect his privacy more, which she has ascertained to mean that she shouldn’t give her friends CSI-level breakdowns of what his dick looks like. “Um, he likes normal sex stuff,” Missandei says, circling a rack, trying to put some physical distance between her and Jhiqui.

“Oh, babe! Before I forget, can we put a double date down on the calendar? Nick’s been bugging me to invite you guys over. He loves feeding you guys — especially Fifty Shades — because your man eats anything and everything. At our last dinner party, Nick brought out this gorgeous uni mousse topped with a raw quail egg. The bank’s vice president’s wife gagged and almost threw up at the table. Nick’s been super down about it ever since. That’s partly why I want to cheer him up.” Jhiqui holds up a white bodysuit with strategically cut holes. “Is this shit Star Wars or Star Trek? I can’t tell.”

She has two hours to kill before he comes over after his run. She feels silly as she furtively looks around her empty apartment, kind of assessing the space, kind of looking for any peeping Toms. She wonders if she should do this in the bedroom or on the couch. She would feel a bit Puritanical in the bedroom, like she’s ashamed of what’s about to go down. She would feel exposed on the couch, because there are like, windows everywhere.

She decides on a happy medium. She draws her blinds.
Missandei sits down and opens the plastic box. She discards the directions, because she images this sort of thing should be pretty intuitive. It looks like a microphone, which she thinks is cool — that’s what she said at the store when the clerk was trying to sell her on a more expensive model. The thing comes with batteries, which is really nice and convenient. She’s a proponent of thoughtful packaging. She pushes for the extra cost at work all the time.

She squeaks out an, “Eek!” when she flips the switch and the vibrator’s inner mechanism whirs. She presses a button and it buzzes in her hand, making her smile to herself, her eyes wide, kind of just unsure of what to think — unsure of how to measure just exactly how funny and how weird this moment is.

“Oh kay,” she says to no one, as she unbuttons and unzips her slacks, shimmying out of them on the couch.

He notices that she’s slightly out of breath when she opens the door. “Hey!” she says, angling her head to kiss him on the mouth. “How was the run?”

“Normal,” he says, toeing off his shoes so he doesn’t track dirt into her place. “I’m starving,” he says, walking to her fridge. “What do you have to eat?” The answer is self-evident as he swings over the door. First — there is little to no actual food in her refrigerator. Second — he needs to make some time over the weekend to clean out all of the old expired shit and wipe down her shelves. She likes to spill things and not wipe them up.

“Want me to order a pizza?”

“Missandei.” He says her name like he’s scolding her, after she tells him that she still hasn’t told her grandma about visiting her parents. And she still hasn’t told her grandma that they are moving in together.

“Dude, don’t be bitchy with me,” she says, munching on a piece of crust on the couch, a glass of wine smeared with her lipstick sitting on the coffee table. “Not if you want to get laid tonight. And trust, you most def want to get laid tonight. I figured out something.”

He is completely unfazed when she tells him that she bought a vibrator, and she just had the very first orgasm she’s had in months — and it was cray. She starts to explain to him what a vibrator is, but he holds up his hand and tells her that he knows what a vibrator is.

And then he tilts his head back, pressing it against the couch. And he tells her that he’s really tired. He doesn’t feel like having sex tonight.
She used to be really emotional and take it super personally, whenever Neal told her that he didn’t feel like having sex. At the beginning, the reason was usually that his dick was sore from all the teenage sex that they snuck in during the long days of summer break. Toward the end, the reason was not stated so explicitly, but she knows it was because he was banging other women — that was why he didn’t want to have it with her — which was fine because they were broken up. But still, she used to go on some serious benders because she was so wrecked by Neal’s sex-rejections.

Actually, come to think of it — she used to go on boozy benders and have protected sex with strange men in restrooms, closing her eyes and wishing they were Grey because she was so wrecked by Grey’s sex-rejections — back in college.

This is sort of something she wants to talk to him about, if only to express to him how far she’s come as a human being. Because look at her now, not losing her shit because he doesn’t want to fuck her at the moment. She’s talked to Terri at length about how she trades in her sexual attractiveness and how that is — unfortunately — a big part of her identity and how she gains confidence in herself — and how she worries about how her life will start going downhill as she ages and loses her looks. That part is certainly inevitable. She’s also talked to Terri about how she has repeatedly told herself to not listen to the women in her family — that there will be more to her life than being someone’s wife — and if men leave her — which they can and they have — it won’t be something that breaks her. She’s told Terri that sometimes she’s unsure of how much she believes in this — she really, really wants to believe it — but sometimes it’s hard to be self-aware. It’s hard to disentangle what she’s been taught and what she’s internalized and what she aspires to be. She’s sometimes completely convinced that she will break — if Grey leaves her. It’s this shitty, weak, secret thing about her.

Honestly, that’s really what she wants to tell him — the whole emotional component of sex and the meaning of sex in the context of their relationship and their history — and her fears about it all. But she can tell he’s really not in a good mood. She has no idea why — if it’s the stupid vibrator thing — if some memory’s been triggered — if he just had a shitty day at work. She just doesn’t know.

“So what are you thinking,” he says in the dark, lying next to her, “in terms of where you might want to live?”

“Um.” Her voice is soft and feathery. She might have been on the cusp of sleep. “I’d like to be fairly close to work. I don’t want to spend so much time commuting. But I guess if we’re farther out, it would be nice to be close to one of the rails or a transit station. My friend Amber from work lives up farther north with her husband. She told me it takes her about half an hour to get into work on the rail. That’s not bad, right?”

“It currently takes us less than fifteen minutes to get to work. Probably more like ten minutes.”

She sighs. “Yeah, I know. It’s nice. Are you saying you want to stay in the city?”

“No, not necessarily. I’m open, too.”
He holds out his glass as Jaime’s sister pours the wine. He has spent very little time being around Jaime’s sister, but she is — in one word — intense. Jaime’s euphemism for it is unfailingly, “She’s going through something.”

She and Missandei also dress similarly — something that Jaime picks up on right away when he saw them standing side-by-side. He made horrible, racially charged jokes about it. Missandei made it worse by making a rape joke. It’s sometimes stunning to him, the things that the people around him find funny.

He’s helping Brienne collapse cardboard boxes, so that she can efficiently shove them in the recycling bin later. He’s cutting the tape, and she’s stacking the cardboard and tying piles off. He values her good judgement. She has cracked no jokes about how he once pulled a knife on her.

Jaime sinks onto their couch — now his and Brienne’s couch — nearly spilling his wine. There wasn’t much of a custody battle over the couch. Jaime offered to let him have it, but he said that Missandei has a sectional, so they are good.

“Well, it’s the end of an era,” Jaime says, raising his glass.

“Don’t be melodramatic,” Grey says.

“Can I tell you guys a secret?” Jaime says, looking around the room. “I’m really bummed. I definitely wasn’t this sad when I moved out of Dad’s house,” he says, addressing his sister.

Cersei snorts. “No one is sad moving out of Dad’s house.”

Jaime grins, conceding on that point. “Don’t tell Addam,” he says to the rest of them, “because he will be a stupid little bitch about it, but I also wasn’t this sad when I moved out of the apartment he and I shared during college.”

Jaime looks to Grey, and Grey finds that he has to look away. Because Bieber is such a girl about this shit.

“Dude,” Jaime says. And then he stops. He clears his throat. “Jesus, you know how much I love you. You are my buddy. Brienne has no idea how I like my bagel sandwiches, and she thinks stealing is wrong. And you know how these things go. You promise to keep in touch and to hang out on the regular — but like, I haven’t talked to Dav and Addam in over a month. I am not entirely confident Drogo is still alive. You know, situations change, and life gets busy —”

The front door of Jaime and Brienne’s new rental slams open as Tyrion stumbles inside. He holds up a bottle of liquor. “I’m here to help you move your shit,” he announces. “Oh look, it’s all done. Well, let’s celebrate a job well done, fam.”

She watches Cersei pick up a wet rag with the pink nail tips of her forefinger and thumb, her delicate pale face scrunching up in sneer. She lightly drags the dishrag back and forth across the counter.
She tells Missandei that she’s watched people do this sort of thing.

Brienne comes up from behind, her face flushing pink, and she gently takes the rag from Cersei. The faucet comes on for a split second and then Brienne uses her amazing arm span to wipe down the entire kitchen counter. Cersei slinks back to her wine bottle. The glass next to it is never not full.

“This place is . . . cute,” Cersei says. “Rustic.”

Missandei can hear the boys burst out in laughter — or rather, Jaime and Tyrion burst out in laughter — in the other room. She scans around the kitchen, with its super sleek, shiny, white, handleless cabinets and the stainless steel smart refrigerator that puts out Twitter updates. Because Jaime is hopelessly addicted to technology.

“I like it,” Cersei says, nodding definitively, before taking a gulp of wine.

“Thanks,” Brienne says, smiling shyly. “It’s more Jaime’s taste than it is mine.”

“Oh, honey,” Cersei says. “Big mistake there. Never let a man tell you how to decorate your home. Because if you give him an inch, he will take over every bit of light and joy and happiness in your life. And he will snuff it out like it’s a match and he’s a hurricane. And then you will be left with the ruins of your future. And then you start thinking, ‘Oh, maybe I will sign up for a night class, learn how to fucking make pottery while our nanny teaches my children Spanish and they call her madre. Pottery’s all I’m good for since I didn’t fucking finish college.’” Cersei drags her wine glass back up to her red stained mouth.

“Don’t get married,” Cersei slurs, teetering on her feet, pressing herself against the countertop to keep from toppling over. “Worst mistake of my life.” She smacks her lips. “Don’t tell Jaime I said that,” she says to Brienne. “He will be insufferable. He’s always hated Robert.”

“Jaime is really annoying with the I-told-you-sos,” Brienne says mildly, sipping from her glass of ice water.

Cersei bangs her hand on the counter, eyes wide, nodding. “He is! He is the worst whenever he’s even a little bit right.”

“Sometimes he’s the worst, and he’s not even a little bit right,” Brienne says, getting livelier and livelier, relieved that she’s apparently stumbled on a commonality with Jaime’s sister. “Sometimes he’s flat-out wrong, and he’s still manages to gloat about not being as wrong as he could’ve been.”

“Oh my God, yes.”

She’s tired and a little buzzed and still yearning for the beautiful haze of their vacation when his deep but quiet voice interrupts her reverie, during the drive home. He reaches forward and turns down the music. And then he says, “So it bothers you that I’m anal retentive and uptight?”
She looks at him in confusion, in the dark. “Huh?” His face has no tells. And then it quickly comes back to her. Her pulse starts racing, and she immediately just feels bad. “Oh, babe. You overheard?” She sighs. “I didn’t mean for that to come out like it did. It’s just that Jaime’s sister was just like — you know — getting plastered — and we were all bonding over stupid shit, like what we hate about you guys. And I was just grasping at straws. Because I wanted to fit in. I didn’t want to be uncool.”

“I know I’m anal retentive and uptight,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I shouldn’t have said that. I didn’t mean it.”

Her heels click on the tile floor as she walks from the galley kitchen to the living room. She already knew two seconds after stepping foot in this apartment that she doesn’t want to live in it. It’s cramped, it’s old, and it seems expensive. But she keeps up the farce as she follows Grey and the landlord from room to room.

One new thing that she has learned about the man that she has known for a nearly a decade is that it’s hard for him to visualize things in his head. She tends to walk into rooms, survey them, telling him where they can place their furniture and how it would look. Grey’s one of those has-to-see-it-to-get-it and don’t-care-just-sees-dollar-signs types. She supposes this is why he’s so good at his job.

“It’s ugly. I hate it,” she says to him, crossing her arms over her chest when they are outside of the building, alone and facing each other on the sidewalk. She shivers.

“Yeah,” he says, rebuttoning his suit jacket so that his tie doesn’t flap in the wind. “I gathered that.”

She’s chatting with Moss on the phone on her way home from the gym when she blurts it out. She just blurts it all out. She tells Mossador because he seems like the safest option, being her most patient and understanding brother. She tells him that she found the letters that their parents sent them and started secretly responding back to their parents. And that vacation to Braavos she and Grey took? Wasn’t actually to Braavos. She went to Naath.

His voice is dark and tough, as he asks her what the fuck she thinks she’s doing.

She shuts her door behind her, leaning against it. And she starts tearing up. Her voice is shaky when she says, “I’m so sorry.”

And then he sighs. And he asks for more detail.

When Rachel asks him if he wants to grab a bite after their run, he agrees. They go to a nearby burrito place and she gets a salad as he gets a mondo sized burrito with everything on it. She clinks
her beer to his, and she tells him that there’s nothing better than a cold beer after a run.

Alcohol always hits him the hardest when he’s dehydrated. He’s a little loopy as they joke around over the loud, live mariachi band. In moments, he looks at her and he thinks about how she’s this person who knows nothing about who he is — knows nothing about his history, his damage, his failures, his fears, his limitations. She must look at him and see such normalcy — just an ordinary guy.

He’s surprised, and he’s not surprised — when she leans forward and kisses him at the end of the night.

Jaime looks worried and bewildered, when he opens the door of his new home.

Grey presses his hands to the top of his head, and he says, “Jaime, I really fucked up.”
The big breakup

When he realizes that Brienne is home, Grey bluntly asks Jaime if they can go grab a drink somewhere alone, by themselves, within earshot and eyeshot of her. He just doesn’t care right now. Her face flushes a bit, as she cuts her eyes from his — and Jaime’s hackles immediately raise. He defensively starts to tell Grey to not be such a fucking dick, especially not to Brienne — but Brienne can sense something huge is up. Grey watches as she squeezes Jaime’s bad hand and softly tells him that she has work to do anyway. She tells Jaime to go on and grab a drink with Grey.

She gives Grey an indecipherable look — he has hurt her feelings — before she turns and disappears around the corner.

In the car, before Jaime even turns on the ignition, he faces Grey as the overhead light starts to dim, and he says, “Either you fucking killed someone or you cheated on Missy. Which is it?” Jaime’s eyes shift around, now in the dark. “Are you here because you need an immigration lawyer?”

Grey says nothing.

Jaime hits the steering wheel with the heel of his bad hand. “Goddammit.”

After a near-silent, five-minute drive to a nearby burger chain — after walking past tables overfilled with suburban college students on a budget — they sit across from each other at a two-top.

“I don’t know how you can be so fucking calm,” Jaime finally says, hand clenched tightly around his iced tea. He muttered that he didn’t even want to drink anything, but he apparently felt bad for the server — if the both of them had ordered waters. “You just blew up your fucking life, and you look like you can’t give less of a shit.”

Grey doesn’t even know why he’s here. He doesn’t even know why he’s talking to Jaime, instead of talking to her. He doesn’t know the protocol for this sort of thing — the hazy substance-tinged memories from college — of his disassociation from people, of how he was always leaving girls in beds — are ephemeral at this point. They don’t feel like they happened to him at all.

“I’ve been having a hard time,” Grey confesses, breaking eye contact. “What with deciding to move in together. It was all happening so fast. Things were feeling . . . out of my control.”

“So you go off and bang someone else,” Jaime snaps derisively. “Man, when did you become so fucking heartless? Did I miss the transformation, or have you always been like this?”

Grey scoffs before he glowers at the table. He realizes why he sought out Jaime now. There’s that personality trait that took him a long time to understand — being loyal to a fault. Jaime is a person who has tunnel vision, having never wanted anyone but Brienne, having no concept of self-doubt when it comes to this sort of thing. Jaime has been unerringly steady and faithful — when he waited for her, when she didn’t wait for him — his love for her surmounting years and distance. This, is
why he sought out Jaime.

“See, that’s the thing none of you understand about me,” Grey says, his own voice sounding strange and inhuman to his own ears. “I’ve always been this way. I’ve always been this person. Everyone loves to operate under this stupid, baseless belief that I can be better, because it comforts you all, right? But I cannot change myself.”

Jaime stares at him in a silent disbelief — and disgust. “She’s a really good person,” Jaime says coldly. “She’s — she’s done so much for you. You’re never going to do better than her.”

“No shit.”

Jaime tells him that he can’t believe this is how Grey treats someone he’s supposed to love. There is just no remorse. Grey looks down at the table — he doesn’t even bother sifting through the mess in his head to find the truth in the noise. Instead, he tells Jaime that eight years is a long time. Jaime is so pissed that he struggles to shove out the words — he struggles to even point at Grey in a straight line. He reminds Grey that Missandei is his friend, too. He mutters that he’s loved Brienne since they were kids, for so much longer than eight years. Grey cuts Jaime off when Jaime says that he’s only been with three people, including her, and three people is enough to erase all doubt in his mind — she’s the one. Grey despondently looks across the table, and he tells Jaime that he’s been with more than three people. He’s been with perhaps hundreds of people. He coldly says it’s not a numbers game. He tells Jaime that Jaime can’t keep peddling his paltry tragedies forever.

At that, Jaime stands up, pulls his wallet out of his back pocket, and throws down a few bills.

“Why did you even come to me?” Jaime asks, staring down at Grey. “You’re just that hellbent on ruining us, too? Screw you, man. Get the fuck over yourself, you fucking coward.”

Jaime leaves him to find his own way back to his car.

She tells Mossador that he and Mars were right — of course they were right — but that was never the thing that she wondered or doubted. She just needed to see it for herself. She tells him that she knows they were just trying to protect her — but at some point, that has just got to stop. She’s not so stupid and so fragile as how they treat her sometimes.

He corrects her. He tells her that’s no way in hell in any universe, that he thinks she’s stupid and fragile. He tells her it’s just that — you don’t want the people you love to feel pain. You want to spare the people you love pain. And Mars — when Mars gets emotional, he loses his mind a little bit and starts to say and do things in a counterproductive way. It’s just that they have lost so much and so many people already. Maybe that just causes the leftovers — the survivors — to hold on all the more tightly to what they still have, to one another. He understands why she did what she did. But — God — they are just such shitty parents.

“I look a lot like Mom,” Missandei says.

“God, you really do.” He laughs, hopelessly. “You’re not her, though. You’re grandma’s daughter.”

“Mom was grandma’s daughter, too.”

“Kiddo, you know what I fucking mean. Jesus.”
Missandei feels like this used up shell of a person, when it’s time to get off the phone with Moss. He has to go tuck his kids into bed — having missed dinner with the family because they were talking. He tells her to let him give their grandma and Mars a heads up on this, before she calls them and drops the bomb. She agrees, before she hesitantly tells him that she loves him. She doesn’t want to say it in a manipulative way. She wants to say it because it’s just something that is very true.

He kind of chuckles. “I love you too, lil’ Miss. Now, go get some sleep, you lil’ shit-stirrer. Tell your man I said hello.”

“It’s not quite that late here,” she says.

“Oh, right. I always forget about the time difference.”

She feels emotionally drained — but also good, now that the whole thing is off of her chest.

He heads right to her place because he knows that it’s only a matter of time before Jaime talks to Brienne — and it’s only a matter of time before Brienne talks to Missandei. At the very least, he owes her honesty.

She’s yawning and lying down on the couch, when he opens the door to her place. She hurriedly scrambles into sitting position, telling him that she hadn’t been expecting him. Her face is devoid of makeup. She’s wearing her gym clothes. And she’s tiredly smiling at him, holding out her hand to him, wiggling her fingers in the air. She tells him that it’s a nice surprise, to see him.

“Hey,” he says. “We need to talk.”

She feels like she just got the wind knocked out of her and she’s beyond feelings, as she stares at the empty space in her hands. Her heart is choking her — her body seeming to be processing this a lot faster than her brain can. Her breaths come out in steady, audible huffs. Her eyes feel sore — but she hasn’t even cried yet.

She almost can’t believe this. But why would he lie about this? Why would he think this is funny? Why is he doing this?

“Did you sleep with her?”

“No, I didn’t sleep with her.” He pauses, clenching his hands. “But I think I wondered.”

She blinks rapidly a few times. She says, “Okay, then.” She swallows the lump in her throat. And then she says, “Well, bye.”

He is silent.

“That’s what you want, right?” she says emotionlessly. “You want an escape. Well, take it. Take your out. I’m not going to beg you to stay. Bye.”
He doesn’t move, not right away at least.

“You think I don’t know you,” she says, anger flaring in her low tone. “But I know you. And I’m not going to sit here and cry and lose it, just so you can punish yourself with the sight of what you have done. I’m not going to help you prove to yourself that you’ve been right — this whole time — about who you are. You get to live with this — as is. I’m so sorry you thought my expectations for you were too much.”

She doesn’t break down crying — like she knows she will — until after he leaves. He leaves quietly and without putting up a fuss. He doesn’t fight for her or them. He doesn’t ask for forgiveness — not that she expected him to. He doesn’t even apologize — but she supposes that he wasn’t looking to atone.

It takes a few long minutes. She’s numb and stunned for a while. She anchors herself to the moment by digging her fingers into the couch cushion, as her heart just aches and throbs in her chest.

And nothing really instigates — nothing beyond her own confirmation — that she has lost him. And she is so blindsided. And maybe she should have begged him to stay. Her eyes become wet and her nose gets stuffed up and swollen, and she starts to lose it. She doesn’t want to fucking cry on the couch where he left her, so she tries to get up — but then — she doesn’t even know where to go — to do this.

He holds the plastic baggie in his hand, weighing it. It’s entirely surreal. He was kind of shocked to learn that Deek kept the same phone number, after all of these years. Grey pours one white tablet into his palm and stares down at it.

She takes in a calming breath as she listens to her grandma yell at her over the phone. What has started sad — apparently, after Mossador and Marselen told their grandma about Missandei’s trip, her grandma’s primary worry was that she wasn’t enough of a parent for Missandei that Missandei had to go seek out some ghost — turned to anger when her grandma learned about the money.

Her grandma tells her that they are going to steal her money — the kids won’t see a cent.

She tells her grandma that her memory of Missandei’s mother is more than twenty years old. People can change, can’t they?

Her grandma bitterly says that the nature of people don’t change. She says that their natures are ingrained. A person who has rotted on the inside doesn’t just turn sweet.

Missandei tells her grandma that — if Missandei is just wrong about this — then let her be wrong.
Let her make this mistake. Maybe after this, she will finally learn her lesson.

Her grandma scoffs, says she doesn’t understand the decisions that Missandei makes.

Missandei plainly points out to her grandma that her grandma had hidden those letters from her all those years. That wasn’t right, either. She deserved to see those letters, to make these decisions herself.

Her grandma doesn’t agree. She says that not only does she have the right to protect Missandei, but she has the responsibility to. Her grandma invokes the name of her dead grandfather and tells Missandei that he would be very disappointed at all the sneaking around she has done, all of the bad decisions she has made.

“Would he though? Would he?” Missandei says in English.

It’s one of a few random phrases that her grandma understands. In Low Valyrian, her grandma declares yes, he would be very disappointed. They have taught her better than this.

“Have you, though? Have you?”

He decided to stay in their apartment on a month-to-month basis by himself. He figures it would save him the trouble of moving all his shit in a hurry. And in regard to the high cost of rent — he’s not only paying the entire rent now; the landlord also hiked it up — he figures that he can splurge for the convenience. She’s not wrong. Maybe it doesn’t make sense to work so hard to make so much money and yet, never allow himself to enjoy it. Maybe it doesn’t make sense to stockpile money, in preparation from some disaster where the rug gets ripped out from under him. She used to always tell him he was so glass empty. She used to ask him why he just assumes the worst things will happen.

She used to ask him why he doesn’t sometimes think that good things will happen to him. He used to grin wryly at her, run his finger down the middle of her face, ask her why anything good would ever happen to him. It was a joke. The joke was that he was there, right there, in that moment, with her.

She’s being overfed. All of her friends are taking turns babysitting her. Brienne has spared her the trouble of explaining her new relationship status to Jhiqui, Doreah, and Clea. Lately, Missy’s heard a lot of angry bitching — it’s how they show that they are protective of her — about how none of them ever really liked him because he was so fucking weird and kind of stuck up and acted like he was better than them, always looking down his nose at them.

“Oh, he’s just tall and has really good posture. That’s how he looks at most people,” Missandei says, swiping sky blue nail polish across her middle finger.

It’s a joke. She thinks she’s funny. But she starts to doubt that when Doreah frowns sadly at her, looking at her like she’s some poor lovesick moron who is still obsessed with the asshole who didn’t treat her like the queen that she is.
When she told her grandma that she and Grey are not together anymore, her grandma immediately asked her what she had done. She told her grandma that she did nothing — to make this happen. Not really, at least. Sometimes, people just grow apart. Her grandma must have sniffed something in the air, because she suddenly called Grey despicable and said that he is like every other man. Missandei dully said that he is a good guy — he did not cheat — and let’s not forget that her grandfather was also one of the good ones. Not all men are bad.

Her grandma railed on her indiscriminate tastes.

She’s slated to be homeless soon. Naturally, she didn’t renew her lease. She really hasn’t been in the mood to look for a place. Brienne has already set up their spare room with an air mattress, has already lightly decorated it with a mirror. It would make Missy laugh — if she were capable of laughing these days — that her bestie is so on-the-nose about how transparently vain and superficial she is.

“Dude, there are more potatoes. Here. Eat more carbs,” Jaime says, shoveling the rest of gratin onto her plate. When she showed up for dinner, when she saw him wearing a #TeamMissandei shirt that he had printed up all special — she actually legitimately laughed and just about peed her pants a little bit. Brienne had almost cried in relief, self-consciously saying that the shirt is so insensitive and Jaime is so fucking stupid.

Rachel bumps into him on purpose, elbow into elbow, her ponytail swinging high on her head, her track jacket rustling. She reciting back to him the funniest lines from the movie, doing it in this goofy voice that’s not at all accurate to the characters. He goes along with it, laughing lightly. She’s interested in him — he knows that. Not only does he remember how this part goes — with women — she also explicitly said as much to him. He left his apartment for a movie because she asked him to — and because he hasn’t done much lately besides working, working out, eating, and falling asleep to the sound of a droning TV.

She’s told him that she finds him attractive. His back hits the railing lightly. Among the many ways the past keeps winding in on itself — he also remembers all the people in his past — all the women, all the family members, all the strangers, all the institutions, all the governments — who wanted to save him — who said they were going to — before failing dismally at it.

Rachel’s leaning over the railing, looking out at the dark water, standing right next to him, when she asks him if he would like to go back to her place.

His answer is one word, only syllable only.
Missy is depressed

She’s noticed she’s become a greater point of curiosity to men. She keeps getting stared at. She must be putting off those sad-and-depressed-come-at-me pheromones.

She is in her own little mental purgatory as she walks her groceries to her car when a random guy — one perhaps too young for her — lightly jogs up to her and asks her if she is done with her cart. She blinks hard and tells him that she is. She assumes he wants to take her cart out of convenience. But then he pushes it into the cart collection area before he walks back up to her. He tells her that a lady shouldn’t have to put her own cart away — and she almost laughs in his face, at the idea of being hit on when she looks like a dirty hobo — and then he tells her that she’s really pretty.

She has this flash of a memory — of her teenage self scoffing and literally throwing her hair over her shoulder, after some poor nice guy mustered up enough courage to tell a friend of her friend that he thought she was super cute and was wondering if she’d be interested in going to a school dance with him. Missandei’s seen Jhiqui brutally shoot down clubbers who bought her drinks — telling them that she’s a no-roofie zone. Missandei’s also listened to Phillip, at work, talk about how women are always making him feel like a would-be rapist, whenever he walks up to them to introduce himself.

She thanks the guy who took her cart away for her, shyly. She wishes him a nice day, before getting into her car and leaving.

She usually went grocery shopping with Grey — if she went grocery shopping at all. He used to take care of the buying her the essentials. She thinks it’s crazy, that she never noticed that there was an unending supply of toilet paper, tin foil, plastic wrap, and paper towels at her place. How could she not have noticed that he had been buying shit for her for years?

A random guy at the gym gets into her personal space and he introduces himself as Casey before he asks her if she’s a fan. She’s refilling her water bottle as she asks him what she’s supposed to be a fan of. He gestures to her top — to the graphic print of The Who. She states the obvious, which is God no. She isn’t a fan of this old white men band. She bought the tank at Forever 21 because it was on sale and she thought it was ironic — for a girl like her to wear a shirt like this. It’s like, a meta joke. It’s like, meta-racial humor.

She starts explaining it to him — but she can tell he’s not really listening to her. She hates having to explain her jokes. She feels they are generally pretty intuitive. Mostly. Sort of.

No, not really. Actually most people don’t seem to think she’s very funny. Her joke for that is that her beautiful face really holds her back from what could be a very lucrative career in comedy.

But, random gym guy Casey does laughs — in the end — without this knowing sense of subtext. That’s what she’s used to — that long moment of silence after she drops a punchline — before the guy shows her the universe, with just his eyes, and then he shoves out a short chuckle because he knows that she sometimes really needs a win.
She’s not used to this empty kind of polite laugh that’s coming out Casey’s mouth — what a laugh whore. She bids him farewell with her water bottle, as he’s asking for her number. She tells him thanks, but she has a boyfriend. She’s — unfortunately — one of those women who cannot tell the truth here. She always has to talk about her boyfriend — real or imagined — to get other guys off of her.

She feels like she’s underwater — it’s sensory deprivation — as all of these dudes that she’s known and is mildly acquainted with come out of the woodwork. She finds herself holding up her hand a lot, keeping them all at a distance, telling them all she’s not interested in dating — she’s getting better at that — at telling the truth. She has to. Some of the guys are her colleagues, and gossip spreads fast. They know that she’s single.

And she no longer believes in getting over heartbreak by forcing herself to fall in love again.

She shrieks and flips over, as drops of ice water falls off her bare skin, onto the beach towel. She grabs a fistful of sand, and she tries to throw it in his face. She hears Brienne braying laugh, somewhere behind her. Missandei screams, “Jaime!” before she shoots to her feet, before she runs after him so she can try to drown him in the ocean.

Jaime’s been amazing — amazing at intuiting her moods and her feelings — amazing at being a distraction. It’s not something she would have expected in her wildest dreams but — she supposes — that Jaime, of all people, best understands what she’s going through.

She’s really not meaning to do that Ursula Andress thing, when she climbs back out of the water — after having lost Jaime, that slippery fuck. But male gazes follow her body as her toes dig into the sand and pushes her body forward, away from the grip of the ocean. The looks are oppressive and scrutinizing and hungry. She crosses her arms over her chest.

Jaime runs up to her, dragging an oversized towel. He says, “Truce,” before he throws the towel around her body, covering it. He flips his hat around so that it shields his eyes from the sun. His face is expressionless but alert. He knowingly tells her, “People make jokes — but sometimes it really is hard being beautiful.”

A cold six-pack gets slammed on the coffee table, and they’re sitting on the floor — because Jaime has custody of the couch — there are no visitation rights on account of the whole them-not-talking-to-each-other thing. Drogo tells Grey that he hears that Grey’s friend count is back down to one — back down to the original gangsta — just like the good ol’ days when they were poor as dirt and constantly sitting in boats, beating pain into their bodies with this fun hobby that they shared.

“Bieber is so fucking judgemental, eh?” Drogo says, loudly cracking the bottle cap off his beer bottle. “His moral code when it comes to relationships is so black and white.” Drogo takes a swig of his beer. “That racist.” His mouth quirks into a smile.

Grey knows that Drogo had dinner with Jaime the night before, when he got into town. He knows that Drogo actually slept over at Jaime and Brienne’s, the night before. It’s this bit of subtext they are
“You know the annoying thing about people in relationships?"

“Nope,” Grey says, taking a swig of his beer, leaning his back against the wall. “Go ahead and enlighten me,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“People in relationships are always treating you like you’re a half person — that you’re not whole unless you’re a unit. They’re always assuming that you want the same shit they do — that routine and all of that arguing and negotiating on what you want to do versus what she wants to do. And it’s like — that life ain’t for everybody, you know? Sometimes it’s better to be alone. You get to do whatever the fuck you want, whenever you want to.”

Thus far, now that his life is filled with endless possibilities, he has become a hermit who only leaves his hovel to aimlessly run around town for hours — and to get food. He has become a person who ducks phone calls from his friends because he doesn’t want to listen to them talk about how worried they are about him — he doesn’t want them to try to cheer him up. Cheering people up is such a white concept. And he doesn’t want to even sit around on the phone explaining to fucking Addam and Daven why being cheered up is such a white person thing. It is just intrinsic and obvious and he shouldn’t need to work so hard to explain himself all the time, Jesus fuck. And if they aren’t talking about how he should take up some fucking random hobby — because white people love to have hobbies — then he has to listen to them talk about their lives. He doesn’t want to listen to them talk about what’s going on their lives, because their happy lives are — at the moment — inherently boring to him. Daven is all in love, too. And it’s the worst thing in the fucking world because that asshole is always talking about how amazing Kara is. Kara is an art teacher. She is not curing cancer. Daven needs to fucking stop talking about her like she’s fucking Gandhi.

Of course, Grey never actually says these things to his friends. It would really hurt their feelings. And then he’d have to wade through the inconvenience of listening to them cry at him and tell him that what he said made their hearts hurt. He doesn’t even have time for that shit. He has no one to share his horrible opinions and secret thoughts with anymore. God, she was so non-judgemental. This is something he was bad at actively remembering — about her — when they were together.

Lately, Grey’s done absolutely nothing new, he has tried nothing new, he’s done very little scheming, and he has made no one laugh at his morbid jokes — because there’s nobody around forcing him to be a human being. Drogo was only let in the door because he didn’t give Grey a choice. He just showed up already drunk and started being loud. Drogo tells Grey that he himself is no good at being faithful to women. It might be something Drogo inherited from his father — but then, that’s a crock of bull. Such behavior is conditioned and learned, not hereditary. At some point, they all just have to own up to their own shit. His problem with women is just this ongoing thing. His mom and Lydia keep telling him that he’ll grow out of it — more reassuring themselves than they are him. But he’s heading toward his thirties — they are all heading into their thirties — and it just hasn’t worked out for Drogo. He can see his mom incrementally lose esteem for him — when he looks into her eyes. Drogo tells Grey that not everyone is like Jaime. Not everyone finds the love of their life or their soulmate or whatever it’s called.

“Sometimes, some of us are just stuck . . . wandering,” Drogo says. And then he leans over and snatches up the plastic baggie at the corner of the coffee table, bouncing around the five tablets in the bag. “She was such a fucking hurricane sometimes, wasn’t she?” Drogo says, “Missandei,” he adds unnecessarily, clarifying. “One time, she and I fought because she got so pissed at me for making you drink too much. She’s such a fucking bitch sometimes.”
Grey brings his knees up to his face. He sinks his face down. He hasn’t seen her in two months. He’s been counting the days — the hours, really. He’s been thinking that he’s been seeing her everywhere. She’s been haunting him because she has touched everything. He’s been waiting for this pain to go away.

“My problem is that I hate myself,” he tells Drogo, talking into his lap. “And I love her.”

“It’s not too late to tell her that you’re sorry,” Drogo says, gently.

“I regret letting you through the door,” Grey mumbles into his lap. “I thought you’d do better than bring this first-level basic reverse-psychology bullshit, D.”

He feels Drogo’s hand come down onto his shoulder. “Brother, we both know that I’m not pro-level like you are, when it comes to the fine and subtle art of psychological manipulation.” He laughs. “I felt really bad calling her a bitch. I almost used the c-word, too. But I couldn’t bring myself to, you know. Because my moms are gay.”

She tells Terri that her grandmother alternates between telling her that this is all her fault — that she should have been quieter and more womanly and let Grey shine more; Men do not like to feel emasculated and/or worthless — and viciously bitching him out, calling him morally bereft and a liar. There has also been a lot of attention paid to her advanced, spinster age — Missandei’s, not her grandma’s. There aren’t many Naathi women in their enclave in Myr who are twenty seven and unmarried. Being twenty seven and unmarried would have been inconceivable in the old country. Her grandma has been calling him a thief — who robbed Missandei of her youth, of her best years.

“How does it make you feel? When you hear that?” Terri asks.

“I love my grandma,” Missy says. “She’s a badass motherfucker who’s the matriarch of a family. She kept shit together. And she’s from another generation that didn’t have the same opportunities that I had, or have. And I’m well aware that the opportunities that I have are largely due to her and the rest my family. I owe her so much. She’s sacrificed so much for all of us. She’s such a strong woman. And she’s very progressive for her age.” Missandei sighs, wringing tissue paper in her hands. “But it makes me feel bad when she says stuff like that to me.” She stares off at the wall, trying to compose herself. “It hurts my feelings.”

Over dinner, Rachel tells him this long-winded story about how hilarious her dad is. She tells him they were at a steakhouse for family dinner and the waitress comes up to the table to get their orders. Well, Rachel’s dad ordered the teriyaki steak dinner because he really loves teriyaki. He will eat teriyaki anything. Except fish. Her dad isn’t really into fish.

“I’m sorry,” Grey says mildly. “I don’t understand why this is funny?”

“Oh! Sorry! So anyway, so you’ve been to the Cattle Steakhouse, right?”

“No. I haven’t,” he says.
“Oh! Wow! We should totally go together! You’d love it. They give you peanuts as you wait for your table and you just break open and eat the peanuts — and they totally let you just drop the shells on the floor. They must have so much to clean up at the end of each night. And like, every forty minutes, there’s like, line-dancing —”

“What is line-dancing?”

“Oh my God!” she says, laughing at him. “What planet are you from? I’m joking! We should go line-dancing, too! It’s super easy. People just kind of line-up together and you move around —” she lightly demonstrates for him “ — in unison. Don’t worry, Grey. You totally don’t have to be a good dancer to go line-dancing.”

“Wait, so what does this have to do with your dad?”

“Oh, right! So each entree you get at Cattle Steakhouse, you get a choice of soup or salad. So the waitress was like, ‘Soup or salad?’ to my dad. And he was totally like, ‘What makes it super?’ Because he thought it was a super salad. Not a soup or salad.” Rachel giggles and lightly slaps the table, recalling the memory. “God, my brothers and I just cracked up. That is totally our dad. Our dad is hilarious.”

He forces out a strained smile. He cannot bring himself to laugh at this.

“What’s your dad like?”

“Oh, I dunno. He’s probably dead.”

She looks horrified. “Oh my God! I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to bring it up!”

“It’s fine,” he says, shrugging. “You didn’t know. And it’s not a big deal to me anymore.”

She’s looking at him with such empathy in her eyes. “How did it happen? Was it cancer?”

“No. I’m not sure. I imagine one of his business partners killed him because he owed a lot of people a lot of money.”

He is just blowing her mind. He can tell. “Oh my God!” she says. “Is your father’s murderer in jail?”

“This was in the Summer Isles,” he says. “It’s . . . law enforcement was different. And I actually don’t know if he’s really dead or not. I just assume he is. I haven’t seen him since I was a little kid.”

“Oh my God, you poor thing. I can’t believe things like that happen to people.”

He shrugs. “Well, it does.”

Brienne and Jhiqui advise her to not do anything rash — don’t make any big decisions right now — not while she’s in this mindset.

But Missandei quits her job. She’s been unhappy in it for a while now. Life’s too fucking short to be stuck in shit that makes her miserable.

She momentarily has a freakout, one in which she calls her brother Marselen. Up until then, she had
been on awkward thin ice with him because of the whole parents thing — but she calls him sobbing and telling him that she’s so sorry for dropping the ball like this, like such a fucking irresponsible failure. She was just getting sick of her stupid job and the impossible things they were demanding of her. And she knows that’s such a stupid young person thing to say and do — to just quit because she didn’t find her work emotionally fulfilling anymore. She knows she’s an idiot. He can go ahead and tell her off now.

She wishes she could touch him and hug him through the phone — when he gruffly tells her to just get on a plane and come home. He tells her she doesn’t need much money to live — not if she’s living with him. He tells her he’ll take care of her, of course he’ll take care of her.

And she can’t handle it. She just can’t. Her jaw hurts, and she can’t even speak, not one word. He tells her not to worry about grandma’s bills — don’t worry about anything for a while. They will get through this. She notices the word choices. They, not she. Us, not you.

He tiredly lifts his hand to wave at her, when he sees Tanja, from marketing, flagging him down from behind her entree salad, on the other side of the restaurant near the office, during the lunch rush. Everyone fucking wants a piece of him. He left a meeting late, and she has already ordered food, not waiting for him. He pockets his phone and takes the seat across from her. He lightly coughs when the server shows up. He says that he’d like the turkey sandwich on wheat. And water is a fine beverage for him.

Tanja quickly finishes punching out an email on her phone before she sets it back down on the table and goes back to her salad, spearing a grape tomato, wiping off some of the dressing against the edge of her plate.

“Have you thought about joining some meetup group or some club?” she asks.

“I’m not joining a club,” he says dully.

“Grey, they’re not all as geeky as you’re thinking. I was looking at this weekend hiking club, for instance. There are all sorts of skill levels — so you can join a group of advanced hikers and go see cool stuff that’s hard to get to, with like-minded people — or maybe you can get into trail-running. That seems like something you’d be into.”

“I already do trail-running,” he tells her. “It’s great. But I don’t see why I need to do it with people I don’t know.”

“To meet new people, people with the same interests that you have.”

“Why would I want to do that? People are so annoying.”

Tanja learned that he and Missandei broke up because he told her about it — because Tanja was in the habit of constantly asking after Missandei, asking how Missandei was doing and what they did over the weekend. Tanja wanted to squeeze out every last pulpy detail from him about it — but he has told her very little. It just didn’t work out. They want different things.

Tanja automatically took that to mean that Missandei wanted marriage and babies and was hounding him about it. He didn’t correct her. He kind of feels bad about the mischaracterization of Missandei. But he also didn’t want to spend so much time explaining shit to Tanja. It’s not too bad to let her
draw her own conclusions.

Tanja has repeatedly told him what he is feeling, with this surety that is just so off-base and insane that it loops back to accurate. She tells him he’s severely depressed, and he needs to do stuff to get his mind off of Missandei, for the sake of not wallowing in it all the time.

She downsizes her life immensely because she’s stupid and she wants to keep giving other people her money. Jaime and Brienne have no timetable in which she has to leave their house — that’s what they tell her, and she believes them because they’re such wonderful friends — but she knows that it’s probably a real drag to have a sad sack of a human being just tainting their love all the time. Plus, they can’t have living room sex, kitchen sex, garage sex, bathroom sex — or whatever else. Because she’s just pooping in their toilets or shoving her clothes into their washing machine or stuffing her face with the innards of barnyard animals at inopportune times — she’s always in the way of their love.

Sometimes, part of being a good friend is just peacing the fuck out. So she moves into a studio — much like the one she was living in during college. She moves into a studio in the suburbs because it’s cheaper to live out of the city. Her new place is sort of near a train line. Honestly, it’s a twenty-minute walk to the station, which isn’t horrible but it sure isn’t great. She carries around a pair of running shoes in her purse, so that she can swap out her shoes at the office.

She takes a significant pay cut and starts a new job at a small agency, a start-up. She’s told that the hours can run long and there’s sometimes work on the weekends — but she has this hope that it will be really rewarding. They produce short documentaries — mostly for big companies and their corporate giving initiatives. She’s in charge of localization — ensuring that content is not just simply translated, but actually culture-specific. Her team crosses over with market research, naturally. And that’s an aspect of the job she’s very familiar with. This industry or this kind of work — not as much. She’s been learning a lot — specifically about the different laws in different countries, in order to send a film crew or get access to certain places. Both Jaime and Brienne have found things in her new job to latch onto. They’ve been geeking out together.

This is the stuff they talk about, when they have dinner during the week, as they carefully avoid talking about Grey. Jaime’s been sore and upset about it. She doesn’t even want to know the details, because they will probably make her feel guilty — and she doesn’t need to compound the depression with guilt. On the sly, she has told Brienne that she doesn’t need Jaime to come to her defense, not at such a high cost. He and Grey have been such good friends for so long.

Brienne has told her that Grey and Jaime’s thing actually has very little to do with Missandei and Grey. And those two dumbasses will work it out — eventually.

Missandei’s new job doesn’t require her to wear business clothes — or even business casual. Most people are her age or even younger — and they’re all showing up in jeans.

She wastes so many hours on the train every day because she doesn’t want to pay to park downtown every day. But she consoles herself with the fact that she wouldn’t be doing anything else productive with those lost hours anyway. She can people-watch on the train.

She’s such a blubbery idiot. But she cries at least a little bit — every time a pair of her shoes gets sold. She sighs miserably, whenever she has to print out postage and tape up boxes.
When she shows up, she’s eating an apple and wishing it was a donut. Drogo gives her his fist to bump. He hands her a bottle of clear liquid — she thinks it’s water until she uncaps it and starts gulping it down. She chokes when she realizes it’s vodka. She coughs spastically, as he hits her repeatedly on the back, looking around at the crowd of people, as he quietly and quickly tells her to, “Be cool, be cool, be cool. Fuck. You really have no chill right now.”

“Drogo!” she says, still coughing into her hand. “Can you like, warn me next time?” She clears her throat. “It’s nine in the morning, man. Should I be worried about you?

When he sees a race volunteer holding up Vaseline on a fat popsicle stick, he nearly bowls over a fifty-year-old woman getting to it. He’s at mile twenty-two, and he cannot go another step forward unless he can smear this shit on his body. He gasps in pain as he takes the stuff and rubs it in between his legs. He doesn’t even know why he once thought this — running a marathon — was a good idea. He’s such a fucking moron.

There’s currently a story on the news about this woman who was kept underground for over twenty years, repeatedly raped by her father. When he read the story, one of his first thoughts was that that woman really had it bad — she really had it way more shitty than he ever did. There was a stupid childish part of him that wanted to reach out and write her a letter or something — to tell her that he’s so sorry she went through that and he admires her for surviving — but then, why would a fucking stranger even fucking care that he was thinking about her?

Barristan wants to give him another promotion. They keep joking around about how Barristan is probably grooming him to take over, after Barristan retires. They all just keep telling Grey that he’s doing such a good job, and they want to reward him for it because they want him to stay with the company.

And he can’t handle it. He just despises himself so much sometimes. He’s so fucking idiotic. He doesn’t even know what his fucking problem is. He can’t even fucking handle all of this upward mobility, all of this white shit that is just being laid at his feet. The more that he receives — the more pissed he feels over it all. He was sold these lies — about the how his life was gonna lay out. As Jaime would say — it’s all massive #GreyProbz shit.

People who have run marathons have told him that when he crosses the finish line, he will feel so high. He will feel like he has conquered the whole world.

He actually crashes when he finishes. He falls to the ground. His body is just wrecked and beaten. A race volunteer — a young kid who can’t be more than twenty years old — runs up to him excitedly and tries to help him get back up on his feet. Grey grunts and just shoves the kid backwards, before waving him off and telling him it’s all good.

Just . . . fucking let him crawl on his bleeding hands and knees for a bit.

And then he bends over, pressing his forehead to the hot asphalt. And he’s kind of crying because
it’s just all so fucking unbelievable. A lot of people are in tears around him — so the sight of him doing this must not be that strange.

“Man, the fuck?” Drogo is forcing his presence — and his support. Grey feels himself being lifted up. “Jesus, get ahold of yourself, Dovoeddi. Jesus Christ, you’re a mess. Fuck. You don’t want to be such a fucking mess when you say hello to a beautiful woman.”

When he lifts his face up, he sees her standing there, right behind Drogo. She is still so beautiful. It punches him right in the gut — even though he had been expecting her. She had texted him. God, he would just kill himself for her.

“I’ve never once asked you to,” Missandei says, after she plucked the thought from his brain, blinking back her wet eyes. She sniffs. “Thanks for letting me come see you finish the race,” she says. She shudders a little bit, glancing at his bleeding knees. She grabs the bottle of water from Drogo and starts wetting a napkin with it — before handing it over to Grey.

“Thanks,” he says, wincing when the napkin hits his hands. He realizes it's an alcohol-soaked napkin, not water.

“Sub-three,” she says, suddenly grinning widely. “Sub-three, baby!”
Anjelica, who is not terrible, anticipated/requested post breakup interaction. That is in here. But I don’t think it’s the kind you were thinking of, boo. Haha.

It’s really pointless and childish to pretend like they don’t know each other, so he kind of waves hello to Jaime, who is also standing around in baggage claim, waiting for his suitcase to come out of the shoot. They were on the same flight. They didn’t do that on purpose. They sat on opposite ends of the plane.

It’s just a four-day weekend, but two of those days require some serious backpacking gear, so he had to check in a bag. Some of his gear is actually Missandei’s gear — stuff that got mixed together in their pile, from before the breakup — just frankly stuff that he unwittingly stole from her — stuff that still sort of smells like her if he searches hard enough.

He almost jumps out of his skin when he hears, “You want to share a cab? Or an Uber?”

He looks over at a familiar face. He hasn’t spoken to Jaime in months.

“Holy crap, my boys!” Addam says, bouncing down his front steps, opening up his arms, walking toward them, wearing sunglasses. “As I live and breathe.”

Jaime laughs softly, standing next to him after the Uber driver departs, right before Addam ducks down a bit and rams his shoulder into Jaime’s stomach, lifting him off his feet. Addam whoops, spinning Jaime around, clapping him on the ass, rambling about how much fun they are about to have together. Once he drops Jaime, he starts to advance on Grey — and Grey starts to back away, saying that he doesn’t want to be picked up. A soft whoosh of air gets ejected out of his lungs, when Addam slams a hug into him. He lightly pats Addam on the back, awkwardly aware that Addam has missed him more than he has missed Addam. But then, Addam is melodramatic. He keeps saying that the boys are back in town. It’s one of those references that Grey doesn’t understand. He can pick out that it’s a pop culture thing, but that’s about it. It’s probably a super white reference.

Standing at the front stoop, Grey sees Drogo, barefoot and holding up a little girl with a mop of red hair, who’s two, maybe three years old, in his arms. Addam’s daughter.

“Fuck!” Jaime cries out, sidestepping Addam to look into the house. “Am I fucking seeing shit or is that fucking Clegane? I thought you couldn’t come, dude!”
Sandor’s deep chuckle reverberates. “Surprise.”

Addam slaps Jaime’s ass again. “Bro, can you cool it with the bad words? I don’t want my kid talking like you.”

Pippa takes off her dress — it makes him so uncomfortable, and he wishes she’d just put it back on — but he doesn’t want to be the kind of guy who tells a little girl to cover up her body because he thinks she should be ashamed of it. At least — not a girl this young. She wouldn’t be able to comprehend the greater context of it all.

She hands him a crumpled piece of paper and tells him it’s a spider. He looks down at the ball — it’s most definitely not a spider — but he refrains from bursting her bubble because she’s being so serious about it. Instead he asks her if it’s a friendly spider or a mean spider. She tells him it’s a nice spider. Her baby-like babbling is pretty difficult to understand, and Addam is impressively tapped in and in-tune with his kid, understanding all of the crazy shit she says.

She spontaneously almost takes a tumble forward into the tile floor, and it nearly gives him a fucking heart attack. He immediately shoots his hand out and grabs her shoulder, straightening her and keeping her upright — and his brain is going beserk and shouting that he didn’t mean to touch or grab someone else’s child — but he quickly realizes that he is being fucking nuts. He had to grab her. Or else she would’ve eaten ground. She looks momentarily shell-shocked at the turn of events — but then she cracks up and clutches onto his pants, trying to keep her balance. She asks him what his name is again. He stiffly tells her his name is Grey. Um. Uncle Grey, apparently.

“That’s a color!” she says, a smile growing on her face, pleased when he nods, when he affirms that she made the correct connection.

“You’re a little jokester, aren’t you?” he says, touching her face. “Like your dad.” His hand looks massive on her tiny face.

“Say bye-bye to your Uncle Grey and give him a kiss, baby,” Addam says, coming up from behind and scooping her up. Addam holds his daughter up to Grey’s face like she’s a prop. He can see her fine little freckles this close. They are both hesitating over this. “Come on,” Addam says from behind. “Give him a smooch already.”

He reluctantly gives her his cheek. She smears her spit on it, before she pulls away, before he smiles at her, before she laughs at him. She’s really cute. He clears his throat when Addam pulls her back, propping her up on his forearm. Grey says, “You shouldn’t make her kiss people if she doesn’t want to kiss them.”

“Oh, yeah. I know, man,” Addam says. “But — there’s a whole other thing to this. I think she’s too used to seeing white people — because, you know — it’s Casterly Rock. She almost punched Gloria in the face at my parents’ house the other day when Gloria bent over to help her pick up a toy — Gloria is their housekeeper. This girl is totally freaked out and a jerk to non-white people. She sometimes cries her butt off in public whenever a non-white person inquires about her or asks her if she’s having a good day. It’s so embarrassing. So yeah, it’s like — no, I shouldn’t force her to kiss you — but it’s also like — dude, I don’t wanna raise a bigot. She hangs out a lot with my mom and dad, too. I’m trying to counter whatever crap she’s picking up from them when I’m not around.” Addam shrugs, bouncing her in his arms. “Speaking of, you gotta go get dressed before Grammy
and John come to pick you up!” he says in a sort of sing-song voice, addressing his daughter.

“But I want to stay with you, Daddy!” Pippa whines and kicks her feet against Addam’s stomach. “Can I please come with you, Daddy?”

“Baby, you break my heart when you say these things to me.” Addam frowns. “Aren’t you excited to sleepover at Grammy’s? I bet you she’s having Armando make you some pony cookies. You want to see and eat these cookies, don’t you?”

She’s hilariously torn. She’s thinking about it. Cookies. Or Addam.

“Bear-bear, do you want to go naked? I don’t really care. But the last time you left the house without your clothes on, you were so sad and embarrassed when people looked at you. Remember?”

Addam sighs and looks at Grey. “She’s also been real big into this phase where she hates her clothes, and she just strips down to her skivvies all the time. I’m trying to get her to knock this crap out before she hits puberty.” Addam grabs onto his daughter’s tiny hand, turning his attention back to her. “I know you take after your mommy, who loves to take her clothes off too. But you gotta understand that I want you to grow up to be a respectable lady, ya know?” He sighs again, looking to Grey again. “Parenting is hard, dude.”

They’re lounging around on this massive white sectional sofa that has crayon drawings on it — as they wait for Daven to show up — after Pippa’s been picked up for the next couple days by Addam’s mom and her driver. Jaime is picking and choosing what he wants to eat off of a cheese and fruit platter that Addam said he had laid out himself. Addam stretches his arms out wide, cracking his neck. He mutters that his body isn’t what it used to be. “Like, what are the chances you think we will die on this trip?” he says.

Drogo stuffs a piece of cheese in his mouth. He says, “I think you mean, what are the chances I will topple over the kayak with my fat ass and kills us all?”

“It’s all about equal weight distribution, bro. You gotta pair up with Sandor. I’m with Dav. Obviously Jaime’s with Grey.” Addam laughs. “You guys were always the runts. We used to give you guys so much shit for being so skinny. But look at you now.”

“Didn’t you run a marathon not too long ago?” Sandor asks, around a toothpick.

He and Jaime are, more or less, about the same in skill level, so it’s basically a coin flip for who’s sitting stern and who’s sitting bow. They trim the boat a bit bow light because of tailwinds.

Grey tells Jaime to sit stern. He figures that it’d be good for Jaime to have an unobstructed view of the water because he likes to take pictures and post on social media to death.
He squats down and starts working on a fire, as the other guys unpack the boats and drag them onto shore. He takes cotton balls that he’s soaked in beeswax out of his pocket — kind of inspired by Missandei’s chapstick on tissue paper method.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Drogo mutters, breathing hard, walking past carrying a cooler. Daven trails behind, his beard swaying — it’s back to epic proportions. “You couldn’t do something normal like strippers, steak, and booze?” Drogo tosses over his shoulder, at Daven. “You’d rather have a Revenant moment, out here in the middle of fucking nowhere?”

“Drogo,” Daven says patiently. “It’s so gorgeous out here. How can you look at these old-growth trees and the ocean water and these epic mountains and be angry?”

“Easy,” Jaime says, grunting as he carries two big packs of beer up the hill they’re perched on — a completely unnecessary food item. “Drogo is not the biggest fan of the ocean.”

“The ocean is fucking scary,” Drogo snipes. “It’s like, the fucking ocean.”

He waves Daven off, when Daven offers him the joint. Daven holds it between his lips and he shrugs, grinning before he moves on and offers the joint to Drogo, who takes it.

They’ve spent so much of their time so far just reminiscing, as they wait for the sun to set — Daven has told them he wants to spend the night looking up at the stars. They keep remembering stories about each other, and they keep walking through the past. They’ve talked at length about how ridiculous and pathetic Jaime was, during that period when Brienne broke up with him — it’s this funny story now, of course — because things ended up working out for Jaime and Brienne. Jaime snickers along with all of Addam’s recollections, the way his bedroom used to smell, the way he dropped out of school and made all of them worry about whether he’d end up becoming idly rich, like Addam.

Drogo admits that he didn’t like them very much, when they first met. Because he thought they were racist. Jaime admits that he had the biggest man-crush on Drogo the second time they met. The first time was totally racist. Jaime talks about how he hated Sandor when they first met, because he thought Sandor was trying to steal his girlfriend. Sandor talks about how he hated Jaime when they first met, because he thought Jaime was physically abusing his friend. Daven says that he had no ill-feelings at any point for any of them. He found them all great and friendly and likeable when they first met.

“Oh my God,” Jaime mutters, pulling the bill of his hat down so he doesn’t have to look at Daven. “My least favorite thing about you is that you like everyone.”

“I thought Grey was so cool, when we first met,” Addam pipes up. “You had this chill about you, bro. Like nothing bothered you. Nothing affected you. Nothing ever touched you,”

“I was totally on drugs the whole time, man,” Grey says. “That’s why.”

There are things he remembers too. He remembers resentment and anger — at what they represented to him. Now he knows how he felt about them was his own feelings, being projected. He remembers
isolation. He remembers avoidance — he used to tell himself it was for the convenience of it all. People are more trouble than they are worth. Now he knows a lot of what he did was fear-driven. He can’t be hurt again if he doesn’t let people get close enough to hurt him.

“Alright,” Jaime says lightly. “Let’s just pretend he didn’t just kill the mood.”

Because it’s his party, and he’ll eat what he wants to — they are cooking hot dogs and burgers. Daven says he’s a simple man — he doesn’t need anything fancy. He just wants to hang out in the woods, on a beach, with his best buds in the whole world. Drogo nearly has an epileptic fit at that — ignoring the heartfelt comment, focusing on the food part — saying that it’s not about being fancy. He’s definitely not fucking fancy. But whatever. He’s fine eating hot dogs and burgers. One of each, please.

Drogo usually is their grillmaster, but he’s refusing to cook. On principle. He’s being an asshole. Sandor — who is always so above all of their petty squabbling shit — is manning the grill.

“Dude, don’t get ash in our food, Clegane,” Jaime says, planting his hand on Sandor’s shoulder to peer at the grill. Jaime has been backseat-driving Sandor to death. A normal person would already have gone insane and punched Jaime in the face already.

“I’m not,” Sandor says gruffly, the red tip of his cigarette glowing behind a cloud of smoke.

Daven tells them that he’s totally a puss. But he just loves his wife so much. He’s only been apart from her for less than half of a day, and he already misses her. He tells them he can’t wait to be able to call Kara his wife and to have it actually be true. He tells them that he knows he’s totally irritating, and he sounds so sentimental, but he doesn’t care. It’s how he feels.

Jaime tells Daven that he’s always had the heart of a poet, if not always the eloquence. Jaime admits that he misses Brienne, too.

“I miss Pippa,” Addam offers. “It’s really aggravating that there’s no cell service out here. I’ve never not been able to wish her a good night. It kinda sucks that I’m breaking my streak with you assholes. But I comfort myself with the fact that she probably does not care as much as I do about this.”

“I miss Ayla,” Sandor says.

“I miss my old body,” Drogo says. “I was so hot.” He immediately raises his hands up to shield his face from their crumpled beer cans. “What?” he says. “I don’t have anyone who loves me. I don’t see why I’m getting punished for it.”

“Bro, you’re still hot,” Addam says, chuckling. “Don’t worry. There’s just more of you to love.”

Drogo tilts his head to the side. “Thank you?”

Grey can’t help but notice that they automatically skip over him — in these moments.
He clears his throat. “I miss stuff, too,” he says, with effort, trying not to roll his eyes when five pairs of eyes fly to his face in surprise. Addam, in particularly, is looking at him like such a baby dog who just got a fucking bone and it’s — just too much. “I miss lots of stuff. Sometimes. All the time.”

“You wanna be more specific, Grey?” Sandor asks, chuckling.

“I know what you fuckers want me to say,” Grey mutters. “So that’s why I’m not saying it. You’re such jerks, and you don’t deserve the satisfaction.” He sighs. “But — even though I’m not saying it — it doesn’t make it not true.”

“Grey,” Sandor says, voice so deep. “I’m on the other side of the planet most of the time, trying to bring potable water to really remote villages. You’re being a bit self-involved. I’m not up-to-date on your situation. I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

“Good try, Clegane,” Grey mutters. “I’m not biting.”

Jaime laughs evilly, before sinking his teeth into a hot sweet potato that Sandor had roasted in foil.

“What does it even cost you, to tell a simple truth to people you trust?” Sandor says. “What are you giving up, when you say how you actually feel? And what are you protecting in yourself — when you shut down and shut people out?”

“Oh, snap!” Addam says, loudly snapping his fingers. “You just got told, son!”

Jaime calls it going full-immigrant, as he squats down low to the ground, mocking Grey. The fire turns his face yellow and gold. Jaime is a little bit drunk. Jaime makes a face and says it’s so fucking uncomfortable. He asks what’s so wrong about sitting in a fucking chair.

Grey wiggles his body around in the lawn chair. He says there’s nothing really wrong with chairs. Well, some of them are little awkward. But sometimes there are places where there are no chairs to sit on — and then what is he supposed to do? Stand around the whole time looking like a fucking dickwad? What’s he supposed to do? Sit on the dirty ground and catch AIDS? Squatting is like, a built-in seating alternative. He tells Jaime that Jaime just doesn’t have the fucking muscles or the flexibility for it.

Alone, in their two-person tent, with the rainfly unattached so they can look at the sky and stars — a decision they might come to regret in the morning or the middle of the night — with the sound of Sandor or Daven’s heavy snoring punctuating the drone of bullfrogs in the distance — Jaime sighs and quietly says to him, “Look, we all say shit we don’t mean in the heat of the moment. I don’t really believe you’re heartless. I know you’re not heartless.”

“I’m sorry I said you peddle tragedies,” Grey says softly, rustling his sleeping bag as he rolls in place so he can face Jaime a little bit. He’s been saving up this apology. He already knows what to say because at this point, it’s scripted in his head. “It’s not true at all. I only said it because I knew it would hurt you to hear it. I knew it was one of your insecurities. I was angry. And I just wanted to
hurt you, in that moment.”

Jaime expels a quick burst of air from his lungs, something in between a short laugh and a sad exhale. “It sucked to hear it. You made me believe you. Your opinion of me matters a lot.”

“Man, I’m sorry. That was shitty.”

“Yeah, it’s cool,” Jaime says. “I forgive.”

“I’ve missed you,” Grey says. “I’ve missed our friendship. I’ve been so bored. Other people are so boring.”

“Word, boo. Other people are super fucking boring. I’ve resorted to hanging out with my brother all the time — because there’s nobody else I can stand.”

“Besides Brienne,” Grey adds.

“Oh, well, duh. Besides Brienne.”

“Other people are so annoying, right? They love to talk so much — but they’re not saying anything. I mean, I know you talk a lot, too. But you’re funny and the stuff you say makes me laugh and think. So it’s different.”

“I mean, you just have really good taste in people. That’s what I’m hearing.” Jaime pauses. “I know this might sound totally empty — but you know — I feel like I get you. I really do. I mean, this is actually an opinion I’ve secretly harbored for years. But I figured you’d slap me in the face, if I ever said it out loud, that I get your struggle. I mean — you and I — we’re apples and oranges, right? But we’re both still fruit. And other people — they’re like . . . shit, what are they like?” Jaime wiggles around in his own bag so that he can free his hand. He points up to the apex of the tent, through the mesh, at the stars in the dark purple sky. “They’re like Martian rocks. Or ice from the rings of Jupiter. Like, it’s not even the same planet, let alone the same species.”

“Okay, see?” Grey says softly. “This is what I mean. You talk so much. But it’s mostly interesting, funny stuff.”

“Thanks, man. That’s sweet. I think you’re funny, too. I mean, probably not as funny as I am, but really, who is?” Jaime pauses for effect. “But you crack me up all the time.”

“People don’t generally get that I’m hilarious.”

“Other people are fucking sheep.”

“It’s like, I say stuff, and it’s like — dry humor — or dark — or it’s from the gallows —”

“But instead of laughing, people just stare at you like you’re this weak, sad, pathetic little child that will break if you’re mishandled,” Jaime interjects. “Yep. Totally. And they don’t get how squishy they are. Like, you’ve murdered a puppy, dude. So it’s like, no one needs to patronizingly treat you like you need a hug, like you’re so delicate and weak. You’ve killed a motherfucking puppy as a baby, man.”


“I know, man. I know. I feel that way, too. Except instead of, you know, an awesome ability to murder animals — what’s going through my head is like — ‘Yo, why you acting like you so swoll, bro? Especially since I’m rich, bitch. Do you know what my fucking name is? I’m untouchable. I
can *buy* you. And your whole family! And make you do whatever shit I want! Fucking beneath me — this sorry ass shit.”

"Wow."

Jaime chuckles. “Technically, my dad is rich, bitch. But I figure if a moment requires such action, I’ll have to go like, sell my soul and ask him for some money.”

Grey laughs softly. “How often do you go around saying, ‘I’m rich, bitch,’ to yourself?”

“Man, every time *some bitch* cuts in front of me in line at Starbucks. I fucking hate that.”

He’s drifting off to sleep — only half of his body warm, only due to the heat emanating off of Jaime — when Jaime starts wriggling around again. Grey is shocked when — in Summer Tongue — Jaime tells him that he has to go to the toilet. It’s rudimentary, and Jaime’s accent is godawful, but the words are clear and familiar.

Jaime gives him a wolfish grin before ducking out the tent to go pee.

“The fuck, man?” Grey says, when Jaime crawls back into the tent.

“My firm sprung for a Rosetta Stone,” Jaime explains. “I dunno why I took High Valyrian in school. I never fucking use it, and I’ve already forgotten how to speak it. But yeah — I mean, I know I have the vocabulary of a little kid, and I sound like such a white guy when I’m trying to speak Summer Tongue — but it’s been something my clients have gotten a real kick out of. It makes them feel less stressed out. And it helps for them to see me prostrating myself and struggling with language for a while — they loosen up and it becomes easier for them to tell me things, explain stuff that they might otherwise be embarrassed to tell their lawyer.”

“You know, if you ever need help —”

“Oh, I know I can ask you.”

“I was going to say you should hit up Missandei,” Grey says, biting down on his bottom lip momentarily. “She’s really a fantastic teacher.” He clears his throat. “She also speaks Summer Tongue better than I do.”

“Oh, I know that, too,” Jaime says. “We hang out every now and then, and we have really slow, really simple conversations together. For like, fifteen minutes before I get fed up with not being able to say everything I want to say.” Jaime laughs.

“That sounds really nice,” Grey says lightly. “I’m jealous.”

Jaime bops his shoulder against Grey’s, to get more of his attention. Then he says, “Hey, I’m sorry I picked her over you. I’m sorry it came down to that — and that I haven’t been a friend to you lately.”

“Don’t be sorry for picking her. I’m glad you did. Not for masochistic, self-punishing reasons. But because I’m glad you guys are friends.”

“Missy’s a banana.”
“Huh?”

“Remember? I’m an apple. You’re an orange. Missy’s a banana. Brienne’s, um, maybe a grape. Drogo’s a pineapple. Sandor’s maybe a celery stick. Dav’s like, maybe a loaf of bread. And Addam is — well, he wavers. He’s like, sometimes an Otter Pop, other times, this rich clown that has no filter.”

Addam has one of those fancy doors that doesn’t require a key — just an access code. She’s shifting her bags around, balancing her computer case on her suitcase as she digs for her phone in her jacket, trying to find the text message with the code. Behind her, Brienne is reciting numbers.

It turns out Addam sent Brie the code, too.

Missandei punches in the password and the door’s motor whirs. The deadbolt clicks. She grabs the handle and twists, the massive door opening easily, like it’s floating on air.

Her heels click on Addam’s floors. She remembers him rambling about the layout of his house, in a phone call. She sticks her suitcase right in front of the kitchen, and she tells Brienne that she really needs to pee, running down the hallway, hopping over a child gate, opening doors, looking for a toilet.

Missandei swipes up the keys on the kitchen counter, as Brienne putters around upstairs, trying to find the room that Jaime left his stuff in. There’s a note that Addam had left for them — telling them where towels are, where extra sheets are, where the cleaning supplies are, the wireless password, the controls for the heater in pool. Missy looks around at the expansive house and shakes her head.

He’s sticking her in the pool house — it’s something that he was apologetic about, because he didn’t have enough bedrooms in his house. Over the phone, he also told her that he figured she’d be more comfortable there anyway, because it’s more private. His words and their subtle meaning kind of lingered in the air. She had assured him that it’s all gravy — don’t worry about it. She’s glad he’s awesome enough to let her stay at his place — save money and all that.

The pool house is bigger than her entire apartment. It has a little dinette and a full kitchen. It has a king sized bed. It has a humongous bathroom. A part of her feels frankly uncomfortable, in such crazy excess.

“Babe,” Missandei says, when Brienne shows up at the door, already spreading a thick layer of sunscreen on her face. “Fucking Casterly Rock, am I right?”

When Brienne asks her what she wants to do, Missandei says she wants to sit quietly, maybe read a
book, and not touch anything, lest she accidentally breaks a diamond-encrusted pepper grinder. Missandei admits that she feels uncomfortable being by themselves in Addam’s house. Brienne echoes the same sentiments, stating that it’s just as trippy whenever she goes over to have dinner at Jaime’s dad’s house, sitting there, watching Connie, his housekeeper and cook, shuffle back and forth, putting foods on their plates for them.

Brienne suggests going over to the ghetto of upper middle class, on the other side of town to have dinner, so that they can feel just a little bit more comfortable — but they quickly realize that they’re kind of stranded. They don’t even want to touch one of Addam’s cars, let alone drive one.

“Do you think there’s a bus line?”

Brienne shakes her head, so wise from her extensive experience of watching rich people do what they do. “Missy. Of course there’s not a bus line.”

Their dinner is this half-eaten cheese plate they found plastic-wrapped in the fridge. Addam doesn’t have a lot of non-prepared food because he’s not much of a cook. He had left a stack of takeout menus for them, for four-star restaurants. Brienne promises her that they will go hunt down an actual meal for breakfast, or die trying. Brienne observes that it’s so bizarre, that they are huddled around a crystal plate, picking off cheese, and only cheese, like scavengers — in a freaking mansion.

When it’s bedtime, Missandei checks and rechecks that all the doors in the massive house are locked. And then she sheepishly asks Brienne if Brienne will like . . . sleep with her in the pool house. Just for this first night, because she knows that Jaime will be back the next night.

“Uh, yeah! Totally!” Brienne says. “Slumber par-tay! Shoot, we’re on vacation. Sort of. I’m going to drink half of a beer. And you will finish the other half for me, yes?”

Missandei laughs. “Yes. Can I paint your nails?”

In bed, Missandei rests her face on her hand, facing Brienne, seeing Brienne through the dark because of her blond hair and pale skin. Under the cover of dark, Missandei admits that she’s nervous about seeing him — not that she thinks she’s going to go insane and beat him to death. They’re kind of making their way back to being casual acquaintances — sort of. It’s more that she’s very nervous that she will start crying at the sight of him because something or other will be triggered. And that would be so embarrassing and stuff.

Brienne tells her that there’s no shame in crying. If it happens, it happens. People will understand. And it’s good to not suppress feelings. Feelings will come out anyway — no matter what. It’s better if they come out naturally and organically. Or else stuff will go all haywire and crazy.

“I still love him,” Missandei whispers.

“I know you do, honey,” Brienne says.
Brienne has mapped out the nearest grocery store — which is nearer than the nearest restaurant — but it’s still three miles away. Missandei sits down on the bottom step of the staircase to tie her running shoes. She’s been a little bit quiet since she’s woken up — something she’s actively worked to avoid apologizing for to Brienne, knowing that her friend understands. She and Terri have been talking about the pressure of perfection — of being the perfect girl, the happiest girl, the most cheerful girl, the most beautiful girl, the most playful girl, the most sexually adventurous girl, the most virginal girl, the most giving girl, the most self-sacrificing girl.

At the kitchen sink, Missandei thumbs out a tablet of sertraline and puts it on her tongue, chasing it down with water, looking out at the blue water of Addam’s chlorinated pool.

Daven reluctantly pulls into Addam’s driveway. He had been waffling between just dropping them off all off so that he can speed off and go see his fiance — or stopping in for a bit to say hello to Missandei and Brienne. Daven’s sense of decorum wins out — he says it’s only the polite thing to do, after the ladies traveled hundreds of miles to attend his wedding.

They all stumble out of the SUV, just bone-tired and stinky as hell from their trip.

Sandor makes a beeline to the white bowl in the middle of the kitchen island, plastic wrapped. He peels off the cover and sniffs the bowl, groaning in a way that makes Grey a little uncomfortable. Drogo is not far behind, calling out to Addam, asking Addam where he keeps his silverware, even as he starts opening drawers noisily.

Grey recognizes that pasta. He likes it. He was really bad at telling her that she’s not as bad of a cook as other people liked to say — she actually makes tasty food. He knows that the standards among Naathi women are different than the standards of other people. He never told her that he knew this about her, either.

Drogo drops six forks down on the counter before he dips into the bowl and stabs some penne and chicken sausage. “Fuck me,” he mutters around a mouthful. “Real food tastes so fucking awesome. Fuck hamburgers and hot dogs.”

“Yeah, don’t worry,” Daven says. “My feelings aren’t being hurt at all.”

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” Jaime repeats in a litany, slithering his way to the bowl. “I’m so fucking hungry.”

Daven wouldn’t stop on the way home for food — because he was that keen on getting home to Kara.
She looks up into the cloudless sky. Through her sunglasses, she keeps looking directly at the sun, burning violet into her retinas. Brienne had gotten off the phone with Jaime not too long ago. They are due back at any moment. Missandei has resisted digging into her purse for lipstick.

The cold waves in the pool peel goosebumps from her arms and legs, make her nipples pinch. Still floating on her back, she reaches up to adjust her swimsuit top, stretching the fabric over her skin.

It’s like he can sense that she’s there, in the house somewhere. It immediately gives him anxiety — not the bad kind — it’s the sort of good kind. The kind he gets before starting races. He’s nervous before races — thinking irrationally about what kind of injuries he might sustain, how shitty his time is going to be, how shitty the run is going to feel — but there’s also that nervous feeling of yes. Yes, it’s gonna feel amazing when he finds his groove. Yes, he’s worked so hard to do well at this, and now it’s the payoff. Yes, he can mark incremental improvements — he’s steadily getting better and better. He has to start the race in order to finish it — before he can set his sights on what’s comes after.

When he sees her, she’s wearing the white bikini. He’s real familiar with that bikini. Like, really familiar. He’s seen that bikini lying on the floor of a hotel room. Because he threw it there. He misses that, too. His entire body twinges when he lets himself think about it. All the sex they used to do on each other. He misses that a lot.

She and Brienne are both floating in the pool, faces up to the sky, sunglasses on.

“Baby!” Jaime shouts, walking to the edge of the pool. “I’m here!”

“Hey, Jaime,” Brienne says, not budging from her back float. “I know you like to announce your presence everywhere you go, but get out of the shot. You’re ruining our timelapse.”

“Oh shit!” Jaime immediately hops away from the pool, as if his feet are on fire. “Sorry, babe. Didn’t realize.” Brienne’s phone is propped on a pool table, oriented at them.

“We’re trying to look like floating dead bodies,” Missandei’s voice calls out. “The video will look cooler than it sounds. And I know it already sounds super cool. So — prepare to have your minds blown, in like, ten minutes.”

She can’t bear to look at him directly. But her first thought, when she catches a glimpse of him out of the corner of her eye: When will she know love without grief?

Her second thought: Is he going to lie to her again?
He watches her as Addam bends over the edge of his pool and touches the water, shrieking, calling to Missandei and Brienne, who are done with their timelapse, treading water on the deep end as they chat with Sandor and Daven — Sandor because he was actually their friend first, before he ever joined crew — and Daven because he is the man of the hour.

Addam interrupts, asking Missandei and Brienne why they didn’t turn on the heat. Grey watches her as she swims over to the edge where Addam is, as she tells him that he’s fucking ridiculous. A swimming pool doesn’t need to be the temperature of bath water. Brienne affirms this — says she prefers colder water anyway.

Addam politely asks them if they can get out of the pool. So that he can greet them properly.

“Addam!” Brienne yells, as he picks her up when she’s not even completely out of the water, getting himself drenched in the process. Her hands fly to her chest, making sure her top is staying on. “Why!”

Then, as he watches Addam twirl Missandei around, with hands pressed into the small of her back, her shoulders, like it’s so easy and like she’s free — as Grey hears her familiar laugh — simultaneously hating and missing and aching over the sound of it — he tells himself that he’s finally going to stop feeling jealous and impotent over this shit. He’s going to stop feeling pissed over it. He will stop laying blame over it. Once and for all. He’s going to do something about it.

He waits his turn — as Brienne and Missandei get passed around, doling out hugs and quick well-wishes. Daven quickly murmurs some apologies after his hug, right before he waves to them as he sneaks out, telling them that he’ll see them at the wedding — ahh, the wedding!

Grey manages to catch her attention during a lull. He can tell she’s kind of avoiding him — he can feel her reluctance and her fears. He catches her attention by touching her hand, really quickly. She turns toward him — he’s aware that he is really caked with dirt and has been wearing the same clothes for two days — and she says, “Hey. How are you?”

“I’m good,” he says, nodding, looking only at her face. “And you? How are you?”

“I’m good also.”

He smiles at her. “Cool.”

Jaime bounces Pippa on his lap as he half-listens to her — a picture book in front of them — her flipping pages and telling him a story that doesn’t exactly match up to the narrative of the book. But she’s doing a good facsimile, based on what she remembers from previous readings with Addam.

“You’re good with her, Jaime. You guys planning on having one of your own?” Addam says, sliding Brienne a wine glass. He sets another glass in front of Jaime — but far out of Pippa’s reach.

“God, Addam,” Jaime says from over Pippa’s head. He covers her ears with his hands. “Why do you
always be startin’ shizz?”

“Uh, we’re not planning on having kids,” Brienne explains — turning pink.

“Why not?”


“Shut! Up! Daddy!” Pippa says gleefully.

Addam shakes his head, giving Jaime an unimpressed look, before he pulls his daughter out of Jaime’s lap and hands her over to Grey. “Go play with your quiet uncle,” he says. “And you,” he says to Grey. “Teach her how cool diversity is, will you?”

He doesn’t know what to do with a kid — especially not one this young and small. He can’t even have a real conversation with her because she is prone to saying incoherent boring shit. He picks up Pippa — who lets him without a fuss — and he wonders if Addam is teaching her about stranger danger at all. At what age does one teach one’s child about stranger danger?

He takes her over to a play area, where her toys are spilling out of bins. She drags over a book — one of those electronic books with buttons that make animal sounds. “There’s a cow in my book,” she tells him. “And a horse and a dog. And a cat. And a chicken. And a monkey.”

“Okay?” he says. “Cool?”

“D’ya like horses?”

“I am apathetic to them.”

“I love horses!” she says, flipping through her book to — presumably find a picture of a horse to show him. “Daddy say he will get me a horse.”

“Yeah. That sounds like something your dad would do.”

She suddenly frowns. “Uncle Grey, I need to go potty,” she says, raising her arms up, as if she’s expecting him to pick her up.

He’s leaving her hanging. And he is panicking, already freaking out at the idea of having to go into a bathroom with this child, as she pulls down her pants and pees or poops in front of him. “Uh, crap. Let me go get your dad.”

“I need to go now,” she whines, pressing her small hands into the skirt of her dress. “Daddy!” she yells out, getting worked up and upset about this, too. “Daddy! I need to go!” Addam’s still in the kitchen chatting with Brienne and Jaime — too far away to hear. This stupid house is too big.

“Hey, sweetie,” Missandei says, walking up to them. She bends down and tries to get on Pippa’s eye level. “Can I take you to go potty?” Missandei glances at him real quick, before she turns away, a small smile spreading over her face.

Pippa nods, holding up her arms, grabbing onto Missandei’s neck.
In the bathroom, she figures out why it was such a big deal for Pippa to have an adult with her — in order for her to go potty. Pippa needs help wiping.

When they are washing their hands at the sink — Pippa sitting on the counter, splashing her hands under the water in a half-assed way — as Missandei reaches out and holds Pippa’s tiny fingers under the stream, pumping out more soap with her other hand — she smells milk and the scent of fruity kids shampoo on Pippa.

“Do you like horses?” Pippa asks, her small voice echoing against tile, obediently letting Missandei scrub her hands.

“They’re alright,” Missandei says.

“Uncle Grey said horses are pathetic.”

Missandei’s surprised laugh comes out in a snort. “Don’t listen to him, sweetie. He’s a real buzzkill sometimes. If you love horses — then just love horses.”

He watches as Drogo and Sandor try to teach her the finer nuances and strategies of bocce ball, but she’s not having any of it. He can still trace out and predict the rise and fall of her patience — an old habit. He can feel her getting annoyed whenever Drogo stops her, just as she’s about to throw, to correct her stance or to tell her where to aim and angle. It’s entirely unsurprising to him — and it makes him smile to himself — when she cuts off the directions and sarcastically says, “So you basically throw balls at other balls. I get it.”

He’s been stalking her. She can tell. Because it takes one to know one. And her stalking skills used to be legendary. But she gave up that racket years ago, having since learned that it’s much more efficient to just be straightforward with people.

“Do you have something you want to say to me?” she asks, just as he’s exiting the bathroom. Their friends are chatting in the living room. And he looks stunned. “Because it seems like you have something you want to say to me,” she says.

She watches him close the bathroom door, before he fully turns to her and asks her if she has something she wants to say to him. And it’s such a bizarre thing — to have her own question turned back at her. And the answer is no — not really? She can’t think of anything pressing she needs to tell him.

He huffs out a short laugh at that — his eyes crinkling in the corners. She is wondering what is going on. But her nervousness starts to dissipate a bit — she lightly chuckles, too. She tells him that they’re
being ridiculous — with all of this overly polite stuff. It’s silly to be so awkward around one another. He tells her that he agrees — they don’t need to act like they are strangers.

They are both actively avoiding the word “friends.”

He thanks her for saving him — that whole Pippa situation. He tells her that he’s just so fucking awkward and weird around kids. Taking Pippa to the bathroom just seemed so intimate. They just met for the first time the other day!

Missandei remembers this — this side of him — so elusive and precious to her — but mostly elusive. She smiles wryly and asks him if it’s really just children he’s awkward around.

He gets quiet at that — and it makes her think that maybe she overstepped and maybe he’s being sensitive about something. And she has already promised herself she will not apologize to him ever again, for being the root cause of these imagined micro-slights — she will not — but then he tries to kiss her, hand grabbing her hips, fingers digging into flesh, the tilt of his body pressing against hers.

His advancement — it’s warmth, and it’s home.

She pitches herself backwards to avoid his face — and nearly falls over — he holds her tight with his arm — he snatches her wrist and holds on, so she doesn’t slam into the ground.

“What are you doing?” she says, pressing a hand against his chest.

After he tells her he’s sorry — and he’s not actually not sorry at all, but he knows it’ll make her feel better if he says he is — he tells her that he wants to offer her an explanation for it all. He means for everything — everything — not just a thwarted kiss — but she doesn’t pick up on his hidden agenda. He knows this is his fault — not her miscomprehension.

She shakes her head in disbelief — slow to process — slow to respond. And then they hear their names being called from the other room. So he follows her back into the living room, where the rest of the group is hanging out. Pippa is sleeping with her head in Addam’s lap, as they all sprawl out over the massive sectional, beer bottles or glasses of wine in hand.

He picks the empty seat next to Drogo, propping a foot up on Addam’s large ottoman. He can see that the ottoman fits into the sectional, making it a huge super-sofa. He watches her, as she quietly and tensely takes a seat next to Brienne and Jaime. And he’s trying. He’s been trying.

He jumps when Drogo’s large hand comes crashing down on his leg. “Dovoeddi,” Drogo murmurs. “Seriously. How do you maintain your weight?”

“Yo,” Jaime pipes up. “Have you tried running double-digit miles every day after work, D? I think that’s Grey’s secret.”

“Have you tried eating less and exercising more?” Grey offers, immediately ducking away when Drogo’s hand lifts up to slap him. He grunts when it comes down anyway, cracking against his arm. “Seriously, D, what are you expecting me to say?” Grey asks, biting back a smile.

“Seriously, guys, lay off,” Addam says, running his fingers through Pippa’s hair. “Drogo, you look fine. Ladies,” he says, addressing Brienne and Missandei, “don’t you think he looks fine?”
Drogo is glowering at all of them, and Sandor chuckles — not because he's amused — but because he thinks they're idiots.

“Yeah!” Brienne says, voice pitching up high as she quickly glances at Jaime. “Drogo, do you really need reassurance or is this one of your guys’ stupid games that's gonna make me feel like an asshat once I answer seriously?”

“Well . . .” Drogo says, sounding reluctant.

“Dude,” Missandei says darkly, arms crossed over her chest, staring ahead into nothing. “Homie, you're obviously fine as all hell. I mean, look at you. And you're being such a flippin’ girl about this. I hate it when obviously beautiful people are like, ‘Wahhh, I'm fat. Wahhh, I hate my beautiful face.’ You're not friggin’ fat, you moron.” She leans back, sinking into the couch cushions. “And yeah, have you considered eating less and working out more? Like, that's the painfully obvious solution to your non-problem, D.”

After a beat, Drogo says, “I hate you.”

She scoffs. “No, you don't.”

And then he cracks up, reaching up to touch his own face before transfers his hand toward her. She looks at the gesture suspiciously — before she carefully reaches over Jaime, to squeeze Drogo’s hand.

When they’re at the point where they’re all beyond tired — as they’re all yawning and starting to nod off — Addam negotiates and basically begs them to continue hanging out a little bit longer, watch a movie together.

They push the ottoman into the sofa and Addam gently transfers Pippa to Brienne before he gets up to grab blankets. It hurts him when Missandei stands up — when she quietly tells them she is tired, that she doesn’t feel like watching a movie.

He’s lying in a foreign bed, and he’s wide awake, staring at the ceiling. His heart is thrumming his throat, steadily, audibly. His heart skips over all of the obvious things — it’s well aware that he’s prone to self-sabotage and suspicion and distrust. It remembers pain. He used to think that he’d feel better about the whole matter, if he had been ripped out of his mother’s hands — if he hadn’t actually felt her pry his hands off of hers. But — he has decided — pain is pain. Measuring it and comparing it to other pain is a bit of a hopeless endeavor.

It used to be okay for him — that she only wanted him when she was in pain — when she was sad and drunk and desperate and indiscriminate. Such a thing made sense to him. He is often an empty vessel for people to imprint their own shit on.

He just didn’t know what to do, when she still wanted him when she was happy. It just scared him so much.
And he didn’t hold on, either. He didn’t hold onto her tightly enough when he should have. He pried her hands away. He is his mother’s son.

His heart is beating steadily. He also has this concept of what is good and what he deserves — and then what she deserves. He remembers sitting at a tiny table and talking to her about this, telling her that she deserves more than someone who is dead inside. He remembers how she touched his hand as he miserably laid naked in a tub filled with hot water. She had told him that he must want happiness for himself, too. At the time — he didn’t realize what it was or what it meant. It’s with the benefit of hindsight, that he understands that it’s the key to their survival.

He feels good — settled. He pushes himself off the bed.

The knocking on the door scares the shit out of her — after it wakes her up. She nearly screams when she sees a male silhouette against the blinds of the poolhouse. It’s his muffled voice — he quickly says her name — that stops her from vomiting up dinner in terror. As she flips the blankets off of her legs and gets up out of bed, she tells herself that he’s gone and lost his fucking mind. All those years of trauma have caught up to him, and he is a fucking psycho now.

Deep down she will never believe that to be true. That’s why she unlocks the door and opens it to look her future murderer in the face. “What?” she says, furrowing her brows. “Are you okay?”

He points a finger in her face — like he’s mad. But he can’t possible have any reason to be mad at her. She hasn’t done anything to him lately.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m so sorry for what I have done to us. It was a stupid mistake because I got scared. I could never figure out why you were with me. I knew why I was with you. I just figured it would eventually end when you wised up. And — at some point — I got too attached to you, and it was going so well. I just couldn’t believe it. And I started thinking that if it didn’t end soon — then I wasn’t going to make it out alive — when you finally did leave me. Nothing happened with Rachel. I pushed her away because she wasn’t you. I lied to you because you are so trusting and so prone to believing the best of me — it was easy to lie to you. And it was a shitty and cowardly thing to do. I hate myself for it. I have a bag of morphine tablets that I bought, sitting on my coffee table. I thought that — well, it wasn’t the greatest bit of decision-making — but I couldn’t think. Anyway, the drugs are just hanging out like a trophy of a dead moose, you know? No, actually you don’t know. Long story short, I’m not back on drugs or anything like that. I just knew that if I did it, it’d be the final nail in the coffin of us. And even when I was bent on being alone — I couldn’t bear to close the door on us completely. You know? God, I’m really, really sorry, Missandei.”

She can’t do anything other than stare at him.

“I fucking love you,” he continues. “I can barely breathe without you. I don’t feel like I’m living, without you. I’m going to love you until I die. I know it’s so grim, but that’s my truth. I want to be with you. I want to be yours — you’re already mine. You’ve already agreed to that, and you can’t take it back. I want to marry you so that your family will finally just shut the fuck up about shit they don’t even know about.”
She smears too much perfume on her wrists before she runs the scent over and down her neck, stopping at the swell of her breasts, as a protective measure. She won’t stop sweating, and she doesn’t want to smell of body odor by the end of the day. She feels nauseous from nervousness, as she blindly stubs her earlobe with her earring, trying to find the hole. She stares at her face in the bathroom mirror, and it’s eerie. She looks the same. She feels changed. Not for the first time — not for the last time — she wonders what will be left of her and what she’ll be good for when her skin loses its elasticity, her hair its luster, and her body its enticing fuckability.

She thinks of Neal — keeping it all in perspective. She used to hug him tight and ask him if he’d still love her if she gained two-hundred pounds — a teasing game where it was easy to fish for compliments. When he was smart, he told he’d love her forever. When he was unsure, he hesitantly said to her, well, she’s not planning on gaining two hundred pounds, is she? When he was honest, he told her that part of his love and his attraction to her was tied to how she made his brain, his heart, and his body feel.

She hopes he’s happy, wherever he is. She knows she was young when she asked the kind of questions that always made her lose — they both were young.

She walks to the center of the room, where the ceiling fan is, trying to dry out the tiny, near-microscopic beads of sweat on her exposed skin.

She sees him through the glass door — walking toward her, blinking against the sunlight. “Hey, Missandei,” he says, lightly knocking on the ajar door before opening it fully.

“Yes?” she says tiredly — she hadn’t been able to get back to sleep after he left the night before. One earring flops against her cheek. She grips the footboard of the bed behind her. “What do you want from me now?”

He looks sympathetic — frowning slightly. “There’s some dress mishap upstairs,” he explains. “And I told Brienne I’d come and get you.”

She purses her lips, feeling the drag of the light tack of her purple-red lip stain and the gloss covering it. “Oh,” she says, pushing past him with determination.

With the hard shit out of the way — with the ball firmly in her court — he doesn’t have much to do besides passing time as he waits. Waiting is something that he can do — something he is fairly good at. He really doesn’t have a care in the world. He knows she’ll eventually come around. He knows she can’t fight it, or them, forever. Obviously she still loves him, too. He knows that she probably has pride that is preventing her from falling into his arms and saying yes — let’s do this shit. Once a
suitable amount of time passes so that he knows he’ll never be on solid footing with her ever again — she will come back to him.

None of that is true or real.

But it’s still amazing — how much more clarity there is in the rest of life — when he actually knows what he wants.

Due to years of wearing a suit nearly every day, he’s got a system down. It takes him no time to get ready at all. He’s got so much time to kill. And idleness makes him anxious. She used to tell him that he gets anxious in quiet moments when he has nothing to do because he must be scared to be alone with his thoughts. She might have been at least a little bit right. But he still gets a little anxious when he’s spacing out and watching TV. It’s the lack of movement that affects him the most. Maybe that’s why he craves sports. Maybe that’s why he has natural dancing ability. Maybe that’s why he’s good at running. To fight or to run — they are perhaps mutually exclusive. All he knows how to do is run.

He can’t help it — it’s a compulsion — he digs out a frilly yellow apron from Addam’s pantry — probably something the maid forgot — and he puts it on, wrapping the tie twice around his waist before cinching it up. He finds yellow gloves underneath the sink — dishwashing detergent.

They can hear the sound of water running and the sound of tinny music from all the way downstairs. She knows what it is right away. So does Jaime — he perks up at the sounds and then grins to himself.

Addam, however, is confused.

After sticking the needle back in the pin cushion and handing it and the thread back to Addam, after the tear in Brienne’s dress gets closed back up, Missandei quietly sneaks downstairs, taking off her heels so he can’t hear her coming.

She sees him washing dishes in the apron, lightly bouncing a little bit on the balls of his feet as he efficiently and thoroughly takes care of their mess from the night before. His back is to her — he can’t see her. His phone is playing from her Run Like Someone is Chasing You mix — she is pretty sure — but she’d need to hear another song to be sure.

She promptly falls asleep in the car, in the backseat, with her head on Brienne’s shoulder, as he puts the car in reverse and gently pulls out of the driveway. All of Addam’s cars are sticks. Only half of them know how to drive stick. It’s a scorching day and the air-conditioning is whirring noisily, and Jaime is constantly adjusting the stereo so that the music can be heard over the fan, but not loud enough to disturb Missandei’s sleep.

He quietly tells Jaime that he asked Missandei to marry him — and how he did it. He knows that how he did it is an important part of the story. It makes Jaime’s hand freeze on the dashboard. Grey’s eyes are trying to stay steadfastly on the road. He knows that Brienne is listening, too. He can feel her eyes — unimpressed and tense — staring at him through the rearview mirror. She speaks before
Jaime does.

She asks, “Was that supposed to be romantic? Was she supposed to swoon and fall at your feet?” She scoffs in disgust. “Why don’t you just leave her alone? When will you be done trying to fuck with her?”

He tilts his head back — lightly hitting it against leather. He stares at Brienne through the mirror — his nose pointed to the ceiling of the car — to the sky — he says, “Never. The answer is I’m never going to be done trying to fuck with her.”

She’s damp with sweat — joints aching — when Brienne gently shakes her awake. Missandei’s eyes are scratchy and dry — her throat the same — as she slowly stares back into expansive blue.

“We’re here,” Brienne says softly.

“Whoa,” Missandei says, her voice coming out quiet and low. “That was really fast.”

She hears Jaime laugh from the front seat, hears him say, “It’s actually been an hour.”

“Really?” she says blearily.

“Yep.” She sees Grey’s wrist — and his running watch — slink around before planting itself behind his headrest, displaying its face to her.

Cocktail hour reeks of Daven’s parents — more than it does Daven and Kara. She’s guessing that this is a concession Daven made to keep the peace. She feels like she at least knows Daven well enough to know that the guy would probably be happy with flip flops, hot dogs, cheap beer, and a big fudgy cake at his wedding.

She’s vigorously fanning her face with her small clutch, trying not to sweat off her makeup, always in the habit of working so hard to maintain her beauty — but she can’t worry about that right now. It’s too sunny. All of Daven and Kara’s wedding photos are going to look . . . secret agent-y . . . because all of their guests are wearing sunglasses.

She sheepishly takes the small napkin offered to her by the bartender, crumpling it in her hand as she carefully lifts her Manhattan from the bar top. It’s a really dumb idea to drink on an empty stomach — while sleep-deprived. But she’s also pretty sure she’d have a better time if she could look at it all through a filtered haze.

It’s a stunned kind of realization — one that renders him even muter than he usually is — as he fights
to recall a moment when he partied with Drogo while *not* being on drugs. He realizes that this is something that has never happened. And he finds D — hanging near the open bar like it’s serving life-giving water and he’s a horse that grew up poor — so that he can tell D what he just figured out.

The factoid only causes Drogo’s lop-sided grin to widen. “Oh, I hear what you’re sayin’. I hear what your eyes are saying to me.”

“Okay, but let’s try not to already be hammered during the actual ceremony, okay?”

He smiles as he tells her his name is Spencer, that he’s one of Daven’s prep school friends. She tries not to take a fortifying breath — she wants to be polite — she drags the stem of her drink across the table, pulling it farther out. She tells him that her name is Missandei and that she’s one of Daven’s college friends. He compliments her dress.

It’s when he confesses to her that he’s nervous about seeing an ex — that she truly starts to listen to him. She asks him why. After all, there are various ways — various causes — that makes anxiety creeps out — and then she teasingly asks him if he’s being honest with her, or if this is a really bad pickup line?

He laughs. He assures her it’s not a pick-up line. For one — he’s gay. His ex is a guy. He swoops his eyes to the cluster of tables in front of them. He mutters, “Prep school.” He tells her he wanted to sit and talk with her because she was sitting alone — and her face looked sad — and he was also feeling bad about himself.

Grey doesn’t want to pressure her or stress her out. So he doesn’t let himself look at her very much because he knows he will shit rainbows and hearts at her — or go on a rampage, ripping her away from other men who are vying for her attention — if he allows himself to look at her. He knows her dress is dark — maybe black. He knows it’s one that he hasn’t seen before, so it must be new.

He refocuses. He breathes through his pain.

The bride’s side of things on the right — being all bohemian and genuine and nice-looking — is really out of place compared to Daven’s side of things. Personally, Grey feels out of place, sitting next to Drogo, being the darkest person by far, in sea of everwhite. But people are probably curiously staring more at Drogo than they are him. That’s usually how it goes.

Aside from the ukulele performance, this is a lot like the kind of weddings he has seen on TV. There are vows, exchanging of rings, a kiss. He wonders what Missandei thinks about weddings — he’s never asked, honestly never thought to. He wonders what her preferences might be. He remembers Jhiqui’s wedding and Missandei remarking that it was pretty cool that it was so Dothraki. He wonders what Naathi weddings are like.

He suddenly remembers a conversation — his brain conjures up Missandei’s grandmother’s face.
Drogo is nursing a martini — they both are. His is dirty. All of their earnest plans to get nasty-wrecked are being sucked down into the quicksand of culture shock. Drogo tiredly rubs an eye socket with the heel of his hand. They are watching a bunch of kids twirl around spastically on the dance floor as a bunch of adults half-heartedly wiggle rhythmlessly around the perimeter. But props to them — to Kara’s side of the family. Daven’s side of the family is sitting frozen at their tables, their postures stiff, their faces pinched in disapproval.

“So,” Drogo says, biting lightly into the rim of his martini glass. “Tom Petty, huh?”

Grey shrugs. “Maybe this is what happens when you let a relative with a MacBook be the DJ. I dunno. This is only the second wedding I’ve been to.”

After they clear it with Dav, who is so hopped up on the whole being married thing that he probably would’ve let them slaughter a pig in the center of the room, had they asked — Grey runs off to go searching for Missandei as Drogo goes off to tell cousin Stephen that he’s completely fired.

He finds her sitting at a table with Jaime, Brienne, and Sandor. They all stiffen as they spot him walking up to them. It’s lame and he hates it and he wishes things weren’t like this — but he also gets it. In a way, he’s glad that she has other people so vigilant, watching out for her well-being. Even if they are all a bit misguided about it.

He holds his hands up. “I come in peace,” he says. And then directing his attention to Missandei — he’s still trying not to look directly at her — he says, “We need your expertise. Drogo and I.”

She makes a face — like she can’t possibly imagine what it is they could both need from her.

He lets her follow him, as he winds his way through the tables and the crowds of loitering, dance-hating people. When they get to the front of the reception hall, they find Drogo unplugging and re-plugging some cords into a MacBook.

He turns to her. He says, “So, do you think this is more of a Summer Wedding mix or a Spring Wedding mix occasion?”

“What?” she says in a daze. “Seriously?”

“Missy,” Drogo says gruffly. “You better not disappoint. He’s been talking you up. Real hard.”

She shrugs. She holds her phone up to her face — the blue screen illuminating it in the dim light, her finger gliding over glass. And then she hands the iPhone over to him. “I just turned off fingerprinting and password-protect for you. Just . . . don’t steal my identity, don’t buy weird shit — and give my phone back to me in one piece after you’re done with it. You’ll be able to find the mixes pretty easily.”
“Missandei,” he says softly. “You don’t want to stay? I thought you’d be more into this?”

She smiles tiredly. “You’re kinda catching me at a bad time,” she says.

He asks her if they can talk later.

Brienne squeezes Missandei’s hand tightly, giving her an oh-my-God-can-you-believe-this smile. Missandei holds Brienne’s hand like she wants to break it — she smiles back. Kara twirls around, the skirt of her cream dress only skimming the ground, brushing against her bare feet. A halo of candlelights encompasses them all.

When Kara’s bouquet of wildflowers comes flying straight to Brienne, Brienne grunts, drops Missy’s hand, and spikes the flowers away like are a volleyball carrying Ebola. The bouquet bounces off a petite bridesmaid’s face before hitting Kara’s young niece, square in the chest. Kara’s niece is seventeen years old.

“I hope you feel proud of yourself!” Jaime’s voice calls out to Brienne, whose face is burning bright red.

Daven doesn’t want to hang out with them after his wedding reception because he wants to have sex with his wife — at least, that’s what he tells them. Addam has to go home and relieve his parents of babysitting duty — something he is reluctant to do. He is clingy and whiny — as he tries convincing them to come finish the party back at his house. They can very, very quietly chill and talk in hushed voices once Pippa is tucked in bed.

Jaime unbuttons the topmost buttons of his shirt and swings a champagne bottle in his hand with a few glasses. He tells Addam that they will all head back to the house after they finish the bottle. Addam groans — walking backwards toward the doors of the reception hall. He tells them to drink quickly.

Before they all clink glasses, they search for something to say — something to toast to. Jaime wants for it to be special and meaningful, vetoing Drogo’s impatient suggestion — a toast to Daven and Kara’s marriage, obviously, Jesus fucking Christ.

“Let’s go around in a circle and take turns —”

“No, Bieber!” Drogo snaps. He quickly brings his glass of champagne to his lips and sucks down a gulp. He winces due to the bubbles.

Grey lightly coughs before it turns into a short laugh. “Alright then,” he says, tipping back his own glass.
“Hey,” she says, walking up to him, to the edge of the pool, still in her dress, tendrils of her hair coming out of her limp updo. She’s bitten her lipstick off. Her mascara is smeared across and down her eyes — making them look hollow. He can look at this fucking face forever. He can spend the rest of his life looking at this face. He has accepted this about himself.

“Hi,” he says.

She delicately places her hand on his shoulder for balance — he’s sitting with his legs in the pool, his suit trousers pulled up over his knees but getting soaked anyway — she steps out of her stiletto pumps, lightly kicking them to the side. She pulls up the hem of her dress, her legs naked — bare. She sits down next to him and pushes her feet into water, splashing and watching how their limbs looks fractured underneath the glow of ghostly pool lights. “So spoiler alert,” she says gently. “We’re not getting married tomorrow.”

“I feel like it’s up for debate,” he says equally as gently, turning to look at her, smiling because he can’t help it. “Or at least a discussion.”

She rolls her eyes and a smile sneaks out, too. “We’re not even together today.” She breaks eye contact and clears her throat. “Your word vomit was incredibly sweet. And insane. But I liked it. I think. I get the general sentiment of it. You might need to draw me a chart for other parts of it.” She pauses. “Sounds like you’ve been going through some heavy stuff recently.”

“Maybe a little bit,” he says, giving her a half smile.

She touches his hand, hooks her pinky finger over his. “You know I love you, right? Of course I love you.”

“Thank you,” he says.

“You’re welcome,” she replies primly. “Grey, we haven’t been together in like, nearly half a year.”

“I know,” he says. “I have been fucking miserable without you.”

“Okay, I’m glad,” she says. “I was hoping you were miserable without me.”

“And you’ve been miserable without me. I know it,” he says. “So let’s try again. Let’s give us a try again.”

“What if it’s not different?”

“Of course it’ll be different.”

“No. The answer is no, Grey.”

“The answer has to be yes.”

“I’m angry with you.”

“You have to get over it.”

She looks at him sharply. “Fuck you, man.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he says quickly, trying to correct himself. “I mean — I really need for you to get over it. Please, Missandei.”
She didn’t think it was appropriate to hijack Daven’s wedding festivities with their stupid personal shit — that’s why she hasn’t indulged him in his gestures — but she’s not perfect — she’s painfully not perfect. She’s about to lash out.

She tells him this. She reminds him that she is only a human being with good intentions — but still flawed and prone to so many mistakes. And she never lied to him like the way he lied to her. Does he only want her when he is in a good mood, when he can tolerate her doing all of the work to lift the both of them up, above water, with her blind and desperate hope that ends up being so disgusting and off-putting to him in his darkest moments? Will he love her when his days aren’t good? Will he love her on his worst days? Will he love her when she is at her most selfish? They are meant to save one another, but what if they just end up sinking one another?

She tells him she don’t need his fucking money. She has her own. She don’t need him or anyone else to take care of her. She don’t need him to save her from her family with a stupid fucking half-baked marriage proposal.

She tells him she actually don’t need his fucking love. She has done without it for half of the year — and she is still standing.

She tells him she is so angry with him, for standing back and letting her do all the work on them and then letting her feel like she’s a fucking crazy misguided emotional bitch for trying so fucking hard — because she had the balls to be optimistic. She sarcastically tells him that she’s so sorry she has fucking balls. She tells him that it’s painful to be the one who tries the most, who believes the most. She tells him — “There would be no us, without me.”

She is angry with him because she knows — she knows him better than he ever gave her credit for — she knows that sometimes he looked at her and he saw another person who was taking from him, who was abusing him and using him. And he treated her badly — he cut her out — because of that. And she ignored his actions and over-rationalized them and waited him out — she let him get away with it because she was just so fucking in love with him — and because she felt so bad that his life has been just so fucking sad.

But what about her life? She asks him — shaking and crying — what about her life? Her stupid, sad life matters, too.

She tells him to go fuck himself. Because that shitty person that he sees in his head when he can’t control his fucking emotions? That person is not her. It isn’t fucking her.

She tells him that she was loyal, and she was faithful. And what was so wrong about that? What was so wrong with her? Why wasn’t she enough for him?

Her return flight is earlier than Jaime and Brienne’s. Earlier than Grey’s, too. A bunch of them offer to take her to the airport, but she told them she’d rather not inconvenience their last day together. She’d rather take an Uber. Grey looks torn when she tells him this — like he wants to fight her on it,
force his presence on her by taking her to the airport. She’s expecting him to just exhaust the shit out of her some more.

But then he looks at her with his eyes cloudy — and he’s trying, she can see him trying — and he says, “Okay” — softly.

Grey insists that they play music from his phone and only his phone and almost gets into a fight with Jaime about it because he’s psychotic — Grey is, not Jaime.

One of her mixes is pushing through Addam’s bluetooth speakers — and they’re all in their swimwear, waiting for charcoal to get hot enough, waiting for meat to hit the grill. Pippa’s wearing arm floaties. Grey’s spinning around in place on a pink floating mat, pretending to sleep under his sunglasses, getting jostled by the soft waves that his friends are creating around him.

When the music stutters over the speakers — when a text message comes through — he immediately flips off his floatie, lifts himself out of the pool, and quickly runs over to his phone while sopping wet. It’s not the first time he’s done this — the last time was due to a stupid automated text, reminding him that he has a dental appointment coming up — so his friends are unfazed.

He wipes his wet hand on his drying skin, before unlocking his phone.

“Hey,” he says gently into his phone, sitting alone in a hallway of Addam’s house in his wet swim trunks. He doesn’t know what else to say after hey, so he kind of stupidly waits.

He hears her breathing. And then she tells him that she has an hour before her plane starts boarding. She asks him if he feels like talking a little bit. His heart clenches tightly in his chest. She’s feeling bad about what she said to him — he knows this — it’s in her nature to feel guilt over hurting people — even when all she did was tell the truth. He doesn’t want her to feel bad for telling him the truth.

“I would love to talk,” he finally says, blinking the wetness back into his eyes. “What do you want to talk about?”

She tells him she wants to talk about something frivolous and superficial. She airily tells him that the airport is packed and there are people all around her. He knows that it means she doesn’t want to cry in public.

“I’ve been thinking about getting a dog,” he says suddenly. “I’m serious. What kind of dog do you think I should get?” And before she can answer him, he says, “I love you. Come back to me.” And then he shakes it off. He says, “I’m sorry — you wanted to talk about dogs, and I didn't listen.”
It feels a little stupid and awkward and silly, but he Skypes with Daven after Dav gets back from his honeymoon — because Daven has expertise in this. All of these websites Grey’s been visiting are treating this like he’s trying to adopt a child, not an animal that they’re itching to get off of their hands. He tells Daven as much — he tells Dav that he should just be able to buy an animal from an animal store. Daven tells him that technically, he sort of can. However — Daven tells him to not be a horrible person — don’t support puppy mills.

Even over the spotty connection, he can see Daven flinch a little bit, every time he refers to a dog as an animal or calls it an “it,” which are both things he stands behind. A dog is an animal. And it doesn’t get its feelings hurt when he calls it an “it.” It wouldn’t even fucking know the difference between “it” and “he.”

“He?” Daven says.

“Oh, yeah. Obviously I don’t want a girl dog.”

It’s another innocuous comment that manages to disturb Daven. God, he suddenly can no longer remember why he thought this was a good idea — why he wanted to solicit Daven’s advice.

“Waffle’s a girl,” Daven says defensively. Waffle is one of Daven’s three dogs, a corgi.

“Yes, so? I don’t want to buy your dog, either.”

“You’re not buying, Grey. You’re adopting.”

“See,” he says. “I don’t like all of this terminology, either. It’s a dog, not a person. You adopt children. Not an animal. Trust me. I should know. No one wanted to adopt me.”

It’s supposed to be funny. But Daven doesn’t laugh or indicate that he gets that Grey is trying to be funny — trying and succeeding. Grey wishes he can just talk to Jaime about this — but Jaime knows nothing about dogs. Jaime actually does think that Grey can acquire one from an animal store.

It just looks like there are so many things Daven wants to say back to him — and after a long bit of silence, Daven says, “Bud, don’t take this the wrong way — but have you entirely thought this through? Are you sure you are prepared for a dog? You can’t just throw ‘it’ in the garbage if it becomes too much for you.”

“Sure you can,” Grey says. “That’s how you get rid of unwanted animals, isn’t it?” That or slitting their throats and then eating them. Grey doesn’t say that to Daven. He knows that’s crossing the line of good taste.

“Dude! Oh my God! Do me a favor and don’t get a dog!”

He knows what Missandei, Jaime, Daven, Brienne, and Drogo think about him getting a dog. Addam is the one person who is supportive and on his side — of course Addam is. Sandor doesn’t give a shit.

The rest of them think he’s nuts and wholly unprepared for the responsibility — and perhaps lacking the emotional capacity to keep a dog alive. Daven is so devoted to dogs that Daven’s actually perturbed and offended that Grey is so flippant about getting a dog.

But it’s really not rocket science — to keep an animal alive. Just feed it and give it water.

He knows that Missandei and Jaime, in particular, think he’s overcompensating and misguided — that he’s grasping at all of these straws to prove that he’s changed and he’s different — and it’s frustrating because there’s little he can say to sway them — to make them buy into his sanity and his good judgement.

Sometimes — he’s paranoid, and he wonders if they’re right about him. After all, these are the two people who know him best.

His world has been upended. He has to care and worry so much about how his actions affect other people. He supposes that in the past, he would’ve just gotten a dog because he wanted one. He’d flip them his middle finger and just do what he wanted anyway. He’d just left it up to other people to do what they do — and he’d do what he do.

Now — it’s this back and forth constant self-examination. He keeps checking his sanity.

She has looked steadily at his face — has told him that he has nothing to prove to her. Her love is not conditional. She will always love him. She tells him to just chill the fuck out a little bit — goddammit.

“Then why aren’t we together?” he asks her, his voice grave and tense.

She run her hands down her face. “If all it took was love — then this would be easy,” she tells him. “And we are together. Kind of.” She gestures to the small plate in front of them — in between them on the table — like it’s supposed to mean something. “I’m being open to it. You know I’m fucking trying too, okay?” she says. She reaches out and splits apart a piece of crusty white bread, before buttering it. She’s wearing a white t-shirt and jeans — really nicely fitted white t-shirt and jeans — and she still cannot let go of the ankle-breaking shoes — and her new office is farther away than her previous office — but lunch during the week is still very doable.

He wants to ask her how she was able to stand it — how she was able to withstand this for so many fucking years — because this is fucking torture — not being with her.

“Jesus,” she says impatiently, reading his mind, chewing roughly on the bread. “We’re together, you dork. How many times do you need to be told?”

The most excruciating thing is how squeamish he is about broaching the fact that they aren’t having sex. He doesn’t know why they are not having sex. He knows he won’t find the answer if he doesn’t ask her. It’s just — she knows it and he knows it — he hates talking about sex. He really, really hates talking about sex. He just wants to fucking have it. With her. This dry spell has been fucking stupid and pointlessly long. And in an ideal world, they never have to fucking talk about it and do post mortems on it. In an ideal world — it just fucking works out intuitively and naturally — without
clinical examination. In an ideal world, he would always stay hard, and she would always climax.

God, he’s so pissed over this. Great. He’s made himself all worked up and pissed over it in the middle of the day when he’s supposed to be winning her over with how happy and carefree he is.

“Grey,” she says, interrupting. “I’ve lost you. I have no idea what’s going on in that pretty brain right now. What’s up? What are you thinking?”

He shakes his head. “I can’t talk about it right now,” he says. “But I want to talk about it. Just not right now. Sorry. It’s just — it’s lunchtime, and I have to be back at the office in like, fuck, twenty minutes — where is our fucking food?” He looks around the busy restaurant, seeking out their server.

“It’s coming. Don’t harass the waiter, okay?” she says lightly. “Don’t worry. I don’t have to rush back to anything. So you just leave when you need to, and I’ll take care of the bill.”

Missandei tightens the laces on her rollerblades, stooped over on a bench. Brienne is already ready and raring to go, her long legs strong and naturally adept at this, lightly gliding side-to-side on the asphalt. Brienne spins around before asking Missandei how things are going with Grey.

“To say things are good is not accurate,” Missandei says, pulling loops in her fist. “But they’re not bad at all. He’s so funny and cute and sweet sometimes. Other times he’s overbearing and pushy, and it’s like he’s just begging for me to punch him in the face.”

Brienne laughs. “I totally get that. I really do. I mean — I live with that.”

“You know what my grandma keeps saying to me?” Missandei presses her hands on her knees as she stands up. “She’s been saying, once a cheater, always a cheater.”

“Yikes,” Brienne says, hissing in empathy.

“Yeah,” Missy says darkly. “And my brothers currently really hate him — because they all live close so they get together and they get bored and they talk to each other about me. And then they get themselves all worked up and they fucking get on the phone to tell me all of these thoughts that they have on my life. All of these conversations have been really fun. I love constantly having to defend my decisions and trying to convince deaf people that I’m not as fucking stupid as I look. And then in private — I’m wondering if I’m actually as fucking stupid as I look.” Missandei closes her eyes, frowning. “Honestly, it’s been hard. Anyway, I’m ready. Let’s get our sweat on.”

Brienne tells her to wait a second. Missy doesn’t want to cry in public, but her arms come up anyway, when Brienne grabs onto her, hugging her tightly — squeezing so hard — and Brienne is so strong. And Missandei is just biting back her feelings and her grief. Brienne presses her mouth against a cheek. And she tells Missandei that she’s not fucking stupid at all. She whispers that Missandei will be okay — no matter the outcome — not due to any kind of divinity or luck or savior — but because Missy will make it so. Brienne whispers that Missy is capable.

“I don’t want my family to hate him,” Missy says. “But when I defend him, I sound like that girl — you know?”

“We all sound like that girl sometimes,” Brienne says reasonably. “You know, my dad used to hate
Jaime’s guts.”

Missy smiles. “I do remember having short conversations with your dad in the thick of your guys’ break-up.”

“Now, they like, hang out. Sort of. My dad fixes stuff around their house, and Jaime shows up to get yelled at and hold flashlights. But they keep going back to that well. So, I dunno.” Brienne shrugs. “It’s also not really in my control — whether or not they get along. Sometimes, you just gotta train yourself to let this sort of shit go. You know that your family is wrong about Grey. So just, remember that.”

“Sometimes I get nervous that they’re actually right about him.”

Brienne nods sympathetically. “That’s something else to work through and figure out. You have time.”

Over the phone, he invites her to a golf tournament that his company is organizing — it’s basically a schmoozing thing for existing clients. He tells her that it’s actually this annual thing, and it’s a huge pain in the ass because he has to be “on” the whole time — but significant others are invited. He lets that statement hang so that it can sink into her fucking brain and stay trapped in there forever. He asks her if she knows how to golf — it’s one of those random things about her that he doesn’t know. She tells him she’s a very novice golfer. The last time she golfed, she got kicked off of the course because she was drunk and hadn’t paid to actually play — and got caught by staff. That was a long time ago.

She always drops these funny bizarre little stories so matter-of-factly. He loves this about her.

He asks her if he should give her name to the event coordinator, as his plus-one. She tells him she has to check her calendar — she’ll get back to him. He suggests that she check it right now — it doesn’t take that long.

And she says, “I know it doesn’t take that long. But I’ll check later, okay?”

He smoothly says, “Okay. Sure. No problem. Just let me know when you know.”

“Stop that,” she says, her voice flattening.

“Stop what?”

“Stop acting all . . . agreeable. That’s not really you. You want me to check my calendar, and you want me to check it right now, and it’s really annoying to you that I’m being so lazy about it and putting it off.”

He’s stunned. And totally caught off guard.

And she is completely wrong. None of those things occurred to him — to feel about her.
His hand is on her shoulder, having her walk in front of him, steering her as they approach the steps leading into Jhiqui and Nick’s massive house. Grey invited himself to dinner. It was weird because he hates dinner parties. She has a hard time trusting that his actions aren’t those of a man desperate to prove himself to her. She doesn’t trust that this is something authentic and real — that it’s not another facade. She can see how easy it would be to get lost in this bit of perfection. She’s been trying to keep her head on straight and her feet grounded.

When the door opens, Grey hands Jhiqui a bouquet of flowers and Nick a bottle of wine. He looks at Jhiqui and says, “Hey. This fucking weird, stuck-up asshole is giving it to your friend again.”

Missandei’s jaw drops. It had been a mistake to tell him about that.

Jhiqui sputters. Nick just looks confused, hand resting on his wife’s hip, as if physically trying to hold her back from a fight.

Jhiqui recovers — schools her expression into one of indifferent coldness. “Sup, Fifty Shades? Been two-timing this wonderful creature lately?”

“No,” Grey says. “Not as far as she knows, at least. And for the record, I was joking. Missandei and I haven’t fucked — yet.”

“Not for lack of trying on your part, I’m sure,” Jhiqui snipes. “You seem to have a hard time keeping it in your pants.”

“Yes,” he says, face blank. “That is somewhat correct.”

Missandei clears her throat. “Okay, shut up. Both of you. Call a truce, for my sake.”

He shrugs — clapping Nick on the chest as he walks into the house. He tells Nick that dinner already smells so fucking amazing, and he is starving, following the aroma into the kitchen — he’s never been in this house ever before. Jhiqui looks like she smells something bad.

Her chin is resting against the heel of her hand, encased in her palm — as she struggles to stay serious — as she tries not to laugh and condone his behavior. Her lips quiver from holding back — that just kills him every time; he’ll forever be chasing this feeling — and Jhiqui and her husband are finishing up in the kitchen. She doesn’t touch him. She has been stopping herself from touching him — and it’s so not them, so it makes him sad when he thinks about it. It also makes him pissed at himself, for not savoring it more, when he used to have it.

She just stares at him, as she quietly and slowly says, “You are aw-ful.”

“No,” he says back to her, carefully lining up the silverware next to napkin. “I’m just fucking weird and stuck-up.” And then he grins. He says, “You look so good tonight.”

She looks down at her plain shirt and cardigan combo, before looking back at him. She doesn’t believe him.
Jhiqui is getting really agitated that Nick is crushing so hard on Grey — that much is clear. Nick is easy to win over and is so forgiving. All it takes is — apparently — the way Grey is slowly poring over the food that Nick painstakingly spent the last three days on, examining it, analyzing it, discussing it, eating it, complimenting it, dropping factoids about stuff, geeking out a little bit on the weird shit they both like to eat. Grey tells Nick he has this tradition with his best friend. On his nameday, they go to really nice restaurant that his friend picks — and they just go apeshit — all out on a prix fixe meal with wine pairings — and the joke is that Grey ends up paying for it all — on his own nameday. “You’d have to know Jaime to get why that’s funny though,” Grey says.

“I’ve met Jaime,” Nick says.

“You have?”

“Yeah. Many times, actually.”

“Huh,” Grey says, picking up his wine glass, swirling the Cab. “No shit?”

Nick laughs. “You guys literally respond this way every time — every time you re-introduce Jaime to me. You’re like, ‘Hey, this is my friend Jaime.’ And I say, ‘Oh, I know. We’ve met before. Six times before, actually.’ And you guys always go, ‘Oh shit, for real?’” Nick laughs again. Jhiqui doesn’t find it funny at all. She’s glaring daggers at Grey.

And he’s ignoring her. To Nick, he says, “We really do that?” He scrunches up his face. “Shit, man. That’s rotten. I’m sorry. If it makes it any better — we don’t mean to. It wasn’t like, a running joke or anything. We’re just . . . self-involved, I guess.”

“No, I get it,” Nick says. “It’s alright. You guys are like, the ultra cool guys with swag. I’m like — a dweeb. I get it. I mean, I’ve experienced high school.”

Grey shakes his head. “Nah, man. That’s real fucked up. I won’t forget next time.” He pauses, looking off into space for a second. “We should like, all have dinner together sometime. Jaime likes food, too. I mean, obviously. Because he’s so fat.” Grey shakes his head, smiling to himself in a micro-flash. “That’s another stupid inside joke.” He clears his throat. “Jaime’s a good cook, too. He doesn’t make artful food like you do, though. He’s more into like . . . the ethnic food that his dad’s housekeeper makes. And pickling fish.”

Bieber insists on being such a fucking cliche, with his red hat and his dead rapper cut-off shirt, and his glory-seeking, but woefully ill-timed jumpshot, which Grey handily blocks with a vicious slap. He swoops the ball down and back, low, dropping it to the ground, bouncing it.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Jaime screams, sweating, uncaring of the other people — the children — playing in the park. “Go fucking eat shit, you fucking slut-bucket! Every goddamn time!”

Grey sinks the shot and goes to grab the ball on his own rebound before he lightly jogs back up to Jaime. “Yo, if you want to win at something, why don’t you pick a sport more your speed.” Grey looks Jaime up and down. “Like frisbee golf or something.”
“Fuck you, man!” Jaime immediately snatches his sweat-soaked hat off his head, exposing his light blond hair, before viciously throwing the hat in Grey’s face.

Grey blinks, letting the hat fall to the ground. “You’re way too competitive, dude.”

“You’re only good at basketball because you’re Black,” Jaime accuses.

“Sometimes I forget why we’re friends,” Grey responds mildly, bending down to pick up Jaime’s hat. He puts it on his own head. It’s wholly unpleasant because it’s so damp. But he has decided it’s his trophy. “Come on, I’ll buy you a loser drink.” He pauses. “To be clear, that’s an alcoholic beverage that losers drink. Because they suck at winning. You must be familiar with it.”

It actually doesn’t take much to lift Jaime’s moods these days. At this juncture, all it takes is a burger and a beer. Jaime complains that his patty is overcooked, before taking another massive bite from the thousand-calorie burger. With his mouth full, Jaime rambles on about a case he’s working on — more depressing immigration shit — and how that — compounded with Brienne working beyond overtime to cover someone’s vacation at the newspaper — has just got Jaime so amped up and manic — as he tends to get when he feels stressed out. He tells Grey that lately, he and Brienne have been like ships, passing in the night — well — technically during the day. They eat breakfast really quickly together. The next time they see each other is at bedtime. It’s annoying as fuck.

“We’re so tired by the end of the day that all we can do is sleep, man,” Jaime says. “Dude, we haven’t fucked in nearly a month. I’m going real fucking stir-crazy. It’s not the same by myself? Anyway — all that to say — I’m sorry for my extremely unsportsmanlike behavior on the court today, boo.”

Grey feels the whiplash. His head bounces backwards and he stares at Jaime uncomfortably. This is not one of the things that they talk about with each other. They will talk about rape and death and unfair laws and racism and alienation and shitty parents and dead parents — but not this stuff.

“Have you been talking to Brienne?”


“No, I mean, have you been talking to Brienne and has Brienne been talking to Missandei?”

“What? I guess? Brienne and Missy talk all the time,” Jaime says, ripping off another hunk of burger with his teeth. “Goddammit, sometimes I feel like I need a fucking Rosetta Stone for you. Can you please decode yourself?”

“Why are you bringing this up, Jaime?”

“What?” Jaime is getting annoyed with him. “The fact that I am not getting any? Obviously because I want to brag about it,” Jaime shoves out sarcastically. “Jesus, you’re making me feel all self-conscious and stupid for bringing this up, now.” Jaime picks up his beer glass to gulp from it, washing down his bite. After he places the beer back down, he says, “I dunno. I talk to Amari about it, and he’s just like — being all therapist-y about it. I talk to Brienne about it, and she’s like, ‘God, shut up, Jaime. I’m tired. You will have sex again. You’ll live.’ And she says creepy shit about how I can have sex with her sleeping body if it will make me feel better. And it’s like — news flash, love my life, you unsympathetic bitch — that will not make me feel better at all, fucking your body when
it’s in a corpselike state.” Jaime rolls his eyes at himself. “And now I’m sitting here with you, with you making me feel really silly and weak for telling you about this.”

“Dude,” Grey says, losing his appetite. Because of what he’s about to do and say. He pushes his own half-eaten burger at Jaime — his own beer glass. “Dude, I’m gonna tell you something. And I really need for you not to make me feel all fucking weird about it. So, I’m gonna need you to constantly be like — shoving shit into your face — so you can’t talk back at me for a while, okay?”

Jaime’s mood immediately shifts. He immediately perks up. “Oh shit! This is gonna be so fucking juicy! I know it already! Oh my God. I can’t wait. I can’t wait! Lay it on me, baby. Lay it. On me.”

When she sees his apartment for the first time again — she kind of raises a brow in very mild horror. She’s struggling to say something nice about it. It makes him bite back a laugh, coughing. She raises both of her hands to her neck, weaving her fingers together at the top of her spine. She takes a few steps around. And then she tells him that he’s a real weirdo. She reminds him that when they first met, he was living in this cruddy windowless basement room and had to heat up water on his stove for months, when the hot water heater broke down.

That was when he had no money.

Now he has money. And he’s living in a spacious two-bedroom all by himself with no furniture, besides a coffee table. She nudges the neatly arranged piece of cardboard on the ground, where he sits to eat dinner, with her big toe. He tells her that his bedroom still looks as she remembers it. He doesn’t mean for it to sound heavy or laden with sex.

But it does. She glances at him awkwardly, with her hands wringing together. And she must know what he wants — she must fucking know what he wants. Her general lack of acknowledgement of what he’s been sacrificing at the altar of them is annoying — which is like, yeah, fuck him, he’s an asshole for his hypocrisy. He knows. He knows this.

She sits down on the cardboard — she asks him why cardboard at all? He tells her he likes to delineate his space. He has no furniture because Jaime took it all, but he still wants it to be partitioned. Great expanses of blank space can be intimidating and scary to him — probably because he’s spent a lot of time in tight spaces.

Again. Not supposed to be so heavy with sex. He had originally meant for it to sound depressing and sad as all fuck. But he licks his bottom lip, and he says, “God,” with grit in his throat, as he scans her body up and down. He wants to tell her he was a real fucking idiot — that yeah, he really wants to know what she figured out with that vibrator. He can’t even stop time — so he definitely cannot reverse it. So he keeps pushing forward — projecting forward. Lately, he has been learning so much about what it’s like to be her — without her knowledge or her permission.

“If you don’t stop staring at me, I’m going home,” she says to him.

Their relationship? is this tender and fragile thing at the moment. He knows it will take time to build up the trust again. He knows it with his brain. But he wants to push fast-forward. He wants to inject all the things he has learned and all the knowledge that he has acquired into her brain so that they can skip ahead to that part where she opens herself up to him again — sometimes he means emotionally. Other times, he actually means he wants her to spread those legs and physically open
herself up to him — and just the thought of verbalizing this to her is just the most fucking excruciating thing ever. He just wants to burn his face on a hot iron just thinking about forming the words and having to look at her face as he tells her these things.

Emotionally, he knows it’s a risk for her — he knows the fear well — but he keeps whispering to himself that she has to — she has to. He has to believe this. He has to balance what is smart and judicious with what is frighteningly eager and honest. The truth is that he just doesn’t want to buy furniture without her input, without taking her taste into account. Because it’s going to be their fucking furniture. And he has decided he can’t go backward. They had been about to move in together. He will not go backward.

He peels back plastic, uncovers steam. He breaks apart wood. He hands her paper. And then as she’s shoveling takeout onto her plate, he orients the screen of his laptop so that she can see it, too. He pulls up his bookmarks. He’s like a puppy pornography junkie, just photos upon photos of dogs upon dogs that he has looked at — in the short lulls of his workday.

She’s lying face-up on his carpet with her curly hair fanned out in a fluffy halo. Her jean-clad legs are angled and braced against the wall. Her small feet crossed at the ankles — her toenails a sky blue. She’s letting a nearly full bottle of beer get warm in her hands, on her stomach. She murmurs to him — asks him if he’s really prepared to open himself up to inevitable and severe heartbreak — before rolling over and grinning at him because she’s quoting him back to himself. She loves throwing the things he has said back into his face. Her hair is bouncing around her face.

She’s referring to the dog. He knows she’s just mostly, innocently referring to the dog.

“Yeah,” he says breathily. “Fuck yes.”
Grey wants sex and a dog

The time difference is killer. Missandei is blinking hard at her too-bright computer screen, waving at Adara, who’s holding onto a tablet on her end, shifting it back and forth between herself, Kamil, and their parents in the living room. It’s making Missandei a little dizzy.

Missandei asks how everything is going. And are they going to ask her for more money during this call? Missandei’s so tired, and she’s picked up some horrible-wonderful habits from Grey. There’s little point in being delicate and beating around the bush sometimes — especially when it comes to money. She’s learning to view money as more of a tool, more transactional. Not this emotional thing.

An upside is that it’s very disorienting for her parents, when she says stuff like that. They tend to regurgitate back honesty, because they don’t have time to think of how to massage language.

Her mother generally doesn’t change. She chats away at Missandei, name-dropping people she doesn’t know, not giving her enough context, talking to her as if this sort of familiarity has always been built into their relationship. Moss and Mars still haven’t come around to opening up the lines of communication with their parents. Though it doesn’t stop them from grilling her for all the fucking details, whenever she talks to them. And it doesn’t stop them from bad-mouthing their parents to her.

She has told them that she still thinks it’s worth the trouble to them — opening the lines of communication — if it means they get to know Adara and Kamil. That’s been a troubling and sore spot for Mars and Moss. They tell her they feel replaced. Missandei has told them that she feels replaced, too. But that’s not these kids’ fault.

It’s hard to be a real sister from far away. Missandei looks at the crop-top Adara is wearing. It looks like low self-esteem mixed with having an overbearing beautiful mother mixed with healthy adolescent exploration of femalehood. Missandei also looks at the outfit and wonders how much she has influenced her sister in the short time they were together — if her sister thinks that this is what Western women wear. Missandei looks at the outfit and observes that Adara has a cute little body.

Which is totally wrong. It’s so, so totally the wrong thing to say to a young girl. Missandei has to be careful about what she says to her sister — from her distance.

It would be completely unfair to blame their mother for the outfit — but Missandei is really tired, so she blames their mother. And in English, she says, “How is school going, kiddo?”

She has to get all of her shit done and taken care of before her business trip, which she hadn’t been expecting to go on, but she’s a last-minute add-on. Because of this, she doesn’t have much time in the week leading up to it to spend time with him in person. Their relationship is being mostly maintained by phone. He’s so understanding about it. And it makes her feel bad, just as it makes her
wonder how long this perfect version of him will last. Her extreme cynicism almost makes her feel bad enough to throw him a bone — by taking off her clothes for him again, by letting him fuck her again.

That’s something she’s back-burnering — this horrible and awkward conversation she needs to have with him about sex.

She often wonders how much he misses that fun-loving, fun-having version of her. That girl sent him naked pictures of herself and let him try to put his dick in her ass because she was dumb and thought that she could knock him out of his cool-headed, emotionless haze if she’d just . . . let him fuck her in the ass. The fucking things that girls will do.

Now, he gets a version of her that is either guarded and distrustful of him — or one that is just overextended as hell and distracted because of work. And he’s not even getting laid for his troubles. It’s a thought that she just continues to be obsessed with — when will he decide that she is not worth this? When will he realized that he can do better? How much time left do they really have?

And he was wrong. What is a relationship between two people that is devoid of sex? It’s not necessarily friendship. It’s this fucking purgatory. She misses his smell — she misses the smell of him in her sheets. She misses the warmth of him in her sheets. She especially misses the delicious pain of him in her sheets.

“Let me get it for you,” he says, over the phone.

“Huh?”

“Your prescription. You said that you have to stop off at the pharmacy to get it before you fly out. Well, let me get it for you. My schedule isn’t as packed. I have the time. I can give it to you when I come pick you up.”

She frowns. It’s prescriptions, plural. There’s sertraline waiting for her at the pharmacy. That’s not the thing she’s feeling weird about. It’s the birth control. She never went off it, even when they weren’t together. Because it was nice to have her period suppressed. She could like, go swimming whenever she wanted and didn’t have to worry about always twisting her body around to look at her own ass — to make sure she wasn’t bleeding through her tight clothes.


Her company will spring for a shuttle, but he wants to take her to the airport anyway. He’s barely seen her lately — this will be an opportunity to just be in her presence for a little bit. He stops off to gets gas before he gets to her — he texts her that he’s ten minutes away. She still hasn’t let him in her new place, giving him no reason for it. He hasn’t asked to see it. So, that’s another element to things. There’s also this white paper bag with an orange bottle of pills and a pink compact thing with a blister pack full of hormones. His heart pounds because part of it means they can like, have sex whenever they feel like it — just whenever. His heart also pounds and his eyes see red because he wonders if someone else has benefited from those pills. They’ve only been his possession for less than six hours, and yet, they have been haunting his thoughts in really stupid ways. Because he’s such a fucking fuck-up. And she’s trying to ruin him. She’s trying to make him lose his mind.
Well — joke’s on her. He’s going break her. He’s going to wear her down until she loves him like how she used to. He’s really fucking motivated.

She smiles at him gratefully and waves, when he pulls up. She’s already in the lobby of her building — old and brick and stout.

She mostly just complains about some guy she works with named Nathaniel, on the way to airport. She tells him that Nate is a real fucking boner and that bastard is the reason she has to go on this trip.

In departures, just outside of the double doors — he yanks her suitcase out of the trunk, places it on the ground, and extends the handle before he gives it over to her. She not thinking, when she says, “Thank you, baby,” so preoccupied with finding her e-ticket on her phone. She mindlessly tilts her face up to his — it’s something they used to do all the time — and she’s totally on autopilot — and he’s totally going to fucking capitalize on it because he has no fucking shame.

He skims his fingers over her cheekbone, lightly holding her face in place, before he tilts down and softly kisses her.

She freezes in surprise. He keeps it short and clean, just a peck — which sucks, but whatever.

“Have a nice trip,” he says. “I’ll miss you.”

“Bye,” she says — voice far away and dreamy.

“Why don’t you go on Craigslist?” Tanja asks. “My friend got her dog from Craigslist for a few hundos. Are you keen on a purebred or something?”

“I don’t want to just buy a dog,” he tells her, biting into his sandwich. “I like the idea of getting a dog from a shelter.”

“But you were just saying you are being given the runaround, and you don’t think you actually qualify for a shelter dog?”

“Well, yeah. And it’s fucking annoying. But still. It doesn’t change what I want.”

He doesn’t want a girl dog because Momo was a girl dog — not because a dog’s vagina is an inherently terrifying thing to deal with. But when he comes across the picture and the description of a fluffball with tan curly fur that looks exactly like how he remembers Momo looking, he can’t help but be swayed. The dog is still a puppy — estimated to be about six months old. And she has special needs — high anxiety, very skittish and scared of people, needs someone who is very patient in training her.

He’s not an idiot. He knows he’s completely projecting, and he’s being a dumbass about this. He knows he’s probably way out of his depth because he hasn’t own an animal since like — he killed an animal. But he wants this dog. He just has a feeling about it. It’s his dog.
Missandei is still on her business trip when he tells all her about it. There’s a significant time difference, and it’s already late for when they talk — when he gets off of work. And she groans loudly in his ear and tells him to please not do something rash and impulsive before she comes back home. The word home — in reference to him and her — strikes this chord in him. So — even though he thinks she’s being a little melodramatic about this — he promises her that when she comes back, he will not officially be one animal richer.

She stops off in Myr on her way home, just for a couple of days. It costing her money out of her own pocket — obviously her company’s not gonna pay for it — and she knows that she’s just in for some brutal criticism — in person — but she also just misses the hell out of her family.

She shrieks when Moss lifts her off of her feet, grabs onto him tightly, laughing and pressing some the wetness leaking out of her eyes into his shoulder, bleeding her tears into his t-shirt. He feels so solid. He smells like motor oil.

She does a doubletake when she sees Hassan. Who is now taller than she is. Who now awkwardly has facial hair.

“Oh my God!” she says. “Puberty is hitting you hard, kiddo!” It embarrasses him, and he gives her a small wave and mumbles something. And then she beams and reaches out to him, for a hug.

His whole shit with Brienne has been slightly strained for a while now. He feels like all he’s been doing — socially — is making the rounds. He’s been on a grand tour, shaking hands with a bunch of people who despise him because of what went down with Missandei. He already has his eyes set on the pinnacle of everything — on Missandei’s grandmother and her brothers. Eventually, he will have to personally deal with their general hatred of him — and while he doesn’t anticipate that it will be the funnest experience ever — it doesn’t cause him much anguish. A lot of people don’t like him.

It bothers him that Brienne has been upset with him. A little bit.

He brings dessert. Instead of snatching up something from the office on his way out, he actually stops off at a bakery and picks up a cake. When the person helping him asks if he wants something written on the cake, he almost has her write something like: I’m sorry for proposing to your friend. Which is just him asking for it. So he refrains from doing that. The cake is blank and says nothing.

He’s tired and kind of feeling shy, as he joins them in their kitchen. Brienne’s sitting on the kitchen island, watching Jaime cook, swinging her legs, letting the back of her socked feet hit the cabinets.

He puts the cake in the fridge before he tugs at his tie — before he loosens it and takes it off, stuffing it in his suit jacket pocket.

Jaime stops what he’s doing at the stove to reach out for a quick hug — sweating lightly, mind still on the food — he’s not making any jokes. Jaime just says hi before he swipes an oven mitt from the counter and slams open the oven door, before jostling the pan inside, rotating it.
“Hi,” Grey says to Brienne.

“Hey,” she says, smiling at him. She’s entirely too polite to be an utter dick to him, unlike Jhiqui. But a part of him would rather deal with a massive dick than a person who simply doesn’t respect him anymore.

Over cake and tea on their couch, Jaime tells him that pets are property in the eyes of the law. So if someone decides to go and shoot his hypothetical dog dead, then that person would owe him the value of the dog — generally speaking. Jaime tells him that was one of the very many depressing things he learned in law school. And Grey knows that, in some oblique way, Jaime is trying to deter him from getting a dog.

Grey shrugs.

“So have you and Missy done the dirty yet?” Jaime suddenly asks.

He almost chokes on his tea. He coughs. “Excuse me?”

“I mean, it’s been like, two weeks since we talked about it,” Jaime says. “So I was wondering if anything’s changed there.”

Brienne’s face is a blistering red. She transfers her tea cup from left hand to right, before she leans over and places on the coffee table. She scrapes up what’s left of the buttercream with the side of her fork, putting it into her mouth before she also deposits her empty plate on the table.

“Dude, she knows. I tell her everything,” Jaime says. “Sorry. I’m that kind of person.”

He’s having a miserable time — as he handwashes Brienne and Jaime’s dishes. Jaime insisted that they have a dishwasher that he can load later, but Grey insisted on doing it himself — citing something about saving water. Really, he just wants to be alone for a little bit.

“Hey, I’m sorry he’s an asshole,” Brienne says, appearing beside him. They’re about the same height, so he looks straight into her face, and he shrugs. Then he hands her a wet dish for her to dry with the towel in her hand. “He did it because he wanted you to talk to me. But he can’t be a normal person and just ask you to talk to me. So he’s forcing you to. He’s kind of horrible.”

He is silent. He’s usually silent because he just doesn’t know what the fuck to say to people sometimes.

“I didn’t tell her anything, you know,” Brienne says. “I mean, unlike Jaime, I have honor.” She pauses, kind of sighing at the awkwardness of it all.
He tells Brienne that Missandei deserves more than a broken person. He admits that sex has always been difficult and weird and emotionally charged for them. Because of him. And for this reason, he supposes that he understands why they aren’t, like, you know, having sex. Maybe Missandei’s just fed up with him and his limitations. It’s been something he’s been trying to get on board with.

Brienne tells him he’s a real idiot. She tells him that he actually doesn’t have a clue why he and Missandei aren’t having sex — because he hasn’t talked to her about it. Brienne tells him not to assume things. She tells him that men are so hard on themselves, when it comes to this. Women honestly care way less than men do. She tells him that a lot of things that matter to him don’t matter to Missandei — and Brienne knows this, not because she’s talked to Missandei about this so explicitly — Missy has actually said nothing about it. Rather, Brienne knows this because she knows Missandei.

“Dude, why don’t you just ask for sex?” Brienne says. “Is that a really stupid question or something? How did it work before? When you wanted sex? How did you convey this to her?”

He grimaces. “I sort of didn’t.”

“What?”

“I just let her take the lead on it. I figured if she was the one who instigated things, it meant that she really wanted to — not that she felt obligated to. I didn’t want her to have to do anything she didn’t want to. It just . . . seemed safer at the time.”

Brienne’s blue eyes stare back at him empathetically. “I’m sorry, Grey.”

He shrugs.

It’s always been slightly easier to get personal with her over the phone versus in person. Over the phone, he doesn’t get distracted by her face and the miasma of changing expressions. Over the phone, he doesn’t have to worry about his own face — what is coming across, what he is revealing. Their very first meaningful conversations happened when he was in the Summer Isles with Jaime and Drogo — and she was far away but also felt close to him, at the same time. He remembers how paranoid he was during that trip — how his phone was just glued to his hand. He was ready to check whatever text message came through from her. He remembers how he was constantly trying to hide that fact from Jaime and Drogo. He snuck out in the middle of the night to talk to her. He took pains to track his phone habits, so they didn’t know that he . . . had a crush on a girl.

For the life of him, he still cannot figure out why it was so important to him — to keep that sort of thing a secret. Jaime and Drogo honestly gave no shits. On many levels, they already knew that he had a thing for her. And they didn’t make him feel stupid about it or make fun of him for it. Because they’re good friends. All they ever did was say that they thought Missandei was nice and funny and cool. But even those tepid observations about her made him feel so fucking weird and vulnerable.

It’s late in the evening for him — he should already be sleeping — and the day is just beginning on her end. Her voice is soft in his ear, as she laughs and tells him that her family is totally terrorizing her — they are totally driving her nuts. But God, a part of her loves them for it. He’s joking and he’s not joking, when he tells her to pass along his well wishes to her family. Tell her brothers that he
says hello. Tell her grandma that yeah, he wants to marry that.

She says his name waringly.

He laughs.

She tells him about how Hassan is like . . . looking like a man now. And maybe it’s because she doesn’t see her family often enough, but she has noticed this difference, in how her brother treats his son. That little goober used to be such a chunky little nugget that they’d all squish on, just hug and kiss and adore. But now, Mossador is noticeably less affectionate with Hassan. And it kind of makes her sad to observe it. She asks Grey if that’s a thing — with boys becoming men — that he’s personally noticed. She softly tells him that she’s not asking him for his father-son perspective — she’s asking because he’s a macho guy. She tells him that she’s noticed that the way he’s friends with Drogo and Jaime is different from the way she’s friends with Brienne and Jhiqui.

“What the?” he says. “Was that a joke? I’m not a macho guy.”

She tells him that she’s joking and yet, she’s not joking.

He tells her that there’s definitely a difference. He tells her that she’s his friend, too. He considers her one of his good friends. Sometimes it honestly feels easier to tell her personal things or about his fears or insecurities, because she is who she is — but also because she’s female. He tells her that Jaime is actually big girl, too, though. All that fucking therapy. Jaime is fairly open with his feelings, too.

She teases him — the tone of her voice just getting at his gut — it makes him think of her naked body — and she tells him that there must be something about him that just attracts the most emotional of ladies.

“I want to have sex with you again,” he says out of nowhere. “So fucking badly. I’m not saying that so like — you feel pressured to pencil that shit into your calendar. I mean — do it — if this declaration moves you in that direction. But really, I’m just saying it just to let you know. That sometimes — when I get distracted when we’re talking — that’s where my mind is going.”

He’s inundating her with information. She’s walking around in the backyard, phone glued to her ear, aimlessly weaving in and out of the herbs, the fruit trees, and dodging old relics from when they used to have chickens. They cleared out a lot of the stuff out after her grandfather died — it was just too much for her grandma to maintain all on her own.

He tells her that he understands if she feels betrayed because he is a betrayer. He tells her that he understands that it makes her wary about trusting him with . . . her body again. He tells her he understands if it doesn’t feel the same way for her anymore — the implication being that it still feels the same for him. He tells her that he knows that she’s still angry with him. He tells her that he would understand if she had sex with someone else while they were broken up and now, armed with the knowledge of what sex could actually be like — it has changed the way she feels about having it — with him. He tells her that he knows his fucked up body and fucked up brain are a lot to put up with. He doesn’t fault her or blame her or require her to . . .

He’s searching for the words.
And she says, “Stop,” even as she keeps walking around. “Grey, stop.” And he does stop — he shuts his mouth, and then there is just awkward silence. She’s already regretting that she’ll have to cut this conversation short. Marselen is due to pick her up to take her to lunch — she had told Grey at the beginning of the phone call that she might have to leave abruptly — but they both seemed to have forgotten, a little. She softly says, “Baby.”

She doesn’t even know where to begin — in untangling all of his mental, incorrect assumptions. She wants to tell him that he’s such a fucking dumb, beautiful idiot.

She starts with, “Of course I still want to have sex with you, you dumbass.”
Missy was almost one hundred percent sure that Grey’s apartment will have shit and pee all over it, when she comes back. So she is impressed at his self-restraint, when that turns out not to be the case. She also expects for them to be responsible adults and to talk about sex some more, or for them to be irresponsible and to just start stripping off their clothes — the moment she crosses his threshold. But instead, he’s kind of in a tizzy — still in his work clothes, pacing his floor.

He tells her he’s having trouble with the application — because these people take this stupid shit so seriously. They want all of this information about him, and they want to do a home visit. He doesn’t have a fucking yard? But he runs like, at least six miles almost every day so the dog will get exercise and stuff. Does that even fucking count? And he hasn’t had a dog since his last one, when he was just a child. And what if someone asks for specifics about his old dog? And they’re gonna ask him what makes him think he’s qualified to take care of a challenging dog — and what is he supposed to say to that? And about this home visit — it’s gonna be bananas. Because he has no fucking furniture. He’s going to look like such a psycho.

He’s legitimately kind of wigging out about this whole thing. Her week has been fucking crazy and she has a touch of jet lag. But she watches him as he paces his empty apartment, so nervous about not getting this dog — and the thing about loving someone . . .

It’s having faith in them — believing them and believing in them — even when they sound totally batshit. He’s been telling her for more than a month now, that he wants a dog and that he is capable of taking care of a dog. And she’s been skeptical and kind of shitting on his plans, thinking it was some insane ploy to get her back.

But now she sees it. He really does want this dog.

“Hey,” she says, putting her hand on his arm to stop his pacing. “Let me help you,” she says. “But I have to warn you — it will involve some lying and misrepresentation. To well-meaning white people. Are you in or are you in?”

God, he fucking loves her. He fucking loves her so much. He fucking loves her more than he loves . . . he actually can’t think of anything or anyone else he has ever loved like this.

“Missandei,” he says. “I fucking love you.”

“I love you, too,” she says back automatically.

“Missandei?”

“Yeah?”
“I kind of want to name this dog Momo. If I get it. Is that, like, totally fucked up and bent?”

The noises she releases is this mixture of a laugh, a scoff, and a cry. “Of course you do,” she says, shaking her head. “Of course you want to name this dog Momo. Grey, don’t get too far ahead of yourself, okay? You’re gonna be so disappointed if this doesn’t work out.”

Jaime is not in support of this. None of it. Jaime tells Grey that he’s a fucking asshole. And the biggest fucking idiot. And that there’s gonna be the blood of a dead dog on all of their hands.

But they still need Jaime and Brienne’s help moving some of her furniture into Grey’s place in order to stage it like a normal person’s dwelling — so they put up with Jaime’s naysaying and his extreme judgemental negativity. Her studio seems too small for a dog to pretend-live in.

Jaime turns to Missandei, and he incredulously asks her how in the fucking world she’s going along with this crazy shit. She’s supposed to be the smart one.

She shrugs, taking no offense. She’s not really the smarter one. Grey is. And if he’s not stepping up into that role, well, there’s nothing she can really do about it. She says, “He wants a dog, man. He says he’ll take care of it. When have you known him not to do something he says he will?”

“Thank you,” Grey says to her, smiling softly.

“God, you’re both fucking made for each other,” Jaime gripes, heaving up his end of her sofa off of the moving truck. “You’re both so fucking stupid.”

“Don’t mind him,” Brienne says calmly, coming up from behind with an end table. “He gets insult-y when he argues because he grew up a spoiled rich brat and was never taught any better.”

“Yeah,” Grey says, balancing his end of the couch in his arms. “I am familiar with his work.”

She’s taking point on this — because Grey, frankly, makes a horrible a first impression when it comes to stuff like this. She actually puts her name down on the application, and he’s her co-applicant. She’s grown up with dogs. She knows what taking care of a dog entails. And there’s Lucy, her grandma’s dog. In a pinch, she can wax some sentimental poetics about that dog. She emails back and forth with the adoption place and also Caramel’s foster mom — Grey is at least right about the name — he has to change it. It can’t be Caramel. Momo though . . .

Missandei says all the right things. It’s with this uneasy kind of calculation, that she kind of manipulates these nice people into liking her. She hopes that this dog is worth it.
When she texts Brie to see what she’s up to later — Wanna do dinner? — Brienne’s response comes back immediately. Brienne tells Missandei that she’s doing happy hour with her old boss. And she begs Missandei to please come and help disperse the awkwardness. Missandei wryly types back that this is actually not the first time someone has asked her to please come.

Brienne’s not having it. Missandei’s phone vibrates as a new text comes in. It’s hysterical. Brienne is asking if she’s gonna show up to the bar or what? She better show up at the bar, now that Brienne knows Missy has nothing going on this evening.

It’s a little weird and awkward, sitting at a small table with two Aryans who are bad at making small talk with each other. It’s almost impossible for her to imagine these two ever having any sort of rapport — and based on what Brienne has told her about her former boss — they didn’t really get along? There was a lot of respect there, but Brienne has painted her old boss like some sort of terror.

Missandei rotates the stem of her cocktail, some gin-based acidic thing with a name that she’s forgotten. “So, you guys used to work together?”

“She worked for me,” Dany corrects.

“Yep,” Brienne says, raising her pink cocktail to her face.

“Oh, cool,” Missandei says lightly. “So how are you liking King’s Landing?” Apparently, Dany hit up Brienne because she just moved to the city for a new job — she’s new to the area and doesn’t know anyone — besides Brienne. Which is why this horrible evening of awkwardness is happening to them.

“It’s noisy,” Dany says. “The people are rude.”

“Not us, though, right?” Missandei cracks. “We’re cool, right?”

When Dany doesn’t respond, Missandei resists rolling her eyes.

Missy is pretty convinced the whole evening is a bust and — after last call for happy hour — she’s ready to wish Dany a happy, healthy life doing whatever it is that she does. Missandei’s trying to remember what time her favorite froyo places closes — maybe she can hit it up on the way home, maybe convince Brienne to come over to catch up on some of their shows — when Dany asks them if they want to grab more drinks at some other place.

Brienne’s entirely too nice. She says sure.

It’s kind of nice — that the music at the second bar is a touch too loud. It saves them from having to do a lot of talking. Missandei generally nurses her drink and occasionally bops her head to the music. Sometimes she picks up her phone to check for messages that aren’t there. Sometimes she thinks about texting Grey to start up a random conversation — but she’s trying to refrain from letting him become her sole source of entertainment in life. That’s another one of those things that she and Terri
have talked about.

She’s kind of furtively reading an article about potty training dogs, when a chair gets scraped and placed right next to her. She squeezes her arms together, stretching her leather jacket against her body as she tries to just avoid any body contact with some brown dude she doesn’t know — has never met before.

“Hello, you are beautiful,” he says, staring at her for a beat before looking around at the table at Dany and Brienne. “How is it that three beautiful women have found each other in this world?” he adds, talking to his friend, who is smiling and standing next to their table. Brienne immediately looks miserable.

“Can we buy you ladies a drink?”

“No, thank you,” Dany says, holding up her glass. “We have drinks already.

The other guy pulls up a chair, next to Daenerys. “Forgive my friend. He’s new. We —”

Dany’s eyes narrow. Something dark comes over her — this, Missandei notices with interest — before Dany says, “I said we have drinks already. We are not interested. Now, I don’t mean to be rude, but my friends and I were having a conversation together. We’re not interested in including you. Do you mind?”

The tone of Dany’s voice completely belies her words. The aggression in it isn’t hard to pick up. Missandei knows that Brienne generally hates these moments — for a multitude of reasons. They’ve talked about how Brienne tends to be around physically beautiful people and how that sometimes sucks for her, no matter how confident she can make herself feel. This is something that makes Missandei feel extreme empathy over. She’s about to smooth things over a bit, but then the guys’ chairs get pushed back — they switch to Low Valyrian as they stand up.

“What are they saying?” Dany asks.

Missandei glances at her.

“You understand them, correct?” Dany says. “What are they saying?”

So, technically they are saying shitty things about Brienne’s looks and shitty things about Dany’s body, particularly putting things in her ass — and shitty things about Missandei’s probable ability to take a dick in the mouth. And they are saying this full-well knowing that Missandei can probably understand them.

“Well,” one of the says. “Have a lovely night, ladies. Maybe we will meet again.”

“Yeah, well,” Brienne says to them. “I’m so sorry you don’t want to fuck me. I guess that means I have no value as a human being. Bye.”

Missandei raises her hand. “Bye, virgins. Hope you die never knowing the touch of a woman.” It’s all the same. Missandei’s not all that different from Brienne. Her value is also primarily whether or not men want to fuck her.
Dany suddenly laughs. To Brienne, she says, “I didn’t know you speak Low Valyrian.”

“Oh, I don’t,” Brienne says, eyes cold. “I just know what people say about me.”

So Dany ends up being kind of pretty cool. She’s a year younger than they are — which makes her some sort of frightening wunderkind, professionally. Personally, she tells them that she has no family and she’s single and pretty intent on staying that way. Over nearly fifty tiny samples of tart froyo, Dany makes a face and sticks her tongue out, telling them that men don’t actually like women like her. People mindlessly explain it away by telling her that she’s too intimidating to men because of her job and how much money she makes. Dany tells them that that’s really not it, at all — don’t flatter her, and don’t insult her intelligence. She’s not intimidating to men and they don’t begrudgingly admire her. She’s a threat to them. And they actively hate her — for what she represents — their soon-to-be obsolete way of life. Their soon-to-be stripped power. And that’s just too fucking bad. It’s too fucking bad that they feel so fucking insecure over that.

Tubs of yogurt is melting in their hands as Brienne drunkenly fiddles with her keys, trying to find the right one. She bursts out laughing when the door throws itself open — or rather — because Jaime heard them trying — and failing — to get into the house.

“Hello?” he says in confusion. “Jeez, so you’re okay! I was expecting you home hours ago, and you fucking stopped responding to my texts, woman. What the hell?”

“Aw, I’m sorry, babe,” Brienne says, brushing her lips on his cheek before pushing past him, into the house. “I didn’t mean to worry you.” Missandei and Dany mutely follow.

“Check yer messages on the regular, ho,” Jaime says. “You know I can get nuts about that.” He rolls his eyes and crosses his arms — watching them stumble around his house. “Because blah blah, I’m too addicted to technology, blah.”

They find Grey sitting by himself in the living room, with the TV glowing — the screen paused on whatever he and Jaime had been watching. Missandei didn’t know he was over. She didn’t realize she would be seeing him tonight. She’s all drunk — it’s been a long time since she’s been this drunk — and the temperature of her face just shoots up a million degrees. She inexplicably feels ashamed and stupid and childish and silly and very, very shy all of a sudden. She rubs her lips with the back of her hand — a little bit of her lipstick comes off — she must look just rank.

“Hello,” Dany says calmly. “We’re sorry for interrupting your night.” She holds up two cartons of froyo — they had purchased a lot because they felt bad about eating so many free samples. “Would you like some frozen yogurt?”

“No, thank you,” he says quietly, pushing himself off the couch. “I’m fine. We’ve eaten. But let me take those off your hands.” He grabs the melting cartons and walks off into the kitchen.
After flushing the toilet, Missandei splashes some cold water on her face and wills herself to just be sober, goddammit. She remembers how he always had to babysit her when she had been drinking — when they were nineteen, and when they were in their early twenties. She remembers the very first time he had to babysit her and how pissed he had been over it. She feels upset and a little sad, because she and Terri have talked about alcohol and how she’s a little emotionally dependent on it — so that she can loosen up and appear to have fun and be carefree. But the thing about it is — always — the inevitable crash. But she honestly was having fun tonight. And she kind of got lost in the whole haze of victory — because she called some assholes virgins and she thinks that she might’ve hurt their feelings a little bit — and that was something that was really exciting to her. And Dany is also loaded and kept buying them rounds after rounds because she seemed like she was having fun, too. And it was looking like they had made a new friend and it was like — again, that word — exciting.

She should just drown herself under the faucet. Right now.

He’s standing right there. Right in her face. When she opens the bathroom door. She kind of cowers and kind of makes an “eep!” sound in surprise.

He laughs, his shoulders shaking a little bit. He holds up a clear bottle of water. “You know the drill,” he quietly says to her. He cracks it open and hands it to her. He gently touches the bottom of the bottle as she starts tipping it back, holding it steady. “Come on,” he says, standing close. “Take it all down.”

Ugh. It’s too much. Her belly is puffing out, and she needs to pee again already. But she obediently gulps down the entire bottle — it’s a really miserable experience — just because she knows he wants her to. She coughs toward the end and water dribbles down her chin. She pouts and holds onto her stomach — it kind of hurts now because there’s so much pressure — and she hands him back the empty bottle so he can go recycle it.

“God, you’re so cute sometimes — I can’t stand it,” he says, touching a tendril of her hair. “Looks like you guys had a fun night?”

She smiles quietly up at him. She allows herself a slow, squishy hug from him, smearing her greasy face into his t-shirt.

He knows that part of her expects for him to back out, when he’s actually confronted with a living, breathing dog. Hell, part of him expected the same thing. It’s just a visit. He still has to jump through their millions of hoops — and at the end, he gets to hope that they pick him and Missandei.

The dog is scared as shit by him and Missandei and generally hides. The foster mother — this woman named Katy with white hair and a low, authoritative tone to her voice — like she has been a school teacher in another life — tells them that it’s less intimidating to the dog if they sit on the ground. She goes off into her bedroom to try to coax the dog out from under the bed.

The dog doesn’t want to sit with him. The dog doesn’t want to be held by him. He doesn’t make her. Katy is telling them that when the dog gets too freaked out, she has a tendency to crap herself, so it’s
a good idea to have baby wipes on hand at all times. Missandei looks at him uneasily, trying to read his face.

He asks Katy why she thinks the dog is so skittish and scared — where did they find her? Katy tells him that they get these kinds of smaller dogs all the time, from puppy mills. And they try to find a good fit in rehoming them. She tells him she has no idea what Caramel’s history is — beyond her being a puppy mill dog. A lot of times — a very scared dog is not necessarily an abused dog. It’s very possible she’s just an undersocialized dog. Or it’s just her genetics. Maybe she was just born this way.

“She’s a sweet little thing, though,” Katy says, trying to peek at the dog, who has shoved her fuzzy little body underneath the couch trying to get the fuck away from him. “I read in your guys’ application that you specifically are looking for a dog like Caramel?”

“Yeah,” he says. “It’s easy to go pick and choose a dog with the best temperament and the best disposition, with the most talent and intelligence. But I just think about — what about this kind of dog? This kind of dog needs a safe place to live, too.”

When they pull up to her apartment building, he shuts off the car. Her heart skips a beat as he asks her — if it’s okay — he doesn’t want to part right away. He’d like to just talk to her for a little bit longer. She doesn’t think she wants to be a person who is just so flighty and so easily convinced of things — but she is. She is. She is prone to believing in him. So she agrees to have him stay a little longer, laughing softly, asking him what it is that he wants to talk about — what else could there be left, that they haven’t already exhausted at dinner and the longass drive from Katy’s house? He laughs lightly at that. She asks him, are they really doing this? Are they fucking horribly naive people?

He tells her he really doesn’t yet know. Time will tell.

“Grey,” she says. “I am so on board with this dog, now. I get it. I totally get it. I’m with you, one hundred percent. We have to get this dog.”

He asks her if he can kiss her. And then he doesn’t wait for an answer before he leans forward and captures her mouth with his. It’s a real, solid kiss. There’s something surreal about kissing someone she’s already kissed a thousand times before — for the first time again. Her heart is pounding in her throat and she feels his fingers lightly digging into her neck, searching for her pulse. His lips are wet and slow and exploratory. Hers are going numb. It’s so familiar and nice that it makes her ache. Her hand is wound in the hem of his shirt to keep him in place. Cars are such awkward places to makeout. Cars are also awkward places to fuck.

It’s when he pushes his tongue into her mouth that she breaks away with a gasp, touching her swollen lips with her fingers.

“You wanna come inside?” she asks.

“Oh, fuck yeah.”

“N-not for sex,” she says, stuttering.

He looks momentarily confused.
He’s not really that curious about looking at the details of the place — same deal, new location. Her shit is still all over the floor. Her fridge still is not well stocked. She still owns the same bed. He pushes her onto that bed, with their mouths still touching, a swatch of hot air in between them. He’s trying to keep it clean — which is this stupid, stupid preoccupation, but he’s trying not to let this get out of control too fast and too brutally. He’s not letting their bottom halves touch, even as his hands drift there, tugging, squeezing, rubbing — each grunt he draws out of her just making him die a little bit more with need. He’s trying not to shove his whole tongue in her fucking wet mouth. He’s trying not to think of her mouth as this thing that is wet. His body is shaking — hers is, too. She must’ve been fucking around with him — she must not have really meant it — when she said he’s not here for sex. It feels like all he’s here for is sex.

He runs his palms over her legs, underneath her skirt, squeezing the meat of her thighs, of her ass. She’s panting, arching and pressing her body against his, and she’s whispering to him that she misses him so much — and that is everything to him. He tells her that she has no idea — just no fucking idea — what missing someone even entails. Because he has missed her so much. He says this, sliding her buttons out of holes, pulling zippers down.

He pulls down her underwear with one hand. He eagerly touches her, and he almost loses his shit at the whole familiarity of it all and his gratitude at the whole thing. She throws her head back and she cries out, as he easily slides a finger inside of her. And through gritted teeth and her eyes clenched shut — she tells him that maybe . . . maybe they can have sex tonight.

Which is like a hit of cold water to the face for him.

He grunts and his body generally just protests and is so agonizingly turned on, as he lifts himself off of her. “Why don’t you want to have sex?” he asks her.

“I do want to have sex,” she says, correcting him, staring up at him. “What the hell? Why are you stopping.” His hand is still in between her legs.

It almost makes him go, oh, well, okay then, before getting back down to business. Jesus fucking Christ, why is he stopping?

But he’s trying to enact change. He stupidly insists on this. So he lets go of her, wipes his fingers on her sheets. He stands up — he’s lost his shirt somewhere — and he adjusts himself in his pants — grimacing while doing so. And then he walks over to her messy kitchen and starts puttering around, putting on a kettle.

Balancing the hot cup of tea on a kneecap, she tells him that she thinks sex is how they got so off-course the first time. It was hard to differentiate infatuation from love, when they were younger. She tells him it’s not like she has thought about this a lot — she’s kind of going purely on instinct. And she’s just worried that if they have sex — it’s like, back down that rabbit hole where they lose their
fucking minds again. She wants to keep her wits about her — and it’s hard to, when there are
eriodphins and his face and his body and his love pushing into her. She wants to do this correctly —
if she’s going to get on board with all of this stuff he’s been trying to sell her on. And if they have so
much time — if they really have so much time left together — then they don’t need to rush into it.

She tells him that she worries that so much of her perceived currency or value is sex — that on a
subconscious level, she might think that it’s all she’s good for — and she used to just get so upset
and depressed, whenever some obstacle threw itself up.

He interrupts her. He tells her that he knows what she means. He knows exactly what she means. He
knows this feeling.

She tells him she used to think she could heal him through sex — that she could heal herself through
sex. And it was so soul-crushing, all the times he rejected her. She used to wonder what she was
doing wrong — maybe he didn’t desire her or find her attractive enough.

He laughs, pushing his gaze down into her bed sheets, crumpled and wrinkled because they almost
got carried away. He laughs because the very idea that he doesn’t want to constantly be shoving his
dick into her body is so fucking stupid and ridiculous. His laugh surprises her, and he palms her face
— to try and allay her fears with the gesture, because he can’t talk through the laughing.

“It was chickenshit to always make you instigate sex,” he finally says. “It really messed with your
brain.”

“Oh my God,” she says. “You were such a fucking coward. Your standoffishness made me go
fucking crazy.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I had this logic for it, but the logic was pretty bent.”

“I haven’t slept with anyone else,” she blurts.

He exhales loudly. “Oh thank God.”

“To be clear, I wasn’t saving myself for you,” she says. “I just . . . didn’t want to have sex with some
stranger.” She looks down into her cup. “I dunno. I am more than my body.”

“I am more than my body.”

“I mean, it’s not a competition, babe,” she says, her face serious for a moment before it cracks and
brightens up in a smile — a real smile.

He sips his tea. “Why do you love me?” he asks urgently. “How did you know — before I knew?
How were you so sure about me and us?”

She shrugs. “It goes back to a feeling. I just felt it. When we first met — I felt like I knew you. I
knew that you were hiding. I knew you carried pain and loss. I knew from the way you spoke to me,
the way you said words, the way you edited yourself down, what you omitted — I knew your pain.
You saw yourself as an undeserving, broken person. But I saw someone different. You were always
so secretly sweet. And so pathological in hiding it. And you were funny. And you were fun. I love
your brain. I love your convictions. I love your judgement. I love your sense of right and wrong. I
love the subtext you weave in the things you say. I love how you problem-solve. I love that you’re 
insanely anal retentive about stuff — because you’re passionate about stuff and you believe in doing 
things really well. I love that you’re so weird, and you don’t care that you’re weird. That’s 
confidence, man. And I love that, too. It’s attractive. I mean — there’s so much stuff about you.” She 
raises her hands and pressing her palms against her cheeks. “God, now I’m feeling all embarrassed 
and silly. It sounds stupid when it’s all listed out like that.”

They are lying on opposite ends of her bed. Her leg is in the air, rising and falling — he keeps 
smacking the bottom of her foot with his hand, sending it floating back up before he catches it.

“I have a proposal for you,” he says. Her leg freezes mid-air. He snickers. “No, not that kind. 
Though that one still stands.” He runs a line down the back of her leg, down her calf, with his 
forefinger. “Let’s pick a date — a sex date. Let’s actually mark it on the calendar and then not even 
worry about it again until that date. We can just focus on getting shit down and set up correctly.”

She presses her foot lightly on his chest, holding it there. “For the sake of clarity,” she says, “are we 
taking all sex stuff off the table?”

He hesitates — his mind running through his repertoire of sex stuff — and then he says, “Yeah. All 
of it. Off the table.”

She stares at him. “Jesus, no. I hate this idea. I want to have sex. Right now. What are we? Sixteen 
years old? I’m an adult woman. I don’t have to wait to have sex. I want to have sex right now.”

“I want to have sex, right now,” he repeats emphatically.

She straightens a bit — unconsciously, subtly — pulling her shoulders back, raising her breasts just a 
little bit. “So what are you gonna do about it?”
fifty-nine

It’s this tortuous game that he never thought he’d get another chance to play. But he’s narrating out everything — she didn’t ask him to — he’s just making a point — he’s just taking a stand on this. It’s called ownership, he thinks — as he forces himself to remember to breathe, as he uncovers more and more of her naked body. He already knows every mole, every stretch mark, ever fine line of hair, every curve, every bit of darkness. He unsnaps her bra, dragging it off of her arms. He cups her breast — squeezing, weighing it — his hands a little rough and enthusiastic — and he tells her that he owns all of this — her tits, her ass, her body, her entirety, just all of it. It makes her laugh lightly. She tells him he’s always saying stuff like that — he will buy a dog. She belongs to him. He owns her.

She tells him that the way he uses words sometimes makes her sad — because of all of their hidden meanings. He tells her that he calls it reappropriation. He’s stealing back his own life — piece by tiny piece. He kisses her sternum. He whispers, “Mine,” with her heart thudding against his mouth. His lips drift. Her voice hitches as he bites down on a nipple. She grabs onto the back of his neck, uses it an anchor as she presses herself further into him.

He drops his head and he just about brains her with his skull, as he slowly pushes into her. She’s telling him to go slower — as slow as humanly possible — as tears leak down the side of her face — and not because it’s painful or because she needs to adjust to the feel of him — but because she wants to fucking do this forever.

She’s on her back, with her legs hitched on either side of his hips, her hands free to roam around. They go down his back, digging into the corded muscles — his spine, his shoulder blades, all the bones. He always feels meaty and thick in her arms, the way her fingers sink into his substantial body. She tells him that she thinks he’s so lovely to look at — just so beautiful and otherworldly and rare. He’s like no one she has ever known.

They can’t quite look directly at each other. She’s orienting half of her gaze to the ceiling — he’s always shifting his eyes to the pillow or her chin. It’s too much at the moment, to look right into him.

“It freaks me out when you cry during sex,” he tells her softly, smearing her tears down her face, rubbing them away. “There’s always a split second where I think I’m hurting you. And that’s why you’re crying.”

“Oh!” Her eyes fly to his face. “I’m sorry!”

“No, no,” he says. “Don’t be sorry. I get it. I mean, I get why you cry. It’s . . . nice. But it also hurts me. On the inside.”
He’s almost fully encased inside of her. He’s having trouble focusing on his words. He’s balancing all of this verbal shit with the fucking insane, hot, tight, wet suction of her fucking body. It feels instinctive and natural, when he shoves the very last bit of himself into her, making the bed creak, making her head kiss the headboard, the warm, stinging slap of his skin against hers. He exhales and breathes through it — shaking his head in disbelief to himself — at how fucking good it feels. He drags himself out of her.

She lightly hits him on the shoulder. “Come on,” she chastises. “I said slow down, babe.”

He sighs, freezing his body in place. “Missandei. If I slow down any more, I’m just stopping.”

She groans, sinking her nails into his ass, pushing him on. “Don’t stop.”

“I want to go fast,” he blurs, after a few more excruciatingly slow ins and outs. It feels like a million pin needles are poking into every exposed micron of his bare skin. He just fucking needs to come. “Just this first time. You can have your slow shit later. You’re like — I’m just — I’m going fucking nuts right now. I want to hit you in the face for not giving me what I want.”

He immediately winces — because what he just said to her was just awful. But it was honest. Maybe this is why he never allows himself to talk without a filter. And maybe this was why he did what he did — why he does what he does. He alternates between really believing that he was saving her from himself, and also that he was saving himself from her. She honestly doesn’t even have a clue how fucking psychotic he is.

Her head sinks further back among the pillows, the angle obscuring her eyes from him. Her breasts dig further into him with the motion. He feels shitty now. And the sex is about to get pretty depressing. He just knows it.

Her arm winds up around his shoulders, his neck. He’s surprised when she pulls him down, making him collapse all of his weight on her.

She kisses him — all dirty with a lot of spit and a lot of tongue and a lot of biting. She kisses him and buries all of these sounds coming out of the two of them as she squeezes her thighs around his hips, tilts the angle a little bit, and just inhumanely grinds their bones together, smearing wetness. His arms go to jelly — it also shoots straight to his balls — he has to be suffocating her with all of his weight and his mouth. And he wants to murder her.

She whispers, “Come on,” against his mouth, panting — grinding herself against him again. “Take it.”

This time, it’s going to work out — he can tell. He can feel it. He tells her that the end is imminent — and it’s with this sudden stark clarity — he asks her if she’s close.
She tells him not to wait for her. She laughs all maliciously over it — telling him that he owes her one.

“Dude,” Missandei says in awe, kicking the rumpled, sweaty, dirty sheets with an insane-looking wet spot in the middle to the end of the bed. “Bro.” She raises her hand up.

He slaps it. “Nailed it.”

“Yeah, you did, baby.” She laughs into his shoulder. “Maybe now you’ll finally chill and will stop being such a freaking hag about everything.” She sighs in contentment and languidly stretches, hitting him carelessly with her arms and legs.

He smiles, rolling over to kiss her face, her forehead, her cheek, her nose, her lips. “It’s likely. At least until the tension builds up again.”

She smiles so widely at him — and it’s just messing with his mind — all of this happiness. She lightly taps him on his sternum. “Can I tell you something? I’ve only recently noticed that you get pretty wired — you’re kind of naturally a twitchy and intense person, but you do a good job of hiding it. But you’re always running and always just having to physically exhaust yourself to hell all the time. And I think, subconsciously, I’ve always known this about you — so maybe that’s part of why I was constantly offering you sex. That’s one reason. The other reason is — obviously — I am a sad, sad, sad girl with low self-esteem.”

“Hey,” he says, grabbing her hand. “You were a sad, sad, sad girl with low self-esteem.”

She rolls on top him, their naked sweaty bodies sticking together a little uncomfortably. “Grey, you can ask for sex. If you want to just burn off some of your energy whenever. It doesn’t always have to be all meaningful and special. If you need to scratch an itch, if you need to clear your head before a work presentation or something —”

“Oh, you mean you’ll walk right on over to give me a quickie in the bathroom before my one o’clock?” he says, raising a brow.

“Um, no. I’m not your on-call hooker.” She laughs. “But dude, if it’s convenient and if I’m feeling it, then sure — why not?”

He holds her face in his hands. “On a scale of one to ten — how mad are you still, at me?”

“Right now? A zero. It still goes up and down sometimes.” She grins. “I’ve been really digging you lately.”

“I’ve been digging you lately.”

“What are you doing?” she asks sleepily, running her hand up and down his stomach — him not being ticklish has always been this source of fascination to her. The bright light from his phone is really jarring.
“I’m texting Jaime to tell him that we just had sex,” Grey explains. “He’ll be interested.”

“Oh.”

“Does it bother you?”

“No,” she says. After all, it would be hugely hypocritical to get sensitive over such a thing, after all the things she has shared about him, with her friends. “I just think it’s a little odd, is all. But it’s also kind of cute.” She laughs softly, tiredly. “You guys are so cute together. Your children will be very beautiful, mixed-race babies.”

Grey’s phone buzzes. He shows her the screen. The reply message is fucking humongous and she can see lots of emojis. She doesn’t even want to read it because Jaime is sometimes an idiot. “See?” Grey says. “Told you he’s interested.”

Tanja uncrosses and crosses her legs, her hands dismantling her boxed salad. They’re all too busy to go grab a proper lunch, so Barristan sent his assistant to grab sandwiches and salads from the cafe cart in the lobby. Grey cracks the seal on his can of sparkling water. Bizarrely, it’s all they have — or soda — which is gross. He doesn’t like bubbles in his water.

It’s a working lunch — sort of. They’ve littered their computers and phones all over the conference room table — but right now they’re just sitting around chatting casually. Of course, Grey doesn’t like it. But he has learned that he cannot stop the people around him from getting personal. Barristan talks about how his eldest daughter is still in pretty good spirits, after having to go through the most atrocious wedding. The groom’s side is from Meereen — that’s not why it was atrocious. It was more the fact that the reception was supposed to start at five o’clock, but half of the guests wouldn’t show up, so they kept pushing back dinner until it was eight o’clock. People were so upset. Barristan’s daughter apparently got into a fight with her new husband about punctuality — on their wedding day.

Tanja pushes her glossy hair back behind her shoulder and announces, “Do you know why your girlfriend won’t agree to marry you?”

Grey doesn’t even know she had directed that question at him until he looks up from his sandwich and sees eyes staring awkwardly at him. He shoots Tanja an unimpressed look.

“Because you didn’t get her a ring!” she says indignantly. “How are you going to propose without a ring, Grey?”

“That’s not why she said no,” Grey says flatly.

“Grey, trust me. I’m a woman —”

“I proposed to my wife without a ring — she also said no the first time,” Barristan says casually, trying to clear away the tension. “His business, Tanja,” Barristan adds, waving his hand dismissively. And then to Grey, he says, “I didn’t realize you . . . had somebody. You’ve never mention anyone.”

Because this is a place of business? This is a place where they supply certain skills and then get paid
for their troubles?

Usually Barristan asks him about how his weekend was — Grey tells his boss that his weekend was fine. And then Barristan shares a long-winded story about one of his kids or his wife or whatever.

Grey shrugs.

“His girl is seriously smokin’, Selmy,” Brian says. “She looks like a model or something.”

“Dude,” Grey says, shaking his head at Brian. “Shut up. You don’t get to talk about her. Ever. Don’t even look at her.”

“Okay, that’s enough, children.” Barristan laughs. “And you,” he says, directing his attention back to Grey. “It would be nice to meet your beautiful, non-ring-wearing lady, one of these days.”

“I still can’t get over the fact that I assumed your roommate was your partner, and you never corrected me on it. You let me think that you had a boyfriend for years, you punk,” Emi says. “I addressed holiday cards to both of you.”

She adjusts her bomber jacket obsessively before she decides that it’s just fucking annoying and she’s an idiot for wearing it. She rips it off her body and throws it behind her — she can already hear Grey shuffling up to grab it. He’s undoubtedly folding it up all nicely and putting it on the bench.

Her body feels entirely awkward and stiff and uncomfortable and weird — this is not gonna be good — as she whacks the golf club at the ball, sending it flying just a sad, paltry distance.

“Your follow-through sucks,” he says from behind her. “You’re stopping right here.” She sees him pointing to a spot in the air next to her with his driver. “You wanna be up here.”

She rolls her eyes. She honestly thought him teaching her golf would be this sexy, fun, kind of foreplay sort of thing. She’d pick it up easily because she’s not an idiot when it comes to this stuff. He’d do that thing where he’d correct her swing by hugging her from behind. And then they’d go home and bone frantically or something like that.

Instead, he’s been annoyingly critical and annoyingly impatient. She does not want to have sex with that. He seems to take it for granted that all of his stupid friends are stupid super-athletes. He has seemingly forgotten that normal people don’t just pick up a stick and intuitively understand how to hit tiny-ass fucking balls with these tiny fucking sticks.

“Head down,” he says, lightly touching her in the butt with his driver.

“Grey!” she says. “Will you stop poking me like I’m an animal! Jesus! God! You’re so annoying!”

He takes offense to that. And then the rest of her bucket is just this silent, angry endeavor. Her swings gets progressively worse because she’s so tense and upset by his quiet judgement.
He meets her in the car after he returns the bucket and their clubs. She already has her seatbelt on. When he starts the ignition, he hears her say, “I’m sorry I’m not better at it."

“Baby,” he says, placing a hand on her knee. “I’m sorry I was hard on you. I was being an asshole.”

He tells her that he’s a little stressed out because the whole golf tournament has become this whole stupid thing — he wants her to make a good impression. And then he quickly corrects himself — he says she always makes a great impression. But God, other people are just so fucking annoying and stupid sometimes. He tells her that he means that he wants people to be impressed by her golfing prowess and the funny stuff she says and the cool work that she does — instead of by her ass and tits. She’s going to meet his boss, and that is like, stupidly a big deal to him.

“Aw, baby,” she says to him, leaning forward to give him a quick peck. When she pulls away, she grabs her breasts and holds them in her hands. “The struggle is real.”

“You guys are late,” Grey says, watching Brienne and Jaime take their seats at the table. Missandei reaches for his hand underneath the table, squeezing it, trying to supportively get him to — again — chill the fuck out. He squeezes her hand back and squints against the sun — he left his sunglasses in the car and she offered to go get them, but he’d just rather be uncomfortable. He plucks up his glass of water.

“Sor-ry,” Jaime says with a vocal fry — he is a chameleon and a mimic, always picking up new speaking patterns from his clients — a large portion of which are young city dwellers — people of color. Jaime has told her that he generally can’t help it actually — he just mirrors how people speak. Sometimes it’s embarrassing because it sounds patronizing and then he starts wondering if he’s like, being a huge racist. She has told him that he’s actually really good at it — at mimicry. It really made his day, when she told him that.

She knows that she will always be second in Grey’s heart, as she and Brienne watch Grey and Jaime quickly dissect the brunch menu, finishing each other’s incomplete thoughts in their heads — like a couple of creepy brain twins. At one point, Grey reminds Jaime that Jaime does not like bell peppers — like Jaime had forgotten this food preference he has? And Jaime actually says, “Oh, duh. You’re right.”

“Guys,” Brienne says, interrupting. “I was checking out flights — you know, just for fun. And did you know that tickets to Pentos are like, insanely cheap right now? Would you guys wanna do a vacation together?”

“You know it’s not a joke, right?” he says, lifting her leg and throwing it over his shoulder, intimately spreading her with his fingers in detached, clinical focus. Right now at least. It’s about to get crazy. He kisses her soft skin. He’s inhaling the scent of her. “I really want to live with you. I really want to be married.”

Her hands grab at his head — trying to find purchase on something, trying to steady herself. She’s
started taking her sertraline very early in the morning, even though it makes her a little fatigued — so that it’s at its lowest in her blood and body — by night time. It takes away some of the spontaneity of sex, but it’s also been making a difference. She asks him if they really have to talk about this right now. He tells her that they certainly do not — but he just wants her to know — he’s still serious about her. He softly licks a parallel line on her inner thigh. He tells her he loves waking up with her. She tells him they have to start getting ready for work soon. He tells her that she will be a little bit late today — but not too much. He promises her he’ll be fast, before all the talking stops — on his end at least.

She’s told him that she has to put her full concentration toward this, these days. And there has to be this unerring consistency to it, these days. It’s not very sexy. It’s kind of perfunctory. It’s hard to start and stop. It has to be constant pressure, constant speed. Her pelvis is propped up on a thick pillow. Her legs are harsh and rigid, digging into his back. And he doesn’t agree with her — that this is not very sexy.

She’s told him that it actually helps if she holds her breath and doesn’t breathe. That's why he’s doing this dangerous sort of thing where he’s kind of suffocating her, with his hand over her nose and her mouth. He’s already told her to punch him or scratch him — if she feels like she’s gonna pass out. She was frighteningly blase about it — telling him that she trusts him. It’s so fucking weird and trippy to him, that this level of trust is just so freely given.

He has to read body language and subtle cues — especially because she can’t talk. She forces out some gasps every now and then, some groans — passing through his tight fingers. He feels her teeth biting at his hand sometimes — and it takes a beat for him to know that it’s not based in fear and she’s not trying to get away from him. Mostly — he sees it in her eyes. She’s crying — that will never stop breaking his heart, just a little bit. He knows he’s doing it right when she smears herself into his face, when her hand claws down his head, anchoring it in place.

And he starts to lift his hand, hers immediately presses it back down, tightly sealing her mouth shut. And when she comes apart, he really does let go — yanking his hand off her face. She’s vocal — and he wants to hear her.

“Come on,” he says, picking up her boneless naked body, setting her on her feet. He pushes the both of them into his bathroom. “We really need to get a move-on,” he tells her, turning on faucet, checking the water temperature needlessly. “I have a nine o’clock I can’t be late for.”

“God, I love you,” she says, still breathing heavily, leaning into him.

They rarely shower together — she doesn’t really like it — an interesting idiosyncrasy about her. But this morning, it’s just logistical, and they’re on a time crunch. As he’s soaping up some shampoo in his hands so he can put it on her head — his voice echoes in the shower stall, over the sound of the spray. He says, “Missandei,” in this mixture of uncertainty and reluctance and also in greeting, and he stares down at her hand holding his dick.

She’s blinking against the overspray, biting down on her bottom lip in concentration as she works him with soap — when did she grab soap?

“Baby,” he says, stopping her hand mid-stroke. “We’re already late.”
“Oh my God,” she says. “It’s your fault, and you’re so freaking bossy.” He sees her swallow. “Do you want to fuck?” she asks bluntly.

“Well, yeah,” he says. “But I have a nine o’clock.”

She looks at him for a long moment. And then she takes her hand off of him. “Okay,” she says. “Okay.”

There’s this inner struggle happening within him — as he watches her quietly and quickly soap up. She knocks his hand away when he tries to help her shampoo her hair. He doesn’t have the same problem — he just swipes soap across his scalp and then calls it a day. She gripes that he doesn’t get hair and that he’s too rough with her hair sometimes. He’s watching the suds flow from the top of her head, down her face — her eyes are closed so soap doesn’t get into her eyes — over the swell of her breasts, her nipples, made darker from the hot water, running down her stomach, down the apex of where her legs come together.

Okay. Shit. Really. It’s gonna take all of five minutes.

“Grey, can I get to the water?”

“Okay, let’s fuck.”

Her eyes snap open. “Huh?”

He pushes her against the wall of the stall, nudging apart her legs with his. She puts a hand on his chest to stop the incoming kiss. “Grey. Babe. For real, I need to get at that water.” The sound of her voice makes his heart clench — is she mad at him? — and she must be noticing. Because she softens. She says, “Honey. If we’re gonna fuck, I need to wash the soap off. Otherwise it’s gonna burn like hell, when you shove soap inside me.”

“Oh my God, I love you,” he says, turning the both of them around so that she’s under the spray. She’s laughing and calling him a doofus and kind of sputtering underneath the stream.

Missandei continues to be very average at golf — and he has clearly given her some sort of complex over it because he keeps overhearing her apologize profusely to people whenever she sends the ball shooting off in some direction she didn’t completely intend to — and that makes him feel like utter shit. Everyone else is very nice to her about it, telling her that it’s just for fun — and that she’s doing pretty well overall. And she keeps muttering that she could be doing better.

They’re not playing together because their skill levels don’t match up.

She’s not even bad! She’s just a mediocre golfer. And that’s okay because she’s so amazing at so many other things. Why on earth did he get so fucking nuts about this?

He’s having a bit of trouble focusing on his clients and what they’re saying. He doesn’t even have the attention span to conjure up the tight little ball of his red hot rage whenever dickface probably-racist Phil laughs like a braying jackass and calls him Tiger Woods. Grey’s too preoccupied with what a monumental dick he is.
She hates golf. It sucks. Because she sucks. And it’s not fun to do stuff that she sucks at. She should’ve practiced more. There are not many women playing, either. There are a lot of women around and enjoying the event, but she’s one of only a few playing.

Which also sucks. She feels inordinately responsible for repping the ladies. And instead of being capable at this stupid sport, she’s just prancing around like a fucking ditz, chasing after balls, laughing like a fucking airhead when she holds up a hole with the gazillion shots she needs to take. People are being indulgent, and they’re not playing through because they seem like they want to watch her just be miserable in this shit. There’s always a fucking audience watching her just be a monumental failure at this super white sport, with such indulgent amusement. She’s a fucking sideshow.

She’s standing in line and ordering a lemonade by herself because Grey’s busy doing his really weird fakery of what he thinks a ‘normal’ person is. He actually does a good job. It only creeps her out because it’s totally not who he is. He doesn’t laugh at lukewarm jokes, and he doesn’t do casual touching — he doesn’t freaking shoulder-punch anyone for cracking a pun.

An older white man walks up to her. She sizes him up — trying to figure out if he’s one of those ridiculous assholes with jungle fever. There are white men all over the place.

“Are you cutting in line in front of me?” she says to him. “Hey, that’s really not cool.”

Someone chuckles behind them. “That’s the VP! He can do what he wants!”

“Nuh uh, no he can’t,” Missandei says, tempted to wag her finger at the rest of the line because they’re being a bunch of bitches. “No. Line. Cutting! The hell? You think you’re too good to stand in line like everyone else?”

A short, strangled kind of laugh comes out of the white dude. “I’m not trying to cut in line,” he tells her. “I actually just wanted to come up and introduce myself. Hi, I’m Barristan. And you are Missandei.”

She nearly drops her purse. Her face is on fire. “Oh my gosh! I’m sorry!”

He laughs, waving her off. “Don’t be.”
Grey leads her by the elbow over to some of his clients and their wives. He ran out of shit to talk about with them, and so he figures it was time to tag in Missandei. She’s good at this sort of thing. And it’s less skin off her back. He’s pretty much just shoving her at these people so that he can get a break for a while. “This is my —” he pauses. He actually hates the word girlfriend because it sounds juvenile. He can’t call her his woman because white people don’t really get how that works. And she refuses to agree to marry him, so he can’t call her one-day wifey.

“I’m his partner,” she interjects smoothly, holding out her hand, shaking everyone’s in the circle. “Missandei. Hi, everybody! Did y’all see me tear it up on the green?”

“Everyone saw you tear it up,” he mumbles, laughing, lightly patting her on the hip. And he means it earnestly. He’s so proud of her for being such a trooper and keeping things light, casual, and fun as she played around a bunch of people she didn’t know.

She laughs, too — and he’s surprised to see that it’s self-conscious — she’s upset. He squeezes her hip, trying to let her know that he notices, as she says, “Yeah, I didn’t do so hot.”

“But you looked good doing it,” says Bill’s wife — Grey can’t remember her name. “And that’s the most important thing. Gosh, you’re such a pretty little thing.” And they both know that she doesn’t mean anything by it — as far as Grey knows, she’s a nice lady. But still — this is the shit he hates about this sort of thing. He doesn’t even know why he’s subjecting Missandei to this shit. This is exactly one of the reasons why he avoided having Missandei come to his work shit for years. It’s a women’s clothing company with — with lots of women in all levels of middle management — and with white men ultimately running it.

“Yeah,” Missandei says, lightly shrugging, grinning. “Thank you.”

It’s kind of a nice change of pace — being with him like this. She’s normally around him when he’s real — when he’s cranky and withdrawn and sterile and rigid — which she fucking loves about him. She’s bent, and he has rewired her brain. She finds his weirdo qualities so cute and sexy.

A fact about him is that he doesn’t like public displays of affection, and he doesn’t like for her to touch him too much around their friends. He has told her that it throws the group dynamic off. He has told her that she’s also Drogo’s friend and Jaime’s friend and Addam’s friend and Daven’s friend and Sandor’s friend. He has said that if they hang all over each other and get too cutesy and saccharine — it will make their friends view her as ‘the girlfriend.’ He has told her he remembers how Jaime used to talk about Addam, Daven, and Drogo’s exes. He generally called them stupid, silly bitches. He called all of Addam’s girlfriends golddiggers. He could barely stand to be in the same room as Daven’s college girlfriend.
She has told Grey that this is different though. They are different. She is different. She doesn’t think Jaime will start getting all sexist and bastardly if she like, kisses Grey real quickly or holds his hand in front of the group every now and then. And if Jaime does get weird about it — that’s actually really fucked up?

They arrived at the conclusion that this is actually more of a ‘Grey’ thing than it is an other people thing. It’s something he’s still working through. He has told her he’s not sure why he’s so freaked out by PDA. He has told her that it makes him feel awkward — because he feels like everyone is staring at him like he’s a freak — and it also makes him feel vulnerable — because it becomes clear to people that he’s so fucking invested in another person, and it will fucking wreck him if he loses his person. He tells her part of it is hiding her, so she doesn’t get taken away.

Some of the way he says things has to be purposefully manipulative. But she still drinks the Kool-Aid. She still melts into him under the cover of darkness, in bed, with all of their clothes off. She finds these terrifyingly sad confessions really romantic. Because — again — he has rewired her brain.

The thing about being together in public, among people Grey doesn’t give much of a shit about, people that he constantly is selling to — selling clothes, obviously, but also selling a lifestyle, an image, an aspiration, a business, a brand — is that their dynamic together shifts. His weird shit would stand out if it didn’t shift.

So he won’t let go of her hand. And he keeps smiling at her like such a dope. He keeps her close. He keeps planting kisses on the side of her head. And he keeps bringing the conversation back to her like a man who is obsessed. He keeps telling people that she speaks a gazillion languages and that her work involves producing material for multimillion philanthropy initiatives.

Attentions perk up and people ask him to tell them more. It takes her a bit to realize that he is selling her, too. In addition to selling himself, he is selling her.

One of Grey’s clients looks straight at her. “Can I just say — you’re just so well-spoken.”

It all goes cold. Or it all goes hot. Because she is just fucking raging over this. But she plasters a smile on her face and she says, “Thank you!”

At the end of the night, he goes to give his boss a quick digest, dragging a tired and quiet Missandei behind him. Grey yanks off his tie with one hand as he stalks across the lawn to where Barristan is holding court with the rest of the team, holding a glass of wine. They’re all fucking tired.

He shoves his tie in his pocket, undoes the topmost button on his shirt.

“He’s a big man,” Tanja says. “This is the most skin I’ve ever seen on you. It’s making me feel uncomfortable.” She cracks up. She’s been drinking. “I’m kidding. I love it. More please.”

Beside him, Missandei softly laughs.

He rolls his eyes. To Barristan, he says, “Matheson, GreenTech, Callison Group — re-upping sponsorship for the fall showcase. Those guys from PLL are being wads and say they have to look at their budget — but obviously they’ve had months to look into their budget. And — Lannister, tepidly interested. Wants to set up a meeting mid next week or later.” Upon Barristan’s skeptical look
because they have not broken into Lannister in his entire career, Grey wryly shrugs and says, “My friend’s dad.” Probably nothing will come of it. But sometimes name recognition helps. And Jaime’s dad recognized his name. And his face. From all of their awkward past interactions.

“Okay,” Barristan says. “I’ll have Mary schedule it. Nice work.”

“We’re gonna head out,” Grey says. “I’m beat.”

“You guys don’t wanna stay for one last drink?” Brian says, smiling, looking over Missandei. Grey reminds himself to remember that he needs to punch Brian in the fucking face on Monday.

She squeezes his hand. “It’s okay,” she says. “We can stay for a little longer.”

“Nah, I’m seriously so tired. We’ve got an early day tomorrow.” It’s a lie. They have nothing going on in the morning. But this is the type of thing people say to one another — to be polite.

“Okay,” Barristan says, smiling. “See you Monday. And thank you.” To Missandei, he reaches out to touch her outstretched hand. “It was so wonderful to meet you. I’m so glad to have met you.”

She’s resting her head against the window on the drive home. He can’t stop touching her. He knows she’s in a mood — not a bad mood — but a funk. That’s how she described it to him. She’s already apologized for not being fun — and he has told her she doesn’t need to apologize. It’s okay to be in a funk.

But he feels useless and helpless. He keeps touching her as he drives, running his palm up and down her back, shoving his hand between her knees, intertwining their fingers together. He tells her again and again, repeating to her, that he loves her — so much. And it’s starting to make sense to him — the way people can’t help but cling onto their love tightly — when they feel the other person pulling away. He gets it.

He lays her on his bed when they get back to his place. They are generally always at his place because it’s in the city, so close to everything. He kisses her, with him crawling on top of her. His tired body is waking up again, and he didn’t intend for this — he meant for it to just be comfort — but his body is responding. And he indulges. He touches her neck as he licks the seam of her lips. He groans as she opens her mouth and angles her head so he can get in deeper.

“Baby,” she whispers to him, panting, after they pull apart. Her brows are slightly furrowed and she looks torn.

“We don’t have to have sex,” he assures her. “I know you’re not feeling it right now. That’s okay. Let’s just cuddle and watch a movie or something.”

“I can’t believe you just said, ‘Let’s cuddle,’” she says, gripping his shirt, smiling into it.

He gives her this look of mock exasperation — and then he grins — as he strips off her clothes, takes off her bra and her shoes. He rummages in his drawers and grabs a t-shirt — with the emblem of their college on it — it was from crew. He pulls it on over her head before he quickly takes off his own clothes and climbs under the covers with her.

“Dude, again I’m sorry I was such an asshole to you about the golfing thing. You did so great
“No, I really didn’t,” she mumbles into his chest. “Don’t feel too bad about it,” she adds. “I like to be good at things, too, you know? It’s really fucking annoying when I’m not good at things.”

“Oh, man. I knew it was only a matter of time before you called me his name in bed — but I’m glad it’s right now, in the cuddles, instead of in the throes of sex.”

“Missandei,” he says. “That joke is getting so old.”

“Okay, Jaime.”

“It will never get old. Because it bugs you so much.”

“It doesn’t really bug me all that much. Jaime’s . . . really important to me. We spend a lot of time together. So I get it.” He pauses, orienting her face so she’s looking at him. He kisses her softly, chastely. “But he’s not you. That’s why I get testy about it. He’s not my boyfriend. You are.”

She bursts out laughing, pressing herself into him, rubbing her face on his skin. “I like that,” she says. “I’m your boyfriend.”

“Or partner, whatever.”

“Sure.”

“Wife, whatever.”

“Wife, whatever.”

“Wife, whatever.”

“Wife, whatever.”

“Oh, baby. That’s just a whole long conversation to have, jeez. Can’t you just be happy with being together — right now? For now? Sheesh. You’re so exhausting.”

“My boss really likes you,” he says, lightening up the conversation again. “He said you’re a spitfire. Which is — I don’t know if I fully understand that word. But he wants us to come over for dinner one of these days.”

“Oh my gosh, your boss is awesome!” she says, gushing and brightening. “I really like him.”

It’s a relief to him, that she’s perking up for real — because sometimes her low points are so scary to him — because he keeps looking at them with the clarity of hindsight. He remembers when they were younger — all the moments she pushed sunshine and light — forced it, really — at him to combat his extreme fatalism. It’s just so scary to him, to realize that she was faking it and hurting so much inside, and he didn’t even see it — because he’s fucking self-involved or she’s just so amazing at pretending to be okay.

“Missandei says. “The so smitten with you!” Misandei says. “It’s so ridic. So many compliments! I didn’t know you’re a genius! I mean, I did and I didn’t, ya know? But I didn’t know you’re the best mix of creative and analytical! I didn’t know that you move mountains! Baby, why have you been hiding these godlike skills from me?”

He shoves his face into her neck, lightly nipping the skin there with his teeth, hugging her body to his. “God, shut up. People like to exaggerate. I love you.”
He’s still snoozing nakedly in bed as she tears herself away from the cozy warmth of him. He gets to sleep in today because he worked over the weekend. His boss told him to come in whenever, just reschedule his meetings and get in sometime before noon. This means Grey will be in-office about an hour later than usual.

It’s not a wash-her-hair day. It’s definitely a wash-her-face day though. Every day is a wash-her-face day. She shouldn’t have gone to bed without cleaning off her makeup — she usually doesn’t — but she was just too freaking exhausted after sex that she just passed out.

She shakes a bottle of full coverage foundation as she examines her clean face. Her skin’s been pretty clear lately. She and Jhiqui have recently been chatting about this — she’s always switching makeup types and brands — and Jhiqui’s been saying that the older she gets, the fewer shits she gives about her face. But, don’t get her wrong. There are still way too many shits given to her face — just not as many as before.

It’s also something Missandei’s been working on. She’s asked him what his thoughts are about this — fully knowing that men love to say that women wear too much makeup and that they prefer the natural look — fully knowing that the same men will lust after a Kardashian.

Grey had laughed and told her that he never really looks at her face, he doesn’t really care, as his eyes dragged down her body. He had told her that he really likes her push-up bra. And it was such a purposefully baiting comment and he’s so frustratingly oblique sometimes — and it worked. She remembers the foggy haze of attraction and arousal after that, as she yanked his clothes off and shoved him toward the bed.

She’s been digging tinted moisturizers. She can get away with them when her skin is smooth and clear. Full coverage foundation is the fucking pits sometimes. It’s been a lifelong endeavor, to find the right tone, the right color, the right tint. Makeup is not really oriented for people like her. She has to always be in search of ‘speciality.’ Her skin color changes subtly with the sun. It’s taken her a long time to feel like she actually looks beautiful — because of her skin color. She’s always been told — but it sometimes seems like this fantastical thing to believe. It sometimes seem like people are always wordlessly tacking on “for a Black girl,” at the end of all their empty compliments.

She hears the bed creak as he gets up. She hears his feet padding on the ground, flexing the floorboards. “Coffee?” he mutters tiredly, walking into the bathroom, still naked. “You want? I make.” He flips up the toilet lid and starts peeing — just right in front of her.

She smiles softly, looking at his adorable, rumpled, sleepy face. “Yes, please. Thank you.”

He thrusts back into her, harshly and roughly, grunting loudly in shock as her teeth sink into his exposed throat. “God-damnit,” he says, shoving his hand underneath her ass, lifting her pelvis a little, to get in deeper. “This is fucking killing me,” he tells her, slamming into her again, grinding himself against her clit. She’s definitely not going to come from this, definitely not. But sometimes he throws the Hail Mary anyway. Sometimes it just feels fucking good. And they’ve come so far since the days when he was terrified of disappointing her and revealing to her that he was some imposter — not a man, not even a whole person.

He actually feels the most masculine — when he’s inside of her. It’s all sorts of cliched. But when he’s inside of her, he just feels fucking powerful as all fuck. Getting here was insane. And it’s still a
work in progress. But the lesson is in truthfulness and in letting go of old identities.

“I don’t even care,” he mumbles, knocking the both of them around on the bed. Her hands are braced against the headboard so he doesn’t clobber her into it, and her body is just shaking and bouncing with each of his efforts. The bouncing is driving him wild. He repeats that he doesn’t even fucking care at all — he means about not being enough for her. She’s like, fucking stupid. Because she really loves him. And he can’t make her stop. And it’s like — fuck it — it doesn’t even matter anymore. He’s taking it.

They’ve been having a lot of sex. A lot of sex. They spend too much of their off-time fucking. Even his running has taken a backseat to the fucking. He hasn’t been seeing his friends as much. She hasn’t seen her friends as much. Her friends are still merely putting up with him — and they always blame Missandei’s absence from their lives on him. And he will cop to it because it kind of is his fault. He knows this has to change. They need to have hobbies outside of fucking each other. But he’s only just gotten her back.

“All day,” he says.

“All day,” she repeats. And he’s lost. He doesn’t even know what the fuck they are even saying anymore.

Missandei is being a real girl about the cage. She doesn’t even like that he calls it a cage. She keeps correcting him and saying that it’s a kennel. And it’s just fucking semantics.

They’re just window-shopping and they are already bickering and arguing over the most minute shit. Missandei keeps wanting to size up a little bit more, but he tells her it’s important to keep it tight so that Momo 2.0 doesn’t think it’s okay to crap herself in her cage. Missandei tells him that it makes her feel so sad to confine a little puppy to a small kennel. He tells Missandei that it’s an animal — and to stop projecting her human feelings onto it.

And she stops him in the middle of the aisle, with her hands on her hips. And she says, “Are you serious, bro? You are constantly projecting your human feelings all over this animal. And that’s cool. I think it’s sweet. But you’re not letting me do the same thing? Do you realize how hypocritical that is?”

He shrugs. “So I’m a hypocrite. Good to know. What do you want me to do about it?”

“Stop being one?” She sighs. “God, now I’m talking like you!” She grunts. “I love when you shut down conversations with your rigidity. Love it.” She rolls her eyes and walks away, presumably to go grab some eggs and milk.

It’s really awkward to be at Jhiqui’s house without Missandei. It also bothers the shit out of Jhiqui,
which is the payoff. One of the payoffs. He kind of likes Nick. Nick is a nice guy — and not a poser or a fake. Nick owns up to his dorkiness. Which Grey kind of finds refreshing.

Grey has told Jaime to please be cool, to not take over too many conversations, to try not to accidentally say really arrogant shit, to not make assumptions about Nick and his friends, and to try not to point out how white they all are, all the time. Jaime has already snapped at him — telling Grey that he’s a fucking person who goes about his daily life interacting with other human beings and shit all the time. So he knows how to fucking act around different kinds of people and shit.

All of the fucking talking and discussion was pointless. Because Jaime is being Jaime. The guys around the table are very different from their usual crew. The guys around the table — in their glasses and their pale skin and their delicate bodies and their constant fear of causing offense — are all anti-Drogos.

Jaime is also amazing at poker. And it’s trippy, to watch old-money-rich tear shit up and away from new-money-rich. Jaime keeps taunting Nick’s friends — about how they’re paying for his rent this month — and they’re . . . they’re nice — so they uneasily grin at Jaime and congratulate him for being good at poker. Which — apparently — is hugely dissatisfying to Jaime because when he wins, he wants other people to hurt. He doesn’t want other people to graciously lose and say nice shit to him about it. Jaime has been going way overboard with the casual insults.

When Brad mentions that he went whitewater rafting over the weekend, Jaime aggressively asks Brad what’s so wrong about blackwater rafting. It’s clearly a joke — to Grey it is. But Brad pretty much almost cries from the stress of being called racist.

Jaime has been hurting some feelings. Grey is usually bad at detecting this sort of thing — but it’s very obvious people are getting sore. And Jaime knows it — but it’s very much Jaime’s MO to not stop pushing people unless they can muster up the balls to call him out on his bullshit.

“All right, ladies,” Jaime drawls, restacking his chips. “If I pay you enough, will you let me shit into your mouths?”

Nick is the only one who laughs — and very uneasily too. Everyone else tenses around the table. “Uh, no thanks, Jaime,” Nick says. “We’re not really playing, um, for that.”

He stops trying to clear dishes when Jhiqui aggressively tells him to just “fucking leave it.”

He’s getting a little bit fed up with what a fucking bitch she is to him, so he straight up asks, “Seriously, what is your problem with me these days? Missandei is happy.” And it feels strange — to declare such a thing so boldly and so loudly — with such surety. And to claim ownership over it. But he is the fucking source of her happiness. And he knows it. She’s the fucking source of his happiness, too.

Jhiqui looks at him with her face pinched and mean. “You know what my problem is,” she says dangerously.

“Actually, no. I don’t,” he says. “I’m bad at intuiting this sort of shit.”

“You’re an asshole.”
He shrugs. “Okay? Do ya wanna be more specific?”

“How long is she gonna be happy?” Jhiqui shoves out. “How much longer?” When he doesn’t answer, she says, “You’ve been stringing her along for a fucking decade, asshole. I don’t know what magic you have in your fucking dick — because your personality like, sucks — because this wonderful, beautiful, really patient person just puts up with such shit from you. All you care about is yourself. You don’t care about her. I’ve watched her just go up and down over the years because of you —”

“She actually goes up and down because she has depression,” he says, cutting in angrily.

Jhiqui looks stunned at that.

“Look, man. You don’t like me. Whatever. I don’t give a shit. You’re not a peach yourself. But it bothers Missandei — that you and I don’t get along. You need to try to fucking cool it — at least when she’s around. Fuck. Okay? In private — you can just be real with me. You don’t need to bother forcing yourself to be polite to me. I don’t give a flying fuck.”

She just stares at him angrily — she’s fighting to hold herself back from saying what she really wants to say to him.

And then she says, “You’re a real piece of work. You’re fucking emotionally abusive. You make her fucking jumpy as hell — about disappointing you or not doing what you want. You always want shit your way, without any regard to her fucking feelings. You’re a fucking disgusting cheater. And what? You go out there into the world and you realize that no one is as amazing as she is — so you come crawling back like a fucking snake. And nothing ever changes with you, does it?”

“What do you want from me?” he says, his voice uncharacteristically cracking from the stress of dealing with all of this judgement. “You want fucking assurances and declarations?” he throws out, with a sneer. “Well, I fucking love her. I love her a lot. She is everything. I am fucking here, in your house, dealing with your horrendous bullshit — because I fucking love her so much. I would actually fucking rather eat glass than deal with your passive-aggressive bullshit for yet another fucking evening — but I am here. By the way, your husband is actually really nice. So I’m not referring to him — as part of your fucking bullshit, Jhiqui. And I didn’t fucking cheat on her!”

He never thinks that he should have to answer to any other fucking person. Other than Missandei, no other fucking person is entitled to his answers. He doesn’t think that this is ever something that people are allowed to demand of him. He grew up oppressed under the regime of unfailing obedience — under the rule of his father, and then again under the rule of all the fucking people who stole his life from him. And look what happened to him. They always demanded so fucking much from him — so much sacrifice until there was just nothing left of him. He never ever bothers to correct any of the misunderstandings or the mischaracterizations of him because no one fucking deserves his reasons or his truth. He has never given a fuck if they all think he’s gay or he’s banging Jaime or he’s heartless or he’s a fucking traitor — because they are all fucking stupid and undeserving — but this fucking woman is driving him insane with nearly ten years of suspicion and judgement.

“I didn’t fucking cheat!” he repeats to Jhiqui. “I would fucking bleed to death for her! But you know what? It’s none of your fucking business! I owe you no fucking explanations. You have no right.”

“Yo.”

They both turn to see Jaime and Nick, standing in the entryway of the kitchen, watching them fight.
“I dunno if you guys realize how well sound carries in this cavernous house,” Jaime says, his mouth quirking up into a smile. “But we’re all like, listening to all of this. And I fucking love it — but you’re really making Nick’s friends feel very uncomfortable. Some of them are trying to quietly sneak out and go home and stuff. But don’t worry. I’ve barricaded the door. No gets to leave yet. I still have more of their money to win.”

When Jaime kills the ignition on the car in front of Grey’s apartment — their old apartment building — Grey asks Jaime if he wants to come up for a quick drink or something. Earlier in the night, Jaime already mentioned that he has to get up super early to go help Brienne’s dad in the garden — they’re digging posts or something, for a new fence because the old one fell over during the winter — so Grey feels kind of guilty about it. But Jaime starts up the car again, and he wordlessly drives into the underground garage of the building.

Jaime’s hands are on his shoulders, lightly massaging, navigating them to the door. Jaime likes to get maudlin and nostalgic every time he visits the old apartment.

Jaime cracks open a bottle of water and hands it over to Grey, before opening his own. He collapses on one of Missandei’s chairs. Missandei is already asleep in the bedroom. Jaime keeps his voice low as he says, “How you feeling, boo? You’ve had quite the night.”

Grey tiredly shakes his head. “Do you think I’m emotionally abusive?”

Jaime sighs. “Am I the right person for you ask this? Because me in my early twenties? Not my finest moment.” He takes a swig of water. “I tried to break down a door to get to a girl who was terrified. I shoved women around when I was drinking. And also when I was sober. I mean, we’ve all done shit we’re not proud of.” Jaime pauses. “It’s never either-or, man. If you’re not being good — that doesn’t necessarily mean you’re bad.”

“Jaime —”

“Grey, don’t give yourself another reason to let her down.”

“No, that’s not what I was gonna say.”

“Oh, sorry,” Jaime says quietly. “What were you about to say?”

Grey laughs quietly. “I was gonna say — you’re awesome. And I love you, too.”

For years, Jaime has been full of terms of endearment and declarations of love. For years, Grey has returned all of it with hard stares and long pauses.

“Oh my God, I love you, dude. Like for real. Like, it’s not even a joke.”

“No, dude. I know. You’re my best friend.”

“Dude, are you serious? Like, over Drogo?”

“I mean, it’s not a contest?”

“I mean, but it sort of is.”


“Dude, you actually have a brother. His name is Tyrion.”

“Oh, shit!” Jaime face flushes as he laughs silently — but also loudly. He’s slapping his leg and trying to keep from dropping his water bottle. “I forgot!” he whispers. “Oh shit, that’s funny.”
The text buzzes in his breast pocket during his work day. He assumes it’s Jaime telling him a random observation about white people — so Grey is a bit stunned to see that it’s Rachel. He hasn’t talked to her since he got back with Missandei. He just . . . has honestly been kind scarred by that whole nightmare and the fallout with Missandei that he’s mostly just avoided Rachel.

She’s asking him how he’s been — if he’s interested in getting together and catching up in the next week or so.

Her hair has been the exact same style for a lot of years now — because she has so many emotions and so many hang-ups tied to her hair. Because she’s such a fucking girl. Such a fucking superficial girl. Like, it took her forever to find a salon and to find a stylist. She’s yelped the shit out of the entire city. She’s done site visits.

Her hair used to be something that gave her grief when she was younger — because she went to school in Myr, because she was dating a white boy, because she was kind of shunned by the other Naathi kids — for generally not being Black enough. Or for whatever other reasons, she’s not sure. People generally don’t spell out the reasons why they are cold to her. Her mother is fairly light-skinned, too. Generations — hundreds of years — of colonization and racial intermixing will do that.

If not for her hair, she thinks that sometimes people would mistake her for Dothraki.

It used to be a private joke to herself — that she ain’t down with Beyonce hair. But then — lately, Beyonce has been doing some real shit and saying some real shit — with her hair. That is one of the many stupid, superficial reasons Missandei felt that maybe it was a good time for a modest change. She only wishes she had the balls to shave her entire head She wishes she had the balls to not give a shit about what men find attractive. As it is, she’s probably going in the wrong direction with this.

“So, are you ready for this, hun?”

She stares at her stylist in the mirror.

“Oh my God!” Clea cries out from the other side of the room. “I love your hair!”

The loud declaration kind of freaks her out — and it’s so bizarre and so crazy — but she actually waves at Clea and the others before she makes a beeline to Jaime, who is casually sitting at the bar.
with a beer. He’s the person she wants to talk to.

He had rented out the space for Brienne’s nameday. He’s sitting back and relaxing as Brienne gets passed around, from friend-group to friend-group. Thus far — Jaime and his brother are the only men in the room. It’s still very early.

He smiles at her as she approaches. He lets out a low whistle, sizing her up. “Hey,” he says. He tosses his brows up to the ceiling for a quick moment. “You’ve done something different. There’s something different about you. Now, don’t tell me. Let me guess. Hmm, is that a new dress?”

She shoves him so hard that he nearly falls off of the stool.

Jaime’s brother swats at him, too, from Jaime’s other side. To her, Tyrion says, “You look beautiful.”

She blows out a breath.

“Yeah, no seriously,” Jaime says. “You look awesome, Missy. I like the lighter color. I like the looser curls. It got relaxed a bit, yeah?” He reaches up toward her head, touching her hair — which is real fucking weird — that he’s just pressing his fingers into her locks like he doesn’t know that he can get punched for this if she was someone else. But then, it’s Jaime. “You know,” he says. “The lighter hair color actually makes your skin look darker. Because there’s less of a contrast.”

He snorts out a laugh when he sees the expression on her face.

“Missy! Chill!” he says. “As a fellow beautiful person, I can confidently tell you that you went in the right direction here.”

“As a non-beautiful person, I can also tell you that you went in the right direction,” Tyrion adds.

“Yeah, babe. Don’t worry about being a race traitor or anything like that,” Jaime cracks. “You are beautiful like a white person now! And that is really the only thing that matters.”

She knows that Jaime is honestly trying to make her feel better — with his incisive joke. But that is really the worst thing he can possibly say to her — in this moment.

She jumps a little bit and nearly elbows him in the face, when she feels a hand crawl across her stomach, pulling her backwards into his body.

“How was your day?” a ballad is being softly pumped out of speakers — and he picks up her hand, places one on his shoulder, puts one of his on her hip, gently guiding her with just his fingers, and he playfully does a box step with her. Into her ear, he says, “I’m fucking starving. Wanna share some fries or nachos or a burger?”

She grabs him by the forearms. And she gently pushes herself away from his body. He immediately straightens — stunned by her actions. He looks at her questioningly. And she covers up the awkwardness with a short laugh. She tells him that she’s already eaten — but he should go nuts. The fries are great. They are shoestring fries.
Missandei is being really fucking weird. He doesn’t know if it’s because he arrived late or what. But he did text her to tell her that he had to finish up some shit before he can head over. He said he’d be half an hour late, but it ended up being an hour. But she’s not normally the type to be so bothered by that kind of thing.

He’s had a really long, horrendous day. He has missed her — even though it’s only been a whopping ten hours since he’s last seen her. And she smells amazing. He can smell her from seven feet away. And she looks so good. And he’s been a little touchy after getting reamed by Jhiqui. And he’s disoriented and freaked out after getting that text from Rachel. So he just wants to be around Missandei and hold her and kiss her so that he can feel anchored to the ground — so that he can prove to himself that he’s not fucking making all this shit up in his head. They are good for each other. Jhiqui is fucking stupid.

But every time he reaches out to just casually touch her, Missandei’s all fucking jumpy and looks at him like he’s about to rape her — like he’d rape her in front of all of their friends — like he’d rape her at Brienne’s nameday party. It’s so bewildering. He doesn’t know what to make of it. The only thing he can think of is that she’s spoken to Jhiqui and she has suddenly realized that yes, he is one incredibly flawed human being, and she’s disgusted by him now. But it’s not her style. It’s not at all her style to withdraw from conflict — like this. Her style has always been to bravely meet it head-on.

Jaime is being really fucking weird, too. He tried to talk to Jaime about it, so that Jaime can tell him that he’s just being a fucking paranoid psycho. But Jaime’s avoiding him, too. And Grey cannot pinpoint the source of that at all. His paranoid psycho mind sometimes goes overboard, and it tells him that Jaime no longer likes him or wants to be his friend — now that Jaime has learned what a repulsive basketcase of feelings Grey really is.

There is one relationship he does not question. He and Jhiqui are still very much on the outs, so he has to generally avoid the north side of the room because he can’t be sure she won’t throw acid into his face if she catches him looking at her. He keeps trying to signal Nick to come over and grab a beer with him, but Nick keeps shooting back panicked looks, casting eyes toward his wife when she’s not looking. Grey is so fucking over what a chickenshit Nick is.

So . . . he’s stuck chilling with Tyrion and Missandei’s new friend, Dany, who doesn’t know very many people at the party. He ordered the shoestring fries. They are merely just okay. He’s shoving them into his mouth because life is fucking weird and his night sucks, washing down the oily salt with a pint of wheaty, unfiltered beer.

“You know, I don’t get it,” Tyrion says, raising a glass of whiskey to his mouth. “You like Jaime. I like Jaime. You’d think that we’d get along like fucking gangbusters when he’s not around. But no. It’s just more of this.”

Grey doesn’t say anything. He just miserably shoves more fries into his face.

Tyrion turns his attention to Dany. “Do you have hobbies?” he asks her.

“I work,” she says in a clipped voice.

“Well, I work, too,” Tyrion says. “But sometimes when I’m not working, I like to play racquetball.”
“You play racquetball?” Grey says, with his mouth full.

“Oh, you do?” Tyrion says, holding a hand up. “Offensive. Little people can play racquetball. We have hands. We have arms. We have legs. We have hearts. We have feelings. We bleed.”

“No, man. I was just repeating what you said. You play racquetball. That’s cool. I am interested in learning how to play racquetball.”

“Are you trying to ask me out?” Tyrion says. “Stop pussy-footing around and just do it already.”

God, this stupid Lannister sense of humor. “I’ll send you a calendar invite,” Grey says, pulling his phone out of his pocket, making his screen all greasy with his hand.

“Do you want to learn how to play racquetball, also?” Tyrion says, addressing Dany.

“No,” she says, voice devoid of emotion, as she takes down the rest of her drink in one continuous gulp.

“Missy, come on,” Jaime says, cornering her when she comes out of the women’s restroom. “You already know I’m a fucking monster. Come on, stop being mad at me. I don’t like it.”

“I’m not mad at you,” she says, sighing. “I’m just being stupid and lame.”

“Come on, man,” Jaime says. “That shit is so arbitrary sometimes. Sometimes hair is just hair. Sometimes it’s not just hair. But you are driving yourself nuts over this, and you’re not having fun at Brienne’s party. Come on, man. Come grab a drink with me and we can talk about whatever shit you want — hair, sports, work, your sex life, whatever. I vote for sex life, by the way.”

She crosses her arms and leans back against the wall, her legs flexing in her heeled leather booties, the light skirt of her dress resting against her thighs.


She pushes herself off the wall and walks into his arms.

Jaime is taking down shot after shot — he’s drinking too much — and he’s uncharacteristically jittery and serious, at the same time. He tells her that sometimes he just says weird, baiting shit, challenging people to read through the layers upon layers of context and intention, to get the core of what he actually means and believes. He tells her he doesn’t know why he does this — and he does know why. He tells her he challenges and tests people in order to keep most people at arm’s length. He tells her that he’s some rich white guy who just gets to feel awful all day at work, because of how inherently unfair their institutions and laws are — and it will never be enough, and he will forever be atoning.

He tells her that he really was just fucking around about the hair. It was a joke because he can tell
that she’s really sensitive about that kind of thing — about her identity and about the contrast and mixture of East, West, and South in her. He tells her that he knows what it’s like not to belong in a simplistic category. That’s what his comment was touching on. On the surface, they are beautiful in a way that is accessible to most people — that is, he’s white, she is light-skinned and has a high nose bridge, probably from all of the raping and colonization of her culture and her parents’ country.

“But sometimes, that is who we are,” he says. “My history touches yours, in that way. And that’s what I was getting at — with the joke. It was . . . a complicated joke. My delivery sucked.”

She scrunches up her new hair with her hands — messing up some of the nice work her stylist did on it. “It got to me, when you called me beautiful like a white person.”

“I’m an asshole, dude. You’re not beautiful like a white person.”

“Why do you think I speak so many languages?”

“Because you have a gift and an ear for languages?”

She laughs, raising her own glass to her mouth. “Well, yes. So I can impress at fancy white people dinner parties.”

“Why do you think I went to law school?” Jaime says. “Obviously, to defend fucking criminals. Obviously to practice the most lucrative kind of law there is.” He does a small fist-pump. “Yay, immigration law.”

“No, seriously. Why?”

He shrugs, throwing back another shot. “If not me, then who?”

She stares at his perfect face. She’s drunk, too. She starts crying, spontaneously and drunkenly into the bar top. He coughs violently, choking on his drink. She sniffs loudly as she reaches out to slam the heel of her hand into his back.

Grey kind of decides to take his revenge in a roundabout way — Jaime and Missandei are now both kind of ignoring him in tandem. They are having so much fun getting drunk with each other. Grey walks up to Brienne, who is sitting in the middle of Jhiqui, Nick, Clea, Doreah, Dany, and interestingly — Cersei. He gestures for Doreah to move over — she looks at him like he just grew a second head — before she mutely obeys. He takes a seat next to Brienne, who looks confused.

“Dude,” he says to her, as if nobody else is around. “Your party is so fucking weird. And you’re the only person left who likes me.” He glances at Nick. “Or who is allowed to like me. I’m bored. Can I buy you another drink?”

“It’s an open bar,” she says, face pink from being flustered and from alcohol.

“Oh right. Can I retrieve you another drink?”

She holds up her beer — which has been in her hand the whole time.

“Oh, great.” He sighs, rubbing his hands over his face. “God, it’s one of those days.”
Jaime’s slurring his way through an insane toast about Brienne, just doing his very best to embarrass her with these intimate details about their lives and their past. Jaime’s talking about how it’s a little-known fact that he and Brienne have known each other since they were children. He tells them that people always assume that he and Brienne were high school sweethearts, because of the way these sorts of questions are phrased. But they certainly were not high school sweethearts.

Jaime tosses out this very bizarre shoutout to his sister — asks her if she remembers how they used to always try to slam Brienne’s locker door on her face. He laughs and says that was horrible. They were really horrible.

Cersei looks stiff and very uncomfortable. Brienne’s covering her mouth in horror, and she’s saying, “Oh my God.”

It’s when Jaime starts talking about how horrible it was for him when Brienne was screwing some Dornish bastard, that Grey decides to immediately shoot to his feet and stop this. He crosses the short distance between where he was sitting and where Jaime is standing. He puts his hand on the back of Jaime’s neck and tells Jaime to fucking wrap it up.

“Guys,” Jaime says, gesturing to Grey. “My other love.”

“My God, you’re so wasted,” Grey says, grunting, because Jaime is just putting nearly all of his weight on Grey.

“I love you so much, Brienne!” Jaime calls out, raising his glass, absentmindedly pouring it all over Grey’s shirt. “You’re the absolute best thing that has ever happened to me! Happy nameday, baby! I’m so glad I get to celebrate all of your namedays and all the non-namedays with you!”

“Thank you,” Brienne says, amazingly calm about everything. “I love you, too.”

Jaime is completely passed out in the backseat and uncooperative. Grey’s hitting Jaime’s face — light slaps that are progressively getting harder — trying to get Jaime to wake up enough to walk into his house. But all he gets are mumbles and random mutterings. He angrily wonders out loud how in the fucking world Jaime got so fucking plastered. And from behind him, Missandei’s quiet voice says that it might be her fault. Jaime might have been working really hard — drinking really hard — to atone for something. She didn’t know — she didn’t know that Jaime gets like — all like — like this.

“Oh, it’s okay,” Brienne says. “Don’t worry about it. I had a blast. And he’ll be so pissed at himself when he wakes up. It will save me the trouble of beating him up. It’s really a win-win for me.” Brienne laughs. “Happy nameday to me!”

Grey’s so angry at Jaime’s unconscious body — as he fucking drags Jaime’s fat ass into the house — as he drags Jaime through the hallway — before roughly shoving him onto the bed. Brienne is close behind with a wet, cool towel and a bucket.
“Just in case he throws up in the middle of the night,” she explains.

“God, you’re a saint,” he says.

She chuckles. “Not really. He’s great. You know that. He’s really sweet and just so kind. He just . . . has a tendency to never do anything halfway. Sometimes you go hard — and you crash hard. I mean, literally once. He crashed a car, you know? That was the first time his hand got all messed up.”

It’s nearly four in the morning — so crazy — when she’s able to tiredly crawl into bed. He’s close behind, switching off the lights, shifting the mattress with his weight, before his warm hand touches her underneath the sheets. It’s just resting on her stomach. And he tastes like toothpaste and mouthwash as he slowly kisses her. She can always tell what kind of intention is behind his kisses. Sometimes he kisses for comfort. Sometimes he kisses to maintain a connection. Sometimes he kisses to affirm or confirm something about them — to himself. And sometimes he kisses with the intent of sex.

It’s so late — or it’s so early. And he’s breathing heavily as he runs his hand underneath her shirt, softly kneading her breast, sending tingles down to her toes. She’s easy. She can pretty much have sex with him whenever. She wants to have sex with him all the time, too. She has never denied him sex when he has asked for it. She hasn’t felt compelled to.

“Am I out of the dog house yet?” he asks.

“Do you like the hair?” she asks.

“Huh?” he says, lightly pressing his erection into her thigh, hands sliding down her body, tugging and pinching. “Yeah. It’s fine. It’s cool.”

“It’s cool?”


And that is actually all that she needs to hear. She’s been stupidly worried all night that he was being so handsy and affectionate in public because her new hair really does it for him. She’s been worried about just a bunch of really stupid, silly, superficial things.

She pushes herself to her knees. She straddles him. She grabs his hand and boldly pushes it into her panties.

He thinks she’s sleeping, as he stares at her in the darkened room. Her face is buried in his pillow and she’s curled up next him, her eyes closed, her breathing even. He brushes some of her hair off her face, pausing to examine the planes and lines of it. He still thinks it’s entirely a selfish thing —
that he’s keeping her. But he has stopped caring about it as much. For whatever reason, she’s sticking with him. It seems pointless now — to cobble up new reasons to get her to come to her senses.

Her eyes pop open. It makes him smile automatically. He’s about to tell her to go back to sleep, but then she says, “You know how you have a tendency to say that you’d kill yourself for me — that you’d die for me?”

“Yes,” he says.

“Don’t die for me,” she whispers to him sleepily, softly shutting her eyes again, yawning. “Live for me. Live with me.”

He goes rigid in bed, suddenly alert with his heart pounding. “Wait. Are you saying —”

“What?” she says blearily, opening her eyes again. “Wait, what?” And he can pick out the moment she replays what she just said — in her brain. “Oh! No! No no no! No!”

“You don’t need to say no that many times,” he says, relaxing his body down, letting his heartbeat slow. “I get it,” he says facetiously. “You don’t want to live with me or marry me — yet.”

He tells her that Rachel’s been texting him — asking him to go running or to grab dinner. It makes Missandei stiffen in the middle of pulling on her pants. She has just gotten out of the shower, and he’s still lounging around in bed, having just woken up from his short nap. They fucked all sweaty and hot after work, after she got home from the gym and after he finished his run. Now he’s watching her get dressed.

“What’s her deal?” Missandei asks, sighing before she continues dragging her tight, strategically ripped jeans up her legs. She’s going to dinner with her friends. She sucks in her stomach and frowns a bit, as she buttons her pants.

“I honestly don’t know what her deal is,” He says. “I think she’s maybe just lonely.” Missandei elbows down her semi-transparent white t-shirt — low-cut neckline — her black bra peeking through. “Does it bother you?” he asks.

“Does what bother me exactly?” she returns, pivoting around to lean her weight against her dresser. She crosses her arms. “The fact that you guys are like, still communicating or the fact that like, you’re kinda asking my permission to continue seeing her?”

“That’s not what I’m doing here,” he says. He raises himself up, so that he’s sitting, so that he can roll forward and stretch his back. “I . . . I don’t know the rules or the etiquette with this sort of thing.”

“Why didn’t you tell her you had a girlfriend?”

“I did. It was one of the first things I told her.”

“She’s white, right?”

He stares at her in confusion. “Yeah,” he says dully. “She’s white.”
“Why did you kiss her?” Missandei shakes her head quickly, as if shaking the fog from her brain. “I mean, why did you not stop her when she kissed you?”

“Because I’m an asshole?” He sighs. “Honestly, I did. Just . . . not right away. I’ve thought about this a lot. And I don’t know exactly how to explain it.” He clenches his fist and lightly hits it against the mattress. “Look, I don’t want to be some schmuck who’s a broken record about his pathetic, sad shit. But I think I have internalized that it gets worse when you fight back. I have a tendency to freeze or hide, when I feel like the ground isn’t underneath me anymore.”

She tears up. She didn’t expect to have this conversation at all. And certainly not like this, with her half-dressed and on her way out the door — with him undressed and still in her bed.

She reaches up to wipe her eyes with her knuckles. “It’s impossible to be angry with you over this,” she mutters. “I feel like such a fucking bastard when I feel angry over it. I don’t what to feel. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what the answers are.” She sniffs, glancing at the cat clock on her wall. “Shit, I have to go. Sorry. I’m gonna be late.” She wipes her eyes again, before shrugging into her knitted sweater. She sighs. “Should I cancel? I mean, I can stay, and we can talk about this some more.”

“No, no,” he says. “Go. Have fun. They’re gonna blame me if you cancel. They already hate me. Let’s not add fuel to the fire.”

She rolls her eyes before picking up her cellphone — she types out a quick text to Jhiqui to let Jhiqui know she’s running maybe ten minutes late — before dropping her phone and her keys into her purse. “Sometimes I feel like it’s us against the world,” she says, feeling tense. “And I am fucking insane. The world is just telling me I’m fucking insane. Why do I have to constantly defend and fight for this relationship?” She sets her mouth in a tight line. “Why isn’t it easier?”

He claws around on the floor for his boxers — sliding them on as he stands up. He walks the short distance up to her — he thumbs away some more of her tears, trying to clean up some of her smeared makeup. He wonders if this is how adulthood is supposed to feel — this constant ambiguity. Her arms come up, around him. And he just lets himself hold her for as long as she can put up with it. He tells her he’s sorry. She tells him that he can stop saying he’s sorry all the time. She tells him he is so self-punishing. He tells her that she is perfect. Her face screws up — reflecting anger — and she tells him to not say that. She’s not perfect. He lightly presses his nose against her cheek, smelling her — and they lightly sway on their feet.

“Do you need cash?” he says, murmuring the kiss into her neck.

“I already told you. I prefer to get paid via PayPal.”

He gives her a look. He doesn’t like her prostitution jokes. Because they make him feel like a shitty person.
After looking at him for a beat, she says, “I don’t need cash.”

He lets go of her, so that he can go dig around the mess on her floor for his pants — so that he can find his wallet. “What if someone steals your purse? How are you gonna get home?”

“Wouldn’t the cash be in my purse too, though?”

“Keep it somewhere else. Put it in your pocket.”

She runs her hands over the seat of her pants. “These are actually fake pockets. See?” She tries to stick a finger into the seam, showing him it’s sewn shut.

He closes his wallet before he hands her a few bills. “Put it in your boot. Put it in your bra. Put it in your fucking ass. I don’t care. Just take it.”

“Grey, I can just borrow money from Jhiqui or something, if my purse gets stolen.”

“What if you get separated from her?” Now he’s getting agitated. “Missandei! Fucking come on! Stop being difficult and just take the fucking money and stash it somewhere. I want you to stay safe. Fuck!”

She looks contrite. “The extra bulk though.”

He gives her a look of warning.

“I know. I know. My clothes are too tight.” She snatches the rest of the paper money from his hand, shoving it all roughly into her bra. “Sucks that you have to deal with me and my tight clothes.”

He spontaneously reaches out and grabs her wrist, just as she’s turning to leave. He turns her around. He pulls her into his body — still warm from her bed — anchoring her hips to his. He wets his own lips before he licks hers, before he kisses her mouth roughly. He wants to tell her this is why they bother, this is why they fight, this isn’t meant to be easy. He rubs himself against her — she breaks away with a gasp, her eyes heavy and flying out into space. He grabs her ass and lifts her an inch, to get her attention. He makes her look at him. “Come over after,” he says. “I don’t care how late it is. Wake me up. We’ll have some more fun.”
She waves to her friends enthusiastically, smiling so widely. She hasn’t done a proper girls’ night in such a long time — and she hasn’t done a proper girls’ night when happy in an even longer period. Missandei takes her purse off her shoulder and lays it on the back of her chair as she takes the seat next to Jhiqui. Brienne gleefully leans forward and hands Missandei a plastic booklet menu — simultaneously telling Missy that she doesn’t even really have to look — Brienne knows what they are going to order. It’s become an ongoing, super esoteric joke now — eating at the Cheesecake Factory. Dany keeps turning the pages of her menu with this mute disgust.

Missandei’s not altogether sure Dany likes Jhiqui, Doreah, or Clea that much — and she’s not sure the ladies like Dany back. The cool thing about being older is that she really doesn’t care that much if her friends like her other friends.

All around the table, her friends either have iced tea, a modest glass of wine, or water in front of them. Being twenty-eight feels like a significant departure from being twenty-one. She’s vigilant about pacing herself, because she doesn’t want to lose her entire weekend to a raging hangover. She has errands to run. She has to go grocery shopping. She has to work on a presentation for Monday. All of that will be all the more painful if she overdoes it.

“Can I ask you something?” Jhiqui says suddenly, oddly serious, turning to her with a bubbly soda or a soda water in hand.

“What’s up, babe?”

“He treats you well, right?”

Missandei’s brows shoot up. There’s really no question in her mind, who the ‘he’ is referring to. Grey has told her that he and Jhiqui had a bit of a brutal fight. That is also something she’s been trying to not let herself care about or get in the middle of — which has been frankly difficult.

She tilts her head, scrutinizing Jhiqui for a slow second. “Yes,” Missandei finally says. “He treats me very well.”

Jhiqui looks very conflicted. “I want to get to know him better,” Jhiqui says. “I mean, for real. He’s your guy, and I don’t even know his story. Do you guys wanna come over for a barbeque or something? We can invite Jaime and Brienne, too?”


Jhiqui looks relieved.
Grey’s sitting on the couch in a stained white t-shirt and sweatpants, with Missandei’s TV droning on in the background, in his apartment. Over speakerphone so he doesn’t have to worry about keeping the phone to his ear, Jaime asks him what the fuck is that noise — when he hears the sound of whales singing over the line. Grey has had to stop and restart this documentary multiple times because Jaime makes it hard to focus on watching it. Grey tells Jaime that his coworker Tanja keeps bugging him about watching this whaling documentary so they can discuss it over work-Skype. He tells Jaime that women really love to discuss and overanalyze really inane shit — and he gets enough of that at home with Missandei, which he doesn’t mind — with Missandei. But it’s been annoying as hell to deal with it, with the work-wife. Grey tells Jaime that Missandei calls Tanja Grey’s work-wife, which makes him feel weird and uneasy. But Missandei seems to have a sense of humor about it and she’s not saying that to make him lose his fucking paranoid mind. She told him that she has a work-husband, too. His name is Bingo. That’s not his real name. His real name is actually Bharadwaj, but he tells people to call him Bingo. Tanja is also engaged. As far as Grey knows, Bingo is single.

Jaime laughs and asks Grey just how fucking nuts it drives him, that Missandei has a work-husband.

“Oh, so fucking nuts. I hate him. But he also sounds like a very pleasant person.”

“Dude, have you read Octavia Butler?” Jaime asks suddenly.

“Some.”

“Boo, did you read Wild Seed?” Jaime goes on to tell Grey that he brings it up because there is some crazy dolphin sex in that book. Crazy in like, a good way. It’s like, dolphin porn — mixed in with some bestiality overtones, mixed with a lot of slavery shit — which is, obviously, both of their jams. Jaime tells Grey that he should read the book. So that they can discuss it.

Grey says, “Oh my God. You are serious.”

“Dude, I know what’s more your flow than some fucking whaling documentary, man. I’m your husband-husband. Just fucking read it. You’ll like it. God.”

“Dude, we’ve been talking for like, three hours. Why didn’t you just come over?”

“Because dude, I’d have to like, put on fucking clothes. And you live so far away now. Why don’t you come to me?”

“Dude, I have to be home. Because when Missandei gets here . . . we’re gonna fuck.”

“Nice!”

He gets up to open the door for her — when they broke up, she apparently threw the keycard he gave her into the garbage — so she no longer has a key to his place. He kind of already has another one for in his wallet — by that, he means that he definitely has another one for her in his wallet — but he’s kind of nervous about giving it to her. Because what if she like — tells him no thanks?

He flips his wrist over to look at his watch. He shows it to her and says, “It’s eleven o’clock?” He means that’s it’s still early, and he hadn’t been expecting her for hours. She grins tiredly at him and cocks her hip so that it’s leaning against his door jamb for a moment.
He heads back into the living room and quickly clears his plate and mug — the whaling documentary on pause on the TV. When he comes back into the living room, he picks up the remote, points it at the TV, and turns it off.

She’s toeing off her shoes in his entryway. “You didn’t have to turn it off,” she says. “You should finish it. Don’t you wanna know if the activists will save that whale from those fishermen who have been whaling for hundreds of years because it’s part of their cultural heritage? I didn’t mean to interrupt your movie night so early.”

He’s biting back a smile. He says, “It’s okay. I forgive you for coming home early.”

The way he phrased it isn’t lost on her — and he can see her decide not to comment on it.

She squeals when he suddenly grabs her and picks her up, bouncing her once his arms before he walks her into the bedroom, before he drops her on the mattress. After he pulls his shirt off — he sees her hand dip in and out of her bra. She flashes his own money back at him. She tells him that she’s all in one piece, her purse is still in her possession, his cash has gone unused. She drops the money on his nightstand, before she sneaks her fingers into the waistband of his sweats, before she uses the elastic to pull him closer, to where she is reclining on his pillows.

He suddenly realizes where this is going, as she pulls his body closer to her face. And his pulse is pounding in his ears. He can’t even hear what she is saying to him. He can’t even hear himself breathe. He puts a palm on the wall — and he tries not to freak out as she lays her hand on him through his sweats, running her hand up and down the length of him, hard and erect. He’d have to say that … if they were keeping track, the ratio of him touching her parts versus her touching his parts is something obscenely uneven. Maybe like eight to one.

Grey remembers the foolhardiness of being younger and being in college. He remembers these conversations with the guys — with Drogo saying uncomfortable things about how girls in relationships hate blow jobs. Drogo used to say that after a girl knows she’s got a man, she stops being a tiger in bed. She becomes an uptight cat that gives a few tugs, calls it a day, and then expects him to buy her dinner for her troubles.

This has . . . not been Grey’s experience with Missandei at all.

She gently kisses his dick — through the fabric. It makes him tense up with anxiety. This is why the ratio is eight to one. It’s not her fault. It’s not her limit. It’s his.

She rubs her nose against him and takes an audible sniff, which manages to look shocking and fucking hot — manages to make him feel scandalized and turned on. And then she lets out a drawn out, contented sigh, before she fully sinks back into his pillows and blanket.

She reaches out to him. She softly says, “Do you want to smooch a little and talk about this to death until it’s no longer sexy?”

“Oh God, you know I do,” he says.

She makes a big show of crossing her ankles and twiddling her thumbs. She says, “So, what’s your deal with blow jobs?” in an over-exaggerated casual tone — she’s trying to be funny to cover up some of her nervousness. He knows that much.
And he feels that his deal with blow jobs is fairly intuitive. He was forced to give them when he was a terrified little kid. He didn’t want to, and it scared the shit out of him because he didn’t know what was going on. Then he learned what was going on. Now he really fucking hates them, for all the memories they bring up. “What’s your deal with blow jobs?” he asks her.

“Bleh,” she says, resting her hands on her stomach. “Where to start.”

“Ask me simple questions,” he suggests. “And I’ll ask you simple questions back.”

“Okay.”

“Me first. Do you really want to do it, or do you just think you should?”

“The former, actually. I know you probably don’t believe me. But the former.” She tells him that she’s finally too old and too knowledgeable to be fooled into thinking that giving a guy a blow job is the only way he will love her back. Obviously she’s gotten this far with him, sans blow job. Obviously she can get away with this forever with him — because he is one of those weirdos that hates getting blow jobs. So obviously her motivation does not come from obligation.

She starts to mention her ex — and it’s just something he doesn’t want to hear about — so he tells her to skip over that part of her explanation. But she insists on telling him — she insists that he know that she, like many dumb kids, thought it was a prerequisite or a rite of passage at some point, to give head. She admits that she has actually has only done it all the way once. She hated the ending of it — and almost barfed because the taste of semen is the fucking worst. It almost made her cry on the spot because it was nothing like she expected. And she was kind of melodramatic as a teen. She tells Grey she didn’t want to hurt her ex’s feelings. But she never did it again even though her ex wanted her to — they never talked about it. So he kind of never understood why she never wanted to do it again. So sometimes — rarely — she halfheartedly put his cock into her mouth for a few seconds to get him to shut up already. But the first time was kinda traumatizing, so she’s never going to swallow ever again. The end.

Grey says, “God, just when I think I can’t hate him more — I do.”

“He wasn’t a bad guy,” she says. “He was young, too. I bet he’s no longer going around whining about how rough blue balls are and how the only relief he will get is if he gets to put his cock in some woman’s face,” Missandei says, smiling. “I bet you he no longer does that.”

“Jesus, stop defending him.”

“Yeah,” she says, tone now more serious, shrugging. “I really didn’t like doing it. I feel like most women don’t love eating dick just to eat dick, dude. They do it because they really like the guy attached to the dick — or they do it because there’s something sad inside of them. It my case, when it came to you — it used to be a mixture of both.” She pauses, running her hands up and down his bare chest. She runs her hands around his shoulders and pulls him to her, hugging him, pressing her mouth to his clavicle. “These days, I just really, really love the guy attached to the dick,” she says softly.

He physically pulls away after indulging in her attention for a quick moment — because he wants to look at her face. “Dude,” he says, “so you lied to me about liking it and being good at it.”

Her mouth comically drops. “That’s not what you were supposed to take away from that!” She’s shaking her head in disbelief. “I lied because I was just trying to make it sound easy and casual and fun and sexy — low pressure for you.”
“Why would you want to do something that neither of us like that much?”

Her eyes rise to meet his — and she takes a moment to think through her thoughts. In that space of time, he kind of adjusts the sheets and blankets on the bed. Then she tells him that the way they were having sex was so unfair and unequal sometimes. He was always giving like it was his fucking mission in life. He wouldn’t even . . . try to have mutually pleasurable sex — penetrative sex — with her — for the longest time. Like — she had to convince him to try it, over and over, to keep trying after all of the times he was so discouraged and so convinced it would never work. He used to like, go down on her like it was his job. And it made her think about how — even though they cared a lot about each other — it must have been similar to his other bad experiences — in the sense of serving other people — and that made her so fucking sad and upset. She tells him she was trying to make it fair — and she couldn’t make herself be upfront about it — maybe because she was too immature and young. It still goes back to how she was misguided and thought she could heal him through the power of her fucking vagina.

“I know I was pushy. And I was always trying to make you do stuff you didn’t want to do. That makes me upset, too. When I think about how it must have made you feel.” She sighs, rolling onto her side, still facing him. “But I didn’t know what to do. If I didn’t push you to do what you didn’t want to do — I don’t think we’d be having sex the way that we do now. I don’t think we would at all. I think you’d always be going down on me. And over time, you’d resent me for always taking from you and you’d hate yourself for always giving to me.” She pauses. She tells him that this was sort of what she felt with her ex. They were big virgins when they started having sex with each other — they were inexperienced and were too young. She didn’t know what sex really entailed. She thought it was simply an expression of love. So it made no sense when it started to make her so upset and angry with him and with herself — whenever he got himself off with her body and then left her behind in his dust — whenever he had the gall to ask for even more, ask her to put his dick in her mouth.

She tells Grey her ex just . . . was inexperienced at giving women orgasms. He never went down on her. It might not have ever occurred to him to — that it would’ve made her more receptive to his asks. And she was too self-conscious to ask for what she wanted.

“I didn’t want to do that to you,” she whispers to him. She tells him everything is different with him — all in good ways. She tells him that she feels her issues with their sex life is wholly unlike any other woman’s issue with sex. She’s sort of had these conversations with her friends — she knows that men can be fucking horrible and selfish when it comes to sex — she has first-hand experiences with this, too. She tells him that sex with him is not at all like that. She tells him it’s so crazy to her — that he ever thinks that she doesn’t want him or want to be with him or is just putting up with him. It doesn’t feel at all labor-intensive to work out sex stuff with him. Because even though he’s a shut-mouthed asshole sometimes, he’s actually really open-minded and fair. “And that body,” she says, dropping her voice to a whisper, momentarily closing her eyes. She’s not touching him, but her skin just darkens, just the tiniest bit. “You really do it for me — just by like, standing around. Just by like, eating your dinner. Just by like, being a monster asshole and lecturing me about staying safe by stuffing money into my bra, like you don’t know that I have these.” She holds up her clenched fists.

It makes him laugh a little — that, he can’t help.

“Babe,” she says. “You just have to accept that you’re not a charity case. You have to accept that I find you insanely attractive. Like, I cannot even handle it sometimes.”

“I didn’t know any of this,” he mumbles. “I had no idea you felt this way. I had no idea what you were even trying to do half the time. I just had no idea those were the reasons.”
He tells her that he thought — he doesn’t know what he thought exactly. He didn’t let himself examine it very much because it freaked him out. He just knew that he was so in love with her — he wanted to make her happy — and this horrible shit made her happy — and so maybe he could try this horrible shit so that she would be happy. That was the logic he laid out for himself. And sometimes it made him very angry with her in ways that he could not control, and it was so confusing because he loved her so much. Maybe that was why they . . . broke apart. He couldn’t reconcile the two things in his mind — how someone he loved so much can so purposefully make him feel so bad. He was immature, too.

“Knowing this makes me feel better about a lot of stuff, actually,” he tells her.

“Yeah?” she says hopefully.

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Well, cool. Man, we should’ve been telling each other the truth the whole time.”

He shrugs. “Rookie mistake.”

“Though to be honest, I dunno if I had the self-awareness to have told you all of that, when I was younger. I was just going at it blind.”

“We both were,” he says.

They are sitting up now, on the bed, cross legged, her tucked among pillows.

“Why does it make you feel vulnerable?” she asks. “Are you afraid I’m going to like, bite your dick off — or hurt you in some way?”

“Oh, God no. I didn’t mean physically vulnerable. It’s just — doing it makes me feel very submissive and helpless. Because I’m not doing anything besides like, sitting there or lying there. I’m not useful. And beyond that, I think I would feel very disconnected from you — like you’re not a person — but a vessel.”

He refrains from telling her that there have been other girls — in his adolescence — who were so confident in their ability to suck dick that they actually went bezerk when he was unresponsive, when he couldn’t stay hard. It’s easy to be young and insecure — for him too — and there have been girls that flipped out and accused him being gay or being the devil incarnate or being fucked up and weird — for his nonresponsiveness. He doesn’t tell Missandei this — at least, not at this juncture — because he knows it will upset her a lot to hear it. The conversation is already really heavy. This is something he can parse out and reveal to her in bits and pieces, over time.

“You always need to be doing something, don’t you?” she says, a clarity coming over her expression. “It’s very hard for you to just be at peace doing nothing, isn’t it?”

“Well, if ya ain’t constantly hustling —”

“Oh, I know. You are losing the game.” She pauses. “Babe, do you think I’m useless and submissive, when I’m just lying there doing nothing and you’re like, going down on me and rocking my world?” She kind of bites down on her lips to keep from laughing at herself. She’s trying to keep
It serious. “Do you think that I feel . . . disconnected from you?”

“Oh, God no.” Actually, he feels very connected to her, in those moments. After all, his face is like, all up in her business. It’s really intimate. He blinks, kind of in shock. Because he’s kind of an idiot. It’s honestly something he doesn’t know how to answer. Because he’s never framed it like this — to himself. “I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t know why it’s different for me. I haven’t thought about this very deeply.” He pauses. “I just like making you happy. I just like making you feel good,” he offers.

“But I like making you feel good, too, Grey.”

“And you already do. You always do.”

She sighs. “You know — I know it bothers you that I have a much harder time having orgasms on my medication. It’s been obvious that it bothers you.”

“I want you to have them because I want you to feel good,” he says.

She gives him a wry look. “And because it makes you feel like such man when you give them to me. Let’s not front. It’s not all about me, okay?” She laughs.

He laughs, reaching out to lightly shove her, watching her sway against the headboard of the bed.

“But I’m still happy without having them. I just feel good being with you. Honestly.” She pauses. “So, I’m saying. It would be cool with me if we never had oral sex again.”

“No. But I want to,” he blurs. “There can be so much more to sex than just basic shit.”

She smiles — triumphantly. “I know. See? You get it? There’s a double standard happening here.” She slams her hand down on the mattress, her face open in wonder. “There’s another double standard happening here!” she says giddily, realization blooming on her face.

“Oh God —”

“Grey — just try to apply how you feel about the oral on me — and flip it. I have moments where I feel similarly. I also have moments where I want to make you feel good — in that way. Maybe it will make me feel like such a woman, I don’t know. I don’t know exactly how it would feel. Mostly I just want us to have sex every now and then where — you don’t ‘pay’ me back for it. And I know you’re saying you don’t need to receive oral to be happy with sex. But ah, I’m saying the same thing to you. I don’t need oral to be happy. But you’re telling me no — we’re not giving up oral when it comes to me. So . . . I don’t know what I’m saying anymore. Just that I keep having this feeling that I want sex to be fairer. But I don’t want to make you so upset about it, either. That’s counterproductive.”

He tells her fuck it, okay, let’s just go for it and see what happens.

It’s almost not the right attitude to have about this kind of thing — and it’s kind of like, maybe completely right attitude to have about this kind of thing. It’s like playing a very odd, sexy game of Russian roulette.
He tells her that he needs to be drunk for this. It’ll help loosen him up. She stares at him like he’s lost his mind. But after a moment, she scooches all the way off the bed and tells him that — honestly — she should probably be drunk for this, too. To also be loose. But also in solidarity. She walks out of the bedroom and returns a moment later with a bottle of Jaime’s dad’s whiskey and two shot glasses.

She balances the two glasses on the mattress — having a hard time with them because the bed is soft. He reaches out and anchors the glasses down for her, as she pours the first shot. It’s a modest pour — because it’s really nice whiskey. Honestly, they both feel bad that they are wasting it like this. But then he reminds her that it’s really not a waste, if it kind of like — helps them accomplish something huge.

They clink glasses and simultaneously toss back the first drink. He tells her that he’s so in love with her, as she puts her full concentration toward pouring them the next shot. She tells him that it’s so embarrassing, how happy it makes her to hear him say that sort of stuff. She covers up her self-consciousness by picking up her glass — clinking his again — and then sucking it down. She lightly coughs before she gags a little bit. She tells him that she actually really hates drinking alcohol so fast. It’s so gross. She tells him that it must be no thang for him, since he was such a dude in college. Such a bro.

As she pours the third shot, he tells her that he really wasn’t at all a bro. He was like, a weirdo-loner, actually. She looks at him with her eyes a little cloudy — the alcohol is warm in his gut, and it’s starting to hit him already, too — and she tells him that he had a bunch of friends in college, he was a total jock, and he spent his weekends partying hard and fucking around with girls who weren’t her. She sarcastically tells him that he was a weirdo-loner all right. She clinks his glass and takes down the shot. She grimaces right after, and she tells him that he has such a fucking bent view of himself sometimes.

He skips over most of what she says — and he reminds her of what she already knows — he was fucking around because he wanted her so badly. But he couldn’t have her. For the various stupid reasons they convinced themselves of — when they were young.

Another shot gone and she tells him that she can relate. She was doing the same thing.

“Do you think we’d still be together? If we had hooked up early?” he asks.

“Probably not consistently,” she says. “We probably would’ve broken up at some point. But I think we would’ve gotten back together eventually.” She looks up at him. “I can’t imagine not being with you, in any context.”

“So you’ll marry me,” he says, slurring.

“What!” she shrieks. “That is not at all what I was saying!”

“Relax,” he says. “It was a joke.” The room is fuzzy, and it feels bright. She is so beautiful and so his. And he’s probably drunk enough.

Her eyes widen as he gets to his knees, un-cinches the cord of his sweats, and pulls down his pants, exposing himself before he tugs them all the way off. He chuckes them off the bed. He was already shirtless — so now he’s just completely naked. His voice is low and his words all run together, when he asks her where she wants him. Like, physically. What position should he assume? And she’s frozen and stunned. He laughs and he tells her that this is her baby. This is her project. He is her project. She will be the one to see this through to the end — whatever that looks like.

He touches her face — palms it before he bends over and kisses her. Her eyes flutter shut as she
kisses him back. He gently maneuvers her, pushing her so she’s lying down on the bed, with him on top. He’s using the kiss to push down the anxiety — for the both of them. He sighs into it. She tastes like the whiskey they’ve been drinking. He opens his mouth up and forces hers open too, touching his tongue to hers, winding them together, pressing his feverish body against her fully clothed one. And this won’t do at all — it’s not quite fair. He pulls the button out of the buttonhole of her jeans. He unzips it. His hands are tense and his arms flex as he slowly pulls her skin-tight pants off, taking her wet underwear with it. Her hand grasps the back of his neck and she’s responding — arching into him — spreading her legs apart. And they are totally both naked down there. Somehow, he had forgotten.

She’s coating him with her wetness as they furiously make out on the bed. She’s so slick and soft and warm and it’s so enticing — he keeps rubbing up against that — mostly on purpose — sometimes accidentally. She’s been facilitating, just keeping her legs indecently open. He almost just lets himself slip inside of her — just for a taste.

By the time she pulls off her shirt and bra, he is rock hard. And maybe ready to fuck her face.

She is an adorable mess of apprehension — kind of uncharacteristically innocent-looking — as she stares down at his erection. This image of her — nervous and worried — kind of allays some more of his fears. He’s not the only one afraid and freaking out about this.

She gets in close. The first thing she says is that he smells like soap. And also like her. She says it shyly. He tells her that he showered after he got home. And also that they were kinda close to boning just a moment ago. That’s why he smells like her.

She nods thickly and slowly. And then she grabs one of her scrunchies from his nightstand, tying her hair up with it — just intuiting that he’d want to see her face. She has him mostly lying down, but also kind of propped up with pillows at his back. He almost laughs out loud, watching her stare him down like he’s a puzzle that will bite her — watching her first try to come at him perpendicularly, her face hovering just inches from his dick — he can feel her hot breath — before she changes her mind and shifts, getting pushing his legs apart, so she can crouch in between them. She’s a little embarrassed about her awkward non-expertise — and she mutters a quiet apology over it. She’s just . . . the most fucking amazing thing that has ever happened to him.

He’s not quite emotionally ready for it — though he supposes that he can’t really ever be emotionally ready for this. Her mouth is warm — almost hot — as it touches down on him. He nearly jumps right out of his skin on contact. His entire body is tense and coiled up. He’s already sweating. The sound that escapes his throat is weirdly high-pitched, and it sounds all hopeless. He is losing his fucking mind as he watches her slowly take more of him into her mouth, as he feels himself getting coated in her saliva. She’s keeping her eyes on him — just watching every flicker and change on his face.

His eyes just about roll back into his brain, on the experimental upward pull. His brain is just a whole mess of feelings and thoughts — he can’t decide what the overarching theme is. He’s feeling sad — very sad actually. But physically — he also definitely feels fucking fantastic. Like — really, really good. And that makes him feel really, really happy. He asks her to chill a little on the suction. And when she goes back down, he grunts with effort, reaches behind him to grab the headboard, just trying to rip it into splinters — as her hot mouth takes him in again — this time deeper. He feels himself hitting the back of her throat and he just about loses his mind. He’s just gone — he doesn’t have thoughts or ideas and he’s barely even existing — for long minutes as this shit is happening in front of his face and on his body. The climb is steady and predictable — shockingly with no surprises, no backtracking. He is into this. He is really into this. He is probably actually coming up to the end of this way faster than either of them are anticipating. He manages to remember what she said about semen.
“Okay,” he finally chokes out, putting a hand on her cheek, getting her attention. “Okay, okay. Hold on.”

Her lips are pink and swollen, when she lifts her head to see him better. “Are you okay? Is it okay?”

He has decided that doing this with someone he loves feels completely different. “Yeah,” he says thickly. “That was pretty fucking okay. Really nice.” He swallows, his tongue thick in his mouth. “I think we can work with this. Yeah. Figure this shit out later. But now I’m just inspired to fuck you all regular. You make me feel things, girl. I want to be in you.”

She looks at him in confusion. “Are you quoting rap lyrics?”

It’s Missandei that gets the phone call. Katy drops the decision swiftly, laughing about it. And when Missandei hangs up, her eyes are like saucers. She tells him, “Dude. We have a dog!”

He has noticed — of course he has noticed — that she has co-opted his dog. He loves it. He’s into it.

“Baby!” she says, clapping her hands and jumping up and down in place. “We have a puppy! Oh my God! We have a puppy! We can’t call her Momo, by the way, you twisted fuck. But we can discuss over dinner tonight. Oh my God! Baby! Oh my God, we have to buy so much dog shit now! Baby, what is your credit card number? Just kidding, I have your wallet right here.”

Katy literally hands the dog over to them like it’s nothing. It’s crazy. They were supposed to bring a leash, a collar, and a dog tag. For the sake of ease, they just got a dog tag at Walmart late one night and had the machine inscribe Caramel on it. Missandei pressed her nose to the machine the whole time, watching it cut, muttering that there’s no way in hell their puppy will actually stay named Caramel. She told him her issue with it is that it’s a stripper’s name. It’s also not her favorite dessert component. Too sweet.

It’s a warm day, but after the dog actually succeeds in ejecting herself out of the open window while the car was on the road — hanging herself for a short second before Missandei roughly pulled her body back inside the car — just scaring the ever-loving shit out of the both of them — no fucking self-preservation instincts at all — he’s locked all the doors, just to be sure. The dog is cowering underneath the seats somewhere in the car. He’s asked Missandei not to force the dog to sit on her lap. He is learning that she has a tendency to just want to love things so much and so hard. She just wants to play with the puppy and smush it in her hands.

“Momo 2.0 really needs to get a better handle on her shit,” Missandei says, lightly joking away her bewilderment. She’s rattled.
She and Brienne are lying on the floor of Grey’s apartment — in Grey and Jaime’s former apartment — and they are eating dinner together and also trying to coax Momo 2.0 out with dog food. There are pellets of dog food littered all over the living room floor around them. Momo 2.0 is shaking like a leaf, shoving her body tightly against the wall, under the couch. They are generally ignoring Momo 2.0, trying to just let her get used to their presence. Taking her out to potty is this insane endeavor that sucks up so much time because every time Missandei or Grey tries to leash Momo 2.0, she’s so terrified that a little bit of poop comes out of her butt every time. And Grey is heavy-handed, so he thinks that it’s just better to move fast and just be done with it.

Which has resulted in really wet, drippy poop nuggets all over the carpet. Her life lately has involved a lot of carpet cleaning — she’s now so worried about him getting his cleaning deposit back on the apartment. Grey has a stomach of iron, so the poop doesn’t faze him. She, on the other hand, gags every time.

She and Grey use their lunch breaks to go home to check on Momo 2.0. He checks in at eleven in the morning. She checks in around one in the afternoon. The days of them meeting for lunch are just gone.

Missy tells Brienne that Grey is like, a fucking diabolical genius. Because Missy basically lives with him now. She is constantly at his place because she’s constantly looking after this dog. She feels bad leaving him to deal with a terrified diarrhea factory by himself — she feels bad leaving the terrified little diarrhea factory to deal with him and his brand of very brusque caretaking — so she spends all of her nights at his place. She sleeps in his bed with him every night. She has not been to her apartment in forever.

“My fucking furniture is here, too!” she says, gesturing to her couch and the dining table.

Brienne laughs, loudly. “Ya got punked real good!”

He stretches his calves and tries to kick mud off of his shoes before he enters into the coffee shop. Rachel is following behind nearby. This wasn’t a pre-planned thing. She obviously ran into him on purpose, because she knows his route. And he’s trying not to get upset and be a jerk about it. But he hasn’t been saying much to her, and she’s been talking a mile-a-minute, acting like everything is normal.

This something he has to tell Missandei about when he gets home. And — at the very least — he wants to be honorable about it — all of it. Besides, Missandei actually would not want him to be a complete jerk to someone whose fatal flaw is that she weirdly likes him.

“Rachel,” he says, holding the coffee cup in his hands. He’s not even a coffee drinker. “We can’t be friends.”

Her face falls. “Why not?”
When he arrives home, Brienne is also there and she and Missandei are sprawled on the ground, on the carpet, chatting. There’s dog food everywhere, spread around them in a halo. This is no longer a bizarre or disorienting sight to him. He has to drop to his hands and knees and crawl over in order to kiss Missandei hello. She smiles after they part and tells him he tastes salty. He asks her if she’s going to clean up the dog food soon. She tells him she will. He is skeptical — her attention to detail in cleaning is atrocious — but he also knows that he is psycho when it comes to cleaning. He already knows he will have to vacuum later. As he gets back on his feet, he gives Brienne a “sup?” and a head nod. He leaves them to go clean up whatever mess Missandei has made in the kitchen.

“Baby, you forgot to say hello to Momo 2.0,” she says, calling after him.

“The dog doesn’t care if I say hello, Missandei,”

He can hear them talking from within the kitchen.

He hears Missandei say, “What if she never warms up to me? What if she’s scared of me for the rest of her life?”

He hears Brienne say, “Missy, I’m not going to lie to you — that is a distinct possibility,” before Brienne’s loud, punctuated laugh cracks the air — before it shifts into a girly, high-pitched squeal-laugh, and she says, “Stop! Oh my gosh! Stop slapping me!”

Missandei is hugging her iPad to her chest in bed, when he walks in brushing his teeth. They try to do a lot of their toiletries out of the bathroom now, for Momo 2.0’s sake. Missandei puts her makeup on in the living room these days.

She acting really weird and ashamed — when he catches her hugging her tablet to her chest.

She sheepishly flips the screen. And he almost spits toothpaste out — when he sees a blown up picture of Momo 2.0 on the screen.

“She won’t let me hug her for real — and she gets so scared when I stare at her — so I have to do this,” Missandei says miserably. “She’s so cute. Ugh. Just so cute.” Missandei runs her finger on the glowing screen, on the photo, kind of petting the dog through it.

“Dude, will you just marry me already?” he says through the foam. The more and more time passes — the more and more funny it all is — and the easier and easier it becomes, to say this sort of thing to her. It costs him less now. “Seriously,” he says.
“Weddings are so expensive,” she says, shifting her eyes away, deflecting.

“We make more than enough money,” he says, before holding a finger up, letting her know he is pausing the conversation. He has to go run and rinse out his mouth.

After he tells her that he ran into Rachel, after he gives her the rundown on what happened and what was said — she doesn’t really know what she’s supposed to say. She doesn’t want to be catty. She doesn’t want to sound possessive. But she also doesn’t really want to empathize with some person who kissed her man even after learning that he wasn’t really available to be kissed. But then Missandei does empathize because it’s like — sometimes people do things when they are in pain — things that they are later ashamed of. And if people can’t pay penance and be forgiven for their mistakes — that’s just not right or fair. But then, it’s not like Missy wants Grey to become best friends with some white girl who tried to get with him. Not that her race matters. It does and it doesn’t. God. Missandei wonders if she’s being a horrible bitch about this. Did she make him do this — reject someone who was probably pretty nice overall? Was he kind about the rejection, at least?

“You don’t make me do anything,” he says, lying beside her on the bed. “And I tried to be nice? It was very weird though, to kind of break up with someone you were never with.”

She asks him if he will miss the friendship. He tells her he kind of misses the running partner. Missandei offers to run with him sometimes, if that helps. It makes him curl his hand around her butt and pull her body against his. He reminds her that she really hates running. He gently tells her that she’s also not fast enough to keep up, a fact that she readily agrees with. Then she tells him that sometimes she’s insecure over the fact that there are a lot of parallels here. This story also has a girl who’s sad inside — who is persistent and who just wants to be loved. And it has the same male lead — a boy who is withholding — who shunned love.

“At the very least, I got to you first,” Missandei says lightly. “If you had met her first — who knows who you’d be lying in bed with right now?”

“Don’t joke about that,” he says. “It’s not funny.”

“I was just kidding,” she says weakly.

He flips the blanket off of his body so that he can stand up. “Well,” he says. “I don’t like what you just said. I’m gonna go grab a glass of water.”

They have be very quiet these days so they don’t scare Momo into shitting herself in her cage. She’s a fairly quiet dog who rarely barks — much like Grey — and so they wouldn’t know that something freaked her out until the morning after, when they stumble across the shit-mess in her cage, which she had sat in all night. Then they have to loom over her and scare more shit out of her as they bathe her — then they have to clean out her entire cage. It steals hours from their day all the time.

The first time this happened, Missandei was so guilt-ridden over it that she had a hard time stopping herself from checking in on the dog constantly in the middle of the night.
He can hear her feet, walking toward him. He lowers his glass of water to the kitchen counter. When he turns around, her hair is an asymmetrical mess of riotous curls, her long bare legs are these stems that come out of the bottom of his t-shirt. She’s chewing on her bottom lip nervously — he can see her in the dim light. One hand is grabbing onto the other elbow. “Hey,” she says softly from the doorway. “Are you coming back to bed?”

“I didn’t default to you,” he says, cutting to the chase, voice low and almost angry. “I didn’t settle for you. I didn’t let you wear me down. I didn’t just give up the fight and let you have me. I fucking chose you. Don’t you dare take that away from me.”

He silently holds her face in his hands and he wills for her to stop crying, but her tears are soaking through the gaps in between his fingers. He remembers the recent past, when he was hard-pressed to see her weep like this — and he keeps having to remind himself that it doesn’t always signify tragedy and sorrow. She has told him that when she was younger, she felt so much anxiety whenever her grandmother sobbed loudly over her brother Melaku, that Missandei just taught herself to suppress her own tears.

She whispers to him that sometimes, she only needs to look at him — before she finds herself crying — because she feels such emotion when it comes to him. He can see the ticking in her jaw — these fluttering little flickers of movement — as he smoothly glides his hand up her bare thigh and hitches it higher over his hipbone. Her breathing is slow and deep, as she holds onto him tightly, as he slowly pushes back into her. Sometimes he feels like their bodies are permanently fused together — even when they are physically apart, they are still together — good or bad, better or worse. He knows he is moody sometimes. She presses her lips to his ear — a small whimper leaks out in shuddering breath.

Momo 2.0’s favorite spot in the entire apartment is really her cage. They can leave the door to it unlocked and opened the entire day — and Momo 2.0 will still not dare to leave it. They’ve stuffed the cage with tons of blankets — there used to be cushions — but they discovered that it is a real pain the ass to keep cleaning wet shit out of cushions. It’s much easier to throw soiled blankets into the wash.

Momo 2.0 won’t eat in their presence — she only eats at night in the dark. She also won’t rest if they are around — she’s hypervigilant and watching them the whole time — so they keep her cage in the bathroom, with the door closed, with a little night light on at all times. The space is not so intimidating and expansive as the living room, and it’s still close enough that they can hear her whimpering in the middle of the night.

Which she does. Sometimes all night. It drives him nuts. Because Missandei can’t ignore it. She often gets out of bed to check on and make sure Momo 2.0 hasn’t crapped herself. He can ignore it just fine, but Missandei keeps asking him if it just breaks his heart to hear those whimpers. He says it doesn’t. He feels nothing inside, when he hears those whimpers. Well — he feels irritation and annoyance. But that’s about it. Missandei likes to look at him like she doesn’t believe him.
The dog is the biggest cockblock ever.

And they really have got to stop calling her Momo 2.0. It’s actually worse than calling her Momo. Momo 2.0 also invites all of these questions — people realize it’s some sort of inside joke — except it’s not at all funny. He’s been working at being more transparent and open about himself and who he is. When Tanja asks him what the deal is, with the name Momo 2.0, he tells her it’s because new dog looks exactly like his old dog, which was named Momo. He felt relief when she said, “Oh, cute!” and didn’t ask any follow-up questions.

In contrast, when he talks to Daven about it, Daven, having some awareness that Grey was on his own from a very young age, does ask him what happened to the original Momo. Grey tells Dav that original Momo died. He killed her. Because his dad made him. Because they were starving.

He always expects people’s ignorant pity. Sometimes he’s not wrong. But — as he has been finding — sometimes people surprise him in good ways. He expects for Daven to call him subhuman or to scowl at him in this crazed disbelief.

Instead, Dav tells Grey that Kara has had students from the Summer Isles — a different generation than Grey, of course. They’re a lot younger — children of the original survivors. And the crap their parents went through is just so sad and so crazy.

“Dav,” Grey says over Skype. “She’s completely terrified of me. She doesn’t like it when we touch her. Her existence involves hiding in dark spots all day and night. I’m almost at my wit’s end. I’m almost thinking about talking to Jaime’s brother and getting some hook-up of Prozac so that I can dose this dog and try to reduce her anxiety.”

“So . . . don’t do that,” Daven says mildly. “It just takes time, man. Just do what you’ve been doing. Do some training — teach her to sit, heel, lie down and stuff. That will boost her confidence some. Don’t pick her up or console her when she’s crying. That just reinforces that behavior.”

“Dude! Thank you! Can you please talk to fucking Missandei about that? She’s such a girl whenever the dog starts crying. She won’t listen to me.”

Daven laughs. “That’s your issue with your lady, man. I will not get in the middle of that.”

He completely loses his cool when Missandei isn’t home. He is completely sick of the way Momo 2.0 is treating him like he’s trying to do her harm when — really — all he fucking wants to do is give her a fucking good life. He is not her fucking enemy. He’s been trying to get her to come to him — coaxing her with food. And he is not completely in control of his feelings as he roughly and violently yanks Momo 2.0 out of her cage, grabbing her by her collar and the scruff of her neck.

He shouldn’t even be surprised, when a puddle of pungent, goopy shit just starts dropping on the hardwood — and on his arm. They know better now — to keep this dog off carpet. And he’s so fucking pissed — because of course. This dog has an unending supply of shit just coming out of her body all the time, even after they take her out to go potty five fucking thousand times a day. He has to clean up the cage and the floor later. She continues to drip shit as he carries her to the bathroom, trying to catch the errant shit droplets in his hand.

He plops her in the tub — a bit too roughly. He gets in with her, hiking up his pants with his shit-
smeared hands. And he says, “Come on, man! Do you want me to throw you in the fucking garbage!” She cowers and is shaking pathetically. Her tail is tucked between her legs and she is too scared to make any eye contact with him. He turns on the faucet and waits for the water to warm up, running his shit-smeared hand and shit-smeared arm under the water. He knows that Missandei will be so disappointed in him, for this.

Momo 2.0 is shivering underneath his ministrations, as he washes his hands and arms before he carefully pours warm water over her body with a small plastic bowl. Her brown fur darkens with the water, curly hair flattening. Her tail is constantly glued in between her legs. She is such a nervous dog. With the constant wet shitting, the area between the underside of her tail and her ass hole is completely wet and raw all the time. This dog will not allow that fucking area to air out. The constant dampness is gonna give her a fucking infection. He rubs tearless dog shampoo in between his palms before combing it through her hair.

After they are done, after he’s completely soaked and lightly smelling of dog shit, he lifts her while she is still wet and towel-dries her on the sink. She’s still shaking violently — he can’t tell if she’s cold or if she’s just terrified of him.

When she gets home, Grey is asleep, on his stomach on the floor, shirtless, with only a pair of running shorts on. One of the throw pillows from the couch is wrapped in his arms, shoved underneath his face. His entire side is pressed against the couch, which is tucked behind the coffee table. He must’ve fallen asleep chilling with Momo 2.0.

Uh, the crazy part is that Momo 2.0 is not wedged and shaking underneath the couch. The craziest fucking thing is that Momo 2.0 is lying down next to him. They are touching body to body. Her little furry booty is resting against the side of his body. She’s alert and awake, watching Missandei gawk at her.

Missandei’s whole body is tense and aching from keeping it together. She slowly reaches into her purse to grab her phone. She carefully turns on the screen and unlocks it. And then she carefully aims it at Grey and Momo 2.0 on the floor, willing this dog to not — fucking — move.

She snaps a picture.

More than thirty days ago, she put in writing her intent to not renew her lease. When she tells her grandma that she has moved in with a man and is living in sin with him — her grandma merely sighs in disapproval, knowing that she is being baited.

She tells Mars and Moss — on a three-way call — that it’s a money thing — she’s always at his place all the time. It makes no sense to pay rent at a place she isn’t inhabiting. Her brothers tell her that if she really fucking needs money so badly, then just send them less money for grandma’s care. She doesn’t need to prostitute herself to save money.

She sullenly says, “I was fucking joking. It’s not about money. It’s because I fucking love him, and I
want to be with him.” She also reminds her brothers that some of that money that gets sent to grandma is actually also from Grey. Because he’s not letting her contribute to the rent at all because he knows where most of her money is going. She tells her brothers that they should really cut Grey some fucking slack.

But she really knows that her brothers’ problem isn’t truly with Grey. It’s with her. She’s their baby sister. And she’s not turning out at all like what they had expected. They’re having trouble accepting how stubborn she is — how antagonistic she can be — how punishing she can be — how insolent she can be — how shortsighted she is — how Western she has become — how far removed from them she has become — how she doesn’t value their culture anymore — how she is arrogant and behaves like she is above them, now that she is Western. They blame Grey and his ‘toxic’ influence because it’s easy to default to a story about of a shepherd who has led his flock astray — instead of telling a story about sheep that do not conform.

The end of their conversation is very unsatisfying, and there is just so much tension in her body because of it. And she feels guilty. She’s scared that they’re not altogether wrong in their assessment of her.

To prove some sort of point to herself in a very misguided, but very enjoyable way — she sits Grey down on the couch when he gets home from work. She wore a skirt to work today. She unzips his pants and pulls out his soft penis, stroking it lightly until he’s hard in her hand, as he wordlessly stares up at her with his dark eyes. She drags her underwear down her legs before she sits on him. They have sex on the couch with her straddling him, grasping the back of the couch with her hands, with nearly all of their clothes still on. She keeps her red shoes on because he growls at her to leave them on. He’s in an aroused daze when she bites his lip harshly, when she asks him if he thinks she’s a good girl. His eyes are heavily lidded when he tells her that she’s a very, very good girl, roughly pushing her hair out of her face, his own breaking into a knowing smirk as he snaps up into her with a body-jarring jerk.

He tips his beer back, sucking it down in a continuous gulp before he crumples the can in his hand, before he deposits it in the recycling bin. He catches the fresh, cold can that Jaime throws at him, angling it away from his face as he cracks it open, froth shooting out and spilling over his hand. He peers over at the grill, waving some smoke out of his face.

“Don’t overcook it, bro,” Jaime says to Nick — predictably backseat driving. “Just enough for the shells to open up.” Jaime picks up the spoon in the mignonette and tastes from it. There’s nothing sour and pickled that Jaime doesn’t like. That’s something Grey told Nick. And Nick is just too nice and too people-pleasing.

“Hm, that’s good,” Jaime says. “I like the raw garlic. It has bite.”

Nick honestly looks sheepish and embarrassed as he turns some hot dogs on the grill. Jaime casually says that they have a friend — Drogo — and Drogo is an asshole when it comes to grilling hot dogs and burgers. Drogo says it’s too brainless — too easy — too white. Nick tells Jaime that he gets it. Hot dogs are kind of like . . . a cliche.

“But you made these,” Jaime says, not phrasing it like a question at all. “Pork casing?”
“Nah, man,” Grey interjects. “Sheep. Has to be. Look at the girth.” He makes the motion of jacking off.

Jaime snickers, rolling his forefinger and thumb into a circle, looking through it. “Good point, baby. Always look at the girth.”

“Yeah,” Nick says quietly. “It’s sheep.” He is so easily intimidated.

“Emulsion sausages. I dig it. Cured and smoked, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Suh-weet.”

There aren’t enough chairs around the firepit — just five really beautiful Adirondacks because Nick and Jhiqui are so fancy. Grey tells Missandei to go ahead and sit on the ground. Jaime snickers delightedly at that, finger-combing his hair off his face. He’s been trying to wear hats less. Because — as Jaime has told Grey — he probably should appreciate his hair more — just in case he starts to lose it early.

Missandei actually sits down on the smooth rocks, rolling them around as she shifts into a comfortable position — at his feet. It makes him laugh, mostly to himself. He uncrosses his legs, careful to not kick her in the head, so he can bend forward. He pats her on the back to get her attention. He laughs again — quietly tells her she’s being ridiculous.

He says, “Come here,” as he helps lift her back to her feet. And then he pulls her gently into his lap. She ends up blocking the fire — but her body is warm. She’s a little rigid, from the awkwardness of sitting on him in front of people. In private, she sits on him all the time.

He laughs to himself over that, too. He slouches down — shifting the both of them. She squeaks and grabs onto his forearms, to keep her balance.

“Guys!” Missandei says, squirming a little in his lap. “Just the other day, Grey and I were just sitting around playing with our dog. And a text comes through his phone, right? He stops everything to check it — so I know that it’s Jaime. And he takes such a long time reading it. And he has this stupid dorky smile on his face. And I’m like, ‘Whatcha reading, babe?’ And he like, giggles and says, ‘Oh, nothing. Just something funny Jaime said.’”

That is not true at all. That is not at all how it went down. He actually told her that Jaime was stuck at dinner with his dad and was miserably giving him the play-by-play, and it was hilarious. But he hears Brienne’s loud, “Ha!” and he sees Jhiqui’s quiet smile, and he feels Missandei’s body shaking from laughter — he’s not going to correct the story. He presses his own smile against her shoulder, runs his hand against her palm.

She’s loving this night. It’s warm. The fire is all glowy. It’s all boozy and rose-colored. They’re well-
fed. Everyone’s getting along. She’s told that Nick baked a fucking cake, and she jumps out of her cushy man-seat to go into the kitchen to help Jhiqui pour more booze into coffee and put perfect little cake slices onto plates.

Brienne swipes up a finger full of whipped cream and puts it in her mouth, her cheeks red from the residual heat of the fire. “Oh, more,” Brienne says, watching Jhiqui put smoky whiskey into these really beautiful ceramic mugs. “More, more.”

Jhiqui laughs.

Over coffee and whiskey and a fire and the brightening stars, underneath fuzzy and heavy knitted throws that Jhiqui had passed around to all of them, encase in his warm and familiar body — the conversation comes to an awkward slowdown when Nick asks them if they plan on having kids. Naturally, Jaime answers first. He flatly tells them that he’s not procreating — it’s a complete waste, and it’s selfish in an overpopulated world. And his own father was a shitty parent, so he doubts he’d be any good at parenting, anyway. Jaime unnecessarily adds that he and Brienne aren’t planning on marrying each other, either, because it’s an archaic and worthless institution. Brienne lightly raises her brows, when all of their attentions turn to her — waiting for her response to this. Missandei can even see Brienne’s flush, even behind the orange glow of fire.

Brienne clears her throat. “You know, people always look at me in these moments like they feel sorry for me. Like I’m the female victim of this guy’s strong opinions. Like I’m always sacrificing myself and the things I want to appease him because I’m dumb enough to be with him.” Brienne shrugs. “Which I think is bullshit. People only treat me that way because I’m a woman. And I am only a woman when it’s convenient for them.”

Jaime reaches out touches her face — staring at her fondly. “It’s you,” he says. “And it’s me, kid. In this. Always.”

“You know we’re married, right?” Jhiqui says, gesturing between her and Nick. “You know we want to have kids, right?” Her face is open and curious — not angry.


Jhiqui shrugs. “To be honest, a big part of why we married is because Nick really wanted to — his parents really wanted us to — and my folks really wanted us to. I think I could’ve done without.” She pauses, laughing wryly to herself. “I used to be a feminist. Now I’m thinking about taking sabbatical from my job and just being a housewife for a while because Nick makes enough money.”

“And you guys?” Nick asked curiously, directing all of the focus on her and Grey.

“We really haven’t talked about it,” she admits honestly.

“Yeah,” Jaime cracks. “He only asks you to marry him every other week and stuff.”
She can feel Grey shrugging behind her, shrugging because he can’t argue with Jaime. Because they rarely argue. Because they always freaking team up with each other, doing this annoying-adorable shit that they do.

She thinks about it for a bit. And then she says, “My brothers have kids, and their kids are so awesome and amazing. And I kinda always wanted to try and be an actual mother to somebody.” She shrugs. “God, you’re intense. Stop staring at me like that, Jaime.” She holds up a hand to block his psycho face from her vantage point. Her face is hot and she feels embarrassed and vulnerable — especially since she’s sitting on him, but can’t see him. It’s intimate and it’s also disconnected. She shifts around in place, twisting so she can look at his face — which, she notes with some surprise, is soft and slightly downturned into a frown. “I never brought it up when we were together, before,” she tells him. “Because I didn’t want to scare the shit out of you — and I honestly thought that you didn’t want kids.”

“Why did you think that?” he asks curiously.

“You always made these little comments. When I took my birth control or brought up my birth control. You were kind of moody about it.”

“Oh,” he says. “I think you misunderstood.”

“I did?”

He shrugs, orienting his face to the sky for moment, trying to crack his neck. “I used to always have this idea in my head of when my life would stop,” he says, looking back at her. “It kind of coincided with how old my father was, the last time that I saw him. I used to think that my life would just be done at age thirty. When I was little, I could picture who I’d become up until a certain point. After thirty, it’s all just dark and blank.” He pauses. “Dead men don’t make good fathers,” he says.

“And now?” Jhiqui softly asks — pulling his attention off Missandei for a moment — reminding Missandei that they’re not having this conversation alone.

Grey shifts in his seat, lightly lifting her body as he gets comfortable again. “Well, now one step at a time,” he says. “I’m trying not to freak out at the thought of being at my company for another five or six years. And just the idea of retiring from my company as a multi-millionaire — like Selmy is gonna do — is like, Jesus. Stab me in the face and kill me. And I kinda love my job, too.” Upon the look on Jhiqui’s face, he says, “It’s hard to undo psychological conditioning.”

“Man, your thirtieth nameday is gonna be an insane cornucopia of emotions,” Jaime says, grinning. “Which one are we celebrating? The fake one or the maybe-real one?” When Grey says nothing, Jaime nods. “Okay, both. I’m hearing both, G.”

Grey laughs. “That is, if I actually even make it that far. I dunno. Maybe premonitions are real, and they come true.”

She lightly swats him. “Don’t joke about that,” she says. “Do you really want to leave me widowed and Momo 2.0 fatherless?”

She realizes her mistake right away. She realizes her mistake in articulation. Because something comes over his face, before he says, “No. I don’t.”
It took a lot of work, but Momo 2.0 will sit on the couch with them — usually on the far end of the couch, tucked against a corner and avoiding eye contact. When he comes home from his run, he sees Missandei making kissy faces at the dog on the couch, talking to Momo 2.0 and narrating out how cute her little face is, how cute her little eyes are, how cute her little paws are, how cute her little nose is. Missandei is so fucking in love with their dog.

“Baby, look,” she says to him. “She recognizes her name. Momo 2.0!” The dog’s ears perk up. “See!” Missandei squeals.

“Fuck,” he says, very slowly walking toward her so that he doesn’t scare the dog. He leans down and kisses her. He touches Momo 2.0’s head. “Missandei. We really need to give this dog an actual name.”

“But she’s just getting used to Momo 2.0. She’s going to be so confused when we change it.”

“Babe, her name is not gonna be Momo 2.0. You don’t want the ghost of my dead dog forever hanging over her, do you?”
Grey does not revere anyone. He does not fawn over anyone. But the closest he ever comes to any of that is when he’s in the presence of his boss.

And she’s wildly overdressed and looking a bit oversexed in her bright red skater dress. There are kids and their families at this restaurant. She’s actually very annoyed with Grey because when she walked out of their bedroom and asked him if she was appropriately dressed for dinner, he had glanced at her before saying, “Yeah, sure.”

Which, now that she thinks about it — makes this completely her own fucking fault. She should know better.

She uneasily rubs the back of her neck as Grey leads her to the table, with a hand on the small of her back. He unbuttons his suit jacket before sitting down on the bench. She carefully sweeps the skirt of her dress so that it covers her ass, as she awkwardly and carefully straddles the bench, teetering on her heels, before sitting down next to him. She feels his fingers run down the entire curve of her spine — and she is not charmed by him at all.

Barristan is wearing a tropical print shirt that old white guys wear on vacation. And his wife is totally super Black.

Like, not just a little bit Black — a lot Black. Thus, not at all what Missandei was expecting. But it also kind of explains Barristan’s general interest in her and also the way he speaks to her — that is, not like how other white dudes speak to her. His wife’s name is Grace. And Missandei is already crushing hard. Grace’s a professional volunteer, board member, and philanthropist — because of the crazy money they have — and also because she’s retired. Grace used to be the executive director of several nonprofits, and then she used to run a consulting company for nonprofits. Grace is wearing an effortless white linen shirt and a pair of jeans. She’s so classy, and Missandei feels slutty and young and vapid and like she’s trying too fucking hard — just in comparison.

And they are at a fucking pizza parlor.

“Overdressed much?” Barristan says dryly, directing the comment only to Grey, flipping over his own menu. A smile touches his mouth as he holds it up to the light, his reading glasses winking at her, to get a better look at the words.

“Oh, hush,” Grace says, swatting him with her paper napkin. “If I was still young and beautiful, I would look like them all the time, too.”

Barristan grabs his wife’s hand mid-air, kisses the back of it.

“Do you want to share . . . a bucket?” Grey says from beside her, flipping his plastic menu frontward and backward, over and over. He points to the menu. He means a bucket of rum-based fruit punch or whatever. It comes with a shovel.

When she looks into his face — that beautiful face that she loves so much — she realizes — that he
She purses her lips tightly together, stares back at his smiling eyes, doing her very best to not let herself break into a grin. She doesn’t want to give him the satisfaction. Sometimes she doesn’t know why he does the things he does. His pranks are often devoid of purpose, like they are just mean things he does to embarrass her, that just strike his fancy. Sometimes she doesn’t even know why she finds the asshole things he does to be so attractive and compelling. She just wants to grab onto him and pull him closer and smother him in her attraction to him. She resists.

They’ve been getting along so well. This whole thing — their whole thing — has been going so well.

“Are you sure you want to share a bucket of booze with me?” she asks, primly smoothing down her paper napkin and adjusting her silverware just so her hands have something to do before they decide to betray her by palming his face or holding his hand. “Remember the days when you refused to share food with me because you thought it was gross and unnecessary PDA?”

Missandei laughs as she noisily stirs the ice in their bucket with the shovel, as they wait for their second one to get made. She’s tipsy, and she’s hunting down the maraschino cherry — Grey says he hates maraschino cherries, which she knew about him — he said it more for Barristan and Grace’s benefit. “He doesn’t like sweet things,” she explains to them.

“Except for you?” Barristan says teasingly, raising a brow.

Grey snorts noisily, his mouth half full of fatty pizza. “She ain’t that sweet,” he mutters.

Grace had ordered an entree salad. Barristan ordered flatbread with no cheese. Just sauce, garlic, and some spinach. They said they generally try to eat healthily. Barristan said that the reason why he picked a pizza restaurant is because he knows how Grey eats.

Missandei got a soup and garden salad combo. And Grey is single-handedly taking down a specialty sausage pizza. Missandei has snuck in a few bites. Grace keeps staring at Grey in a kind of disbelief. They have told Grace that Grey has to constantly shove calories into his face because he runs so much, or he loses weight. Missandei tells Grace that Grey freaks out when he loses weight because he’s such a woman about it.

“So how come you will not marry this fine gentleman?” Barristan asks, looking at her, his eyes crinkled and good-humored.

“Oh my God,” she says, looking at Grey. “You talk about our business at work?”

“No, actually, he does not,” Barristan says. “I did not even know you existed until recently.” He laughs, the tone warm, rich, and low. “I was very relieved when I learned that you existed.” To Grey, he says, “I was worried that you only live for work.”

Grey grins. “Well, you know I do have a real passion for women’s fashion.”

“Well,” Barristan says. “Grace also said no to me the first time I proposed to her.”

“He always makes this story sound more scintillating that it actually was,” Grace says, spearing a
tomato with her fork. “His parents just really didn’t like that we were together —”

“They were WASPs,” Barristan interjects.

Grace nods. “And he had a contentious relationship with his parents — because he was with me — and also, he had his own issues with them. The first time he asked me to marry him, he did it to punish them. That’s why I said no. When he asked again ten years later, he actually meant it.”

In her mind, she has separated out their relationship into three stages, each demarcated by a break up. The first phase of their relationship ended when she found his drugs. The second phase of their relationship ended when he freaked out and got kissed by a white girl. She doesn’t anticipate that this third phase of their relationship will have an end date — beyond one of them dying, that is. Like, he will die at her hands if he fucks her over one more time.

She has become morbid and violent like him. His influence on her is strong.

And her influence on him is strong, too, she can tell. She has seen the way he’s been trying to force himself into being more social — into getting to know the people in her life and including her in the bits and parts of his life that he finds dull and annoying. After all, they are having dinner with his boss and his wife, right now.

“How did you guys meet?” Grace asks, eyes soft and warm, voice gentle and quiet, in contrast to the cacophony of shouting families around them. “You are so good together,” she says. “I was wondering.”

He’s about to answer, but then Missandei pipes in with, “Oh!” her voice sounding surprised and kind of delighted at the question. She’s already cackling over it — and it makes him smile at her, even though he’s not quite sure what she is remembering. There are a shit ton of things she could be remembering.

He lets her answer, because she’s better at this than he is. His storytelling style is quick and mechanical — just the facts. Missandei is charming and paints better pictures when she speaks. He leans over and flicks her ear — to get her to shut up with the laughing, so she can tell the story.

She rubs her ear roughly as her laugh slows down. She says, “We met as sophomores in college! I was his language tutor — he actually didn’t really need one for very long because he’s so smart — but he kept coming back and stuff. I was laughing because he really wasn’t into me when we first met, so it’s not some cute, romantic story you’re getting. I wanted to date him from the get. I was constantly throwing myself at him — wearing these kinds of dresses.” She gestures up and down at herself. “And he wasn’t having any of it —”

“I was into you,” he interjects.

Missandei throws him a look. “It’s easy to rewrite history with all of the knowledge of what happens. But I remember. All the times you threw me out of your bed and were like, ‘Ew, Missandei. Get off’
“Young men are very stupid,” Barristan says, turning to Grace. “Right?”

Grace laughs softly at her husband, nodding with her head on her hand. “Very.”

After she exits the bathroom in a bathrobe, her face clean and bare, she sees him still in his suit and tie, on his hands and knees and looking into Momo 2.0’s cage, which has been moved to the carpeted spare bedroom because she’s been better about not crapping herself. Yes, this dog has an entire bedroom to herself.

Momo 2.0 quietly lies among blankets, her eyes swooped down at the corners, in a humanlike expression of worry as she stares back at Grey.

Momo 2.0 is getting used to their constant, oppressive presence. Missandei watches him as Grey gently touches his finger to Momo 2.0’s wet little nose, smiling as Momo 2.0 lets him. He’s softly petting her head and murmuring quiet, indecipherable things. She’s too far away to hear what he’s saying to their dog.

Missandei walks over and gets on the floor, curling up around the cage, too. Grey’s hand transfers from Momo 2.0’s head to Missandei’s neck. He drags his thumb over her skin.

And she asks him — hypothetically — when he’d want their hypothetical wedding to take place. Is he thinking months or years or decades?

He freezes. He looks entirely too hopeful, and it fucking just slays her — as he pushes himself up into sitting position. He tells her that it’s up for discussion. She asks him why — a vague question — but she clarifies it by saying that at first, she didn’t believe him — she thought he was just desperately grasping at straws and trying to throw something out there, to prove his earnestness and his commitment to her. And then it became sort of a running joke. And now it’s become something else. She’s like, starting to think he’s like, actually being serious about this.

She tells him she really wants to understand where he is coming from. He doesn’t seem at all like someone who cares at all about marriage and weddings. Isn’t it all just too corny and sentimental for him?

He tells her after struggling enough with the idea that he’s going to live past age thirty — he finds that he suddenly has so much time to fill.

“So you want to marry me so you don’t get bored?”

“No.” He gives her a half-smile. “You know — I don’t have family. I don’t have brothers, sisters, a mother or a father. But you — you have so much family, so many nieces and nephews and now your parents — and always, your brothers.” He pauses. “And it’s not that I covet that — that’s not really where I’m coming at this from. I’m okay with never knowing my parents again. I actually am not at all interested in knowing what happened to them. Because I don’t see them as my parents at all.” He pauses. “You’re my family, Missandei. And I feel like marriage is the easiest way to . . . legitimize this fact about us.”

She’s staring at him in awe. They are definitely having sex later. But for now — she swallows the
lump in her throat, and she says, “Well, shit. Now we’re definitely going to get married. Good job. Good job. Way to go. You’ve convinced me that this is a good idea.”

He laughs.

She tells him that he’s been so patient and that she really appreciates it. She tells him that she imagines it must be hard to put himself out there and to not get the response he wants and then to keep trying again. He laughs and tells her that it has stopped being hard — now it’s just a thing in their lives that they touch on sometimes. He tells her not to worry about him.

She tells him that her viewpoint on marriage is complicated. She used to be kind of obsessed with it when she was young — as evidenced by her wedding mixes. She used to think she’d marry Neal and that would be that. It would be fade-to-black, happily-ever-after stuff. But then that relationship imploded in such an unromantic way — Neal couldn’t wait to get rid of her so he could sleep with other girls. And that was when her view on marriage started to change — that was when she started to question it.

She tells him she remembers lying in bed with the door cracked as a young girl — listening to her grandparents argue with her brothers — about the affordability of her education. She was young, and she was narrow, and she was selfish and short-sighted. All she was able to think about in those moments was Neal and how she just wanted to be with him. Her grandparents were talking about how it was time for her to get married — probably because they had caught her sneaking in and out of her bedroom to be with a boy one too many times — they were so afraid for her virtue and her value, if her virtue was no longer intact. They used to talk about how there are a number of good boys from good families that they could introduce her to — boys who were not white, boys who were from their culture. The preservation of culture tends to be important in these instances. She would have needed special permission — her grandparent’s signature — to marry legally at that age, too. But that is common practice for their people.

But then, they were still wading through the grief of losing Melaku. And soon after, they suffered through the grief of losing her grandfather. It became an important sticking point for Mossador and Marselen, to get her educated — honestly so she didn’t end up like them — so she could be better.

And now — all she ever does when she talks to her brothers is fight with them. Because there is this byproduct of being educated — unintended consequences that none of them could have foreseen. Her brothers don’t know what they don’t know — and she knows that sounds so fucking patronizing — but maybe they really did believe that she’d go off to school, get a good job because of it, and then she’d come back and be a fixture at their dinner tables on the weekend, cooking and gossiping — fattening with pregnancy — beaming that she snarled a high-class man, like a doctor — not some mechanic, like them.

She tells Grey that the scope of sacrifice — of her family’s sacrifice for her — hangs over her head. They have given up so much. They could’ve been living in nicer homes the whole time — they could’ve taken their children on vacations — they could’ve worried way less about money — had they just married her off to some Naathi boy. They must’ve consoled themselves in dark times, by telling themselves that it’ll be worth it in the end. Her life will be better, and they will all be so happy together because of it.

So she’s just this failure and this disappointment because she just cannot let go of certain ideas —
certain beliefs. She is stubborn. She’s making the people she loves so unhappy, so willingly.

She tells him it’s been painful for everyone — that her life is not turning out like that what her brothers and grandma — and grandpa — envisioned. After all — she found him, she’s picking him — he is unconventional.

“My reluctance to get married has nothing to do with you,” she says. “I hope you know that. God. I love you so much. It’s just that my grandma, brother, mother, father — everyone — looks at me like this half-person with a shitty, sad life — even though my life is actually really wonderful — because I’m not married. Marriage has turned into this dark and bitter thing for me because of that. But I don’t want for them to hurt, either. I don’t want for you to be wanting, either. We’re probably going to get married, Grey. I just don’t know when. I need to like — get the fuck over myself and my hang-ups before I can amp myself up to it, I guess.”

He sighs, gently extracting Momo 2.0 from her cage, pulling the dog to his chest. “Now I don’t want to get married anymore.”

“No,” she says, shaking her head, scraping it against the carpet. “We have to get married — eventually,” she says firmly. “It’s the right thing to do. It’ll make my grandma really happy. We need to do it before she like . . . dies.”

“Jesus.”

“Grey?”

“Yeah?”

“Have you thought about the fact that . . . when we get married, you’re gonna become a citizen, right? You’ve thought about that?”

“Oh, yeah. Obsessively.”

“And?”

“And whatever. It’s fine. I mean, we don’t have to be broadcasting it to people all the time or whatever. I don’t like it. But it’s a necessary evil.” He pauses. “I’m not Western,” he says, with conviction in his voice. And then he adds, “You’re not Western, either.”

“Thanks for saying that.” She blearily rubs her face, getting sleepy now. “Man, this is exactly the kind of marriage proposal I dreamed of — when I was a little girl. The resigned, tired, feet-dragging kind.”

“I mean, we can always get a divorce after your grandma dies and renounce citizenship.”

“My grandma is really religious, dude. She’s gonna haunt us from the afterlife if we do that.”

A flight in from Casterly Rock isn’t too expensive or very long, so Daven comes to hang out with them — randomly — for a weekend. But really, he really flew in to meet their new dog. Which is a very Daven thing to do.
Grey’s using the opportunity to pick out every bit of information out of Daven’s brain. They spend hours just exhausting Momo 2.0 to shit, trying to teach her tricks. The constant sound of a clicker and profuse congratulating from two grown men with really deep voices is currently a part of Missandei and Momo 2.0’s lives. Missy keeps having to tell Grey to relax — their puppy isn’t going to be a show dog. She’s not going to be a stunt dog. Just let her learn at her own pace.

Missandei and Kara mostly just sip wine and chat on the couch as Daven and Grey loom over Momo 2.0 with boiled chicken in hand, coaxing her into sitting her butt down. Grey tends to be gruff and impatient — and every time he’s about to lose it and freak out because he’s sure that Momo 2.0 is just fucking with his mind because it’s so fucking obvious, what he wants her to do — Daven puts a hand on Grey’s head, kind of petting it, and Daven gently tells him that it’s okay, which seems to placate Grey enough for him to not blow his gasket.

She has noticed that Grey keeps nudging Daven into training her. Daven keeps uncomfortably saying stuff about how discipline — not just love — is important for dogs. Grey looks at her expectantly from behind Daven during these moments. And she just has to roll her fucking eyes at him.

Missandei almost throws up and when she borrows his computer to look up a recipe for cookies. She almost throws up because he left a spreadsheet of his finances open. “Wow,” she hollers to him from the kitchen, to where he is sprawled out on the couch with Momo 2.0, watching the evening news. “Baby, you are loaded,” she says. “You’re stockpiling money, you hoarder!”

She hears him yawn — because it’s so dull and boring being rich or whatever — before he says, “Yeah. The last pay bump was substantial. With stock options.”

“Good God, hashtag Grey Probz.”

“I know, right?”

They are keeping it light — but she knows that he has major issues with his money — the amount of it that he has. It’s funny, in therapy one time, Terri brought up the notion of fear of success. Missandei is very much terrified of failure — which she thinks is normal and logical. She couldn’t wrap her mind around fear of success, when she was talking about it with Terri. But it clicked one day, just on a mundane day — when Grey came home in really bad mood and told her to take off all her clothes and to meet him in the bedroom. Afterward — she was bewildered and asked him what the hell happened at work.

And he told her that he won a raffle that he didn’t even know he was entered into. They have to claim a free weekend getaway at some bed and breakfast by the end of the year or they will lose the prize. That ended up being something Grey gave to Jaime and Brienne because he was going so mental over it, just getting stuff for no reason. Just getting stuff just for showing up. She thinks that he gets so nuts over it because it’s not at all something that fits into his worldview. To him, everything has to be earned. Everything must be earned. She thinks that when he’s reminded that this isn’t always the case — he feels rage because of what it reminds him of, what it symbolizes to him.

“I feel less guilty about letting you pay all the rent now,” she jokes, spinning around to face him. Little Momo 2.0 also followed him into the kitchen and is looking for a nice dark corner to wedge herself in. “You should do something with this money, hon. Like, invest it or something. Oh God, I
can’t believe I’m saying this — but maybe you should talk to Addam about what to do with this money?”

He scoffs in disgust. “I’m not talking to Addam about what to do with my money. I know what to do with money. It’s like, my job, too.”

“But you do different stuff with money. Like, big corporate stuff. Addam like, invests people’s money for them —”

“Does he, though?” Grey says testily. “Does he really? Or does he just bring clients in the door with his family name?”

Her eyes widen. “Babe. Why are you being so defensive about this?”

He sighs, running his hand over his head. “Jeez. I’m just weirdly sensitive about this. It’s a guy thing.”

She makes an unimpressed face. “Oh, God, spare me the dick measuring contest.” She empties a bag of chocolate chips into her batter before starting the mixer again. She has to shout over the machine’s whirring. She says, “He and I went on one date, a million years ago! It was awkward and weird! And you and I fucked in a car, on the same night! So, congrats! You win! God, how are you still hung up on this!”

“So. Do you want to buy a house?” Grey says, blindly finger-combing Momo 2.0’s hair out of her eyes, crouched on the tile floor of the kitchen with her, by the fridge, as the cookies bake. The dog keeps squirming around, finding it difficult to pick her favorite spot to chill, finding Grey’s attention to be too much.

Missandei shuts off the sink, where she had been washing out her bowls. “Excuse me, what?”

“I’m serious. I’ve been thinking about this for a while. Do you want to buy a house together? Start clean. Live somewhere I didn’t already inhabit with Jaime?”

She frowns. “Baby, I’m in no position to contribute to a house. My relatives are just depleting the fuck out of my ability to save money. And yeah, yeah, I have an unhealthy addiction to clothes and shoes. You should buy a house, though.”

He shakes his head. “No. I want us to buy a house. Missandei — we’re gonna be together. I mean — we’re going to be together.” He gestures to his flour-dusted computer. “That’s our money.”

So looks at him as if he’s stupid. “What? No it’s not. It’s your money.”

“Fuck, woman. You are not getting the gesture here.”

“No, I get it. I just feel very uncomfortable with your gesture.”

He gives her a withering look. “No, dipshit. That’s not what I’m saying or offering. You’re still gonna fucking work a job, and we’re still gonna have separate bank accounts for day-to-day spending shit because I will go fucking insane if I have to see what you’re spending on shoes —”
“Dude, the cost of your suits is exorbitant —”

He ignores her comment — he sometimes gets sick of her constantly pointing out how much of a hypocrite he is. He gets it. He’s the worst. He waves off her comment. Then he says, “Let’s be real. We both work hard, but I make way more money than you do. We can’t do every fucking thing fifty-fifty. What happens when it’s time to make a big purchase and you feel like you have to put the brakes on it because you can’t afford it? Like right now. With a fucking house. Jesus. Don’t take a principled stance on this, Missandei. I’m not your father. I’m not your brothers. I’m not your grandfather. I’m not that Naathi guy you would’ve creepily married as a fucking child-bride. I’m not going to control you with money.”

Her jaw drops. And then she shouts, “Says the guy who is constantly on my ass about how I spend my money!”

He waves her off again. “This is different.”

“How will this be fucking different? Explain this to me.”

Jesus, she always wants to talk and over-analyze shit to death. The oven timer chimes as he sighs. He says, “It just is.”

She throws the oven door open, quickly shoving her hands into some mitts. “Oh my God,” she says in a near-whisper. “You so wanna get your ass beat so hard over this hypothetical house, don’t you?” She slams a hot tray of chocolate chip cookies on top of their stove, which makes little Momo 2.0 jump before cowering behind Grey’s legs.

His face flares in irritation.

It’s the first time in a while that they’ve gotten a chance to be together — and he means together. Momo 2.0 is finally being fucking quiet for once, sleeping in her cage in the other bedroom.

Jazzed over their monumental bit of productive decision-making and fat off of warm cookies, they start rolling around on the bed, frantically taking off each other’s clothes because they are both turned on and high off of the adrenaline of their arguing. Both of her greedy hands dip into his waistband, into his underwear.

And much like how Momo 2.0 took so much time getting used to being a lapdog living a life of crazy luxury, Grey took a fair bit of time getting used to putting his dick into the mouth of a gorgeous, crazy smart, amazing woman.

He keeps banging his head backwards, against the headboard, grunting to himself. Because he cannot even believe what he is seeing. It’s like, fucking pornography. He hums as he carefully cups her cheek, his hand occasionally tensing up as her tongue and the rough suction of her mouth catches him at his most sensitive of places.

“What!” he shouts out, when she unexpectedly goes really south, keeping his dick warm inside of her tight fist. He slaps his own face harshly, the loud sting of it making Missandei jump a little in surprise, pulling friction with her mouth, causing him to moan. He blearily tells himself that one of his balls is in her fucking mouth. “Ba-by,” he says, grunting out the syllables. “Fuck.”
She lifts her face, mouth shiny with saliva, lips red. She stares at him imploringly. “Good? Bad? Yes? No? You into that?”

He shakes his head in disbelief. And then he quickly realizes what he’s doing — and then he rights himself and starts nodding his head. “Into it.”

Her smile is vicious. Because she already knew. “Okay, then,” she says slyly. “Noted.”

Then she’s telling him to grab her hair, to yank it, and to go ahead and masturbate and get himself off using her fucking head — she don’t care — and he’s so bewildered and confused because he’s just so beyond fucking turned on because she is so fucking filthy — and he knows that what she’s really asking for it is for the sex to get a little rougher and a little dirtier. She wants to be handled.

And he’s pawing at her fucking perfect face, trying to grab it so he can yank her up to kiss her and just fucking end this ache by shoving himself into her hot, wet, tight little body — that’s when his phone rings. He leans over to look at the screen. It’s the middle of the fucking night — and it’s fucking Drogo. And he fucking hates Drogo.

He reaches out and rejects the call — as he leans forward, digs his fingers into her soft ass, pulls her forward and up to her knees, bites down hard on the meaty side of her breast — she cries out — he lines them up — and then it’s just bright, burning lights in the back of his eyes as he slams into her. She’s yelling his name and gasping hotly in his ear — he lines them up — and then it’s just bright, burning lights in the back of his eyes as he slams into her. And when they have their own house, he won’t feel so fucking shitty for having sex so loudly. In the distance, he can hear Momo 2.0 toss out a quick bark. And he almost snaps his fingers in Missandei’s face to get her to keep her focus on him and on them and on her orgasm — instead of the dog. She starts to say something — something reasonable about Drogo or the dog — but he pushes the words back into her mouth with a brutal kiss.

She gets what he’s doing — that he’s telling her to shut up. And she makes a joke out of it by trying to get away from him — trying to kick him out of her vagina — laughing about it — but he flips her onto her back, holds her down, and fucks her through her rough-housing, eliciting groans and her eventual submission. He tells her to behave. His phone is buzzing again.


He shushes her — with his hand over her self-sabotaging mouth. He tells her Drogo’s fucking emergency can wait just five more fucking minutes. Just five more fucking minutes. He tells her to just fucking concentrate on her fucking orgasm, hitting her hand where it is wedged in between their bodies, reminding her to keep it going — as he lifts one of her legs and hooks it over his shoulder. She has told him that this position sometimes hurts her a little bit — because he gets in so deep and it feels like he’s punching her cervix in the face, when he slams into her hard. And right now — that is the fucking goal. The pain will inspire her.

Her mouth falls open and her face screws up in tension, and she feels so good all around him. And then her phone is ringing — on the desk.

“Oh my God. I can’t, baby,” she says, groaning, whining, going pliable and boneless, pulling her wet hand out from in between them. She pouts. “I’ve lost it. I can’t concentrate with the phones blowing up.”

He drops his face into her soft, sweaty breasts. And he punches the mattress. “Fuck! Goddammit!” He’s about to ask her if he should just finish without her — because he’s still hard and throbbing
inside of her. But then the phone rings again.

“Fucking kill him,” she rasps — angrily — as he pulls out of her. Her hand grabs his arm. Her nails dig in. She says, “No, baby! Don’t leave!” He pulls himself out of her grasp. She is always so clingy and so attached to his penis during these moments. And it’s not like he doesn’t feel the exact same way about her vagina. But one of them has to be strong about this.

“Fuck!” he spits out, catching sight of her glorious nakedness on the bed — almost second-thinking everything.

Her phone rings again. He turns around toward it.

“Just murder him fucking dead,” he hears her say darkly behind him. Grey immediately shivers from the relative coldness — from being outside of her body — and from the grit in her words. And he would kill for her. He’s already copped to this a lot time ago. He’s still erect and coated in her wetness, as he angrily crosses the final few feet to the desk, swiping up her charging phone.

“The fuck, man!” he shouts into the phone. “Are you fucking dying?”
sixty-five

He doesn’t know how entirely appropriate it is, that his first inclination when he gets off the phone with Drogo is to walk back to bed — stalking darkly over to Missandei’s naked body and her expectant face. She’s interested in whatever the hell is going on. And, instead of telling her what’s going on, he gestures for her to turn around and to get on her hands and knees. He says, “Is it okay if we talk after?”

She’s torn — he can tell. She’s torn because she’s a busybody and likes to know everyone’s business and doesn’t like being out of the loop for one second — but she also really likes it when he gets like this. She gets really turned on when he — and only him — treats her like a piece of meat during sex.

She has told him that it’s because when he does that — he’s taking charge of his own sexual gratification and prioritizing it, and with him being who he is — that is just something really beautiful to her. She’s also told him that maybe she’s fucked in the head — she might secretly be the kind of woman that wants her man to be strong and authoritative and a little chauvinistic. He shushed her when she started rambling on about Black masculinity, telling him that when he bends her over and takes her from behind — there’s something in the action that affirms who they are as people — culturally — to her. And he interrupted her because he was like — what the fuck is she talking about?

He interrupted her because he impatiently just wanted to fuck. Also, he hadn’t wanted have some sort of panel discussion on the pressure of hypermasculinity — right before he was supposed to perform — so to speak. Missandei has the fucking worst timing sometimes.

But that was how he learned that she is into this sort of thing. It’s crazy to him. That he’s known this woman for so many years, but he’s constantly unearthing these new things about her.

And he likes it, too. He’s on board. He tends to be an efficient minimalist. Ultimately, this means he sometimes gets to have sex without having to massage words or make long-winded love declarations — though, he hasn’t minded that lately.

He finds her entrance with his hand holding the tip of his cock. He’s still sticky and damp from before. She’s still swollen and wet and ready. His face goes purple, and she grunts out a shout as he slams into her.

It goes fast, hard. They move furniture. And he comes loudly, releasing some of the tension and anger from his body — into hers. He thinks that her capacity to absorb him at his ugliest will be something he will always strive to pay her back for — for the rest of their lives.

His heart is still hammering as he sighs. His body feels a lot better — calmer. He tells her he has to go pick up fucking Drogo. And it’s pissing him off. He tells her he’s so sorry he has to go. He really wanted to give her some proper sweet lovin’ tonight and stuff, too — not this fuck-them-and-leave-them bullshit. His voice softens — he lets himself be honest — he lets himself be vulnerable. He quietly tells her that he really wanted to be with her all night. He wanted for them to take their time and to just be together. Because he has missed her, in this way. It’s so upsetting to him that he can’t
be with her right now.

Her eyes slant downward. She says, “Oh, babe,” in that way that she does.

And this is just pissing him off so much. That he has to leave her. His pure moments only last so long before his natural self-preservation instincts kick back in. He reaches into the nightstand drawer and — mostly as a joke — he drops her vibrator on the middle of the bed, in front of her, and he tells her to have fun without him.

She gets to her knees, to get up to his face. She gives him a few quick, vigorous kisses on his sweaty chin, and she tells him that he’s so fucking cute sometimes. It seems like an incongruous description of him, after what they just did together on the bed. She’s so unintentionally funny sometimes.

She hands him a reuseable grocery bag filled with water bottles, her Luna bars — which he hates because they are too sugary, but he will need the calories — and a really shitty sandwich she cobbled together with the sparse stuff in their fridge. They don’t currently have lots of on-the-go food. She tells him to not get hungry. Because when he gets hungry, he gets kind of angry. He’s very prone to hanger.

He laughs into her cheek. She’s wearing one of his t-shirts. He hugs her tightly.

“Don’t text and drive!” she says, swaying on her feet with him as he holds her up by the waist. “And stop for coffee when you get tired! And text me when you do so I know you’re alive! I might not respond because I might be sleeping. But trust. I will be very concerned about you in my dreams. So you better text, babe.” She snickers. “Otherwise I’ll be so mad at you when I wake up.”

He’s tired and he’s pissed, when he pulls up to the police station. He drove four hours in the pitch black of night, on zero sleep. He’s running on fumes. Those four hours gave him a lot of time to think. He has so many new things to be fucking pissed over.

Drogo looks totally miserable. “Sorry, man.”

One of the things that Drogo said to him was not to tell Jaime. One of the things that he said to Drogo over the phone was that Jaime is a lawyer. A former defense attorney even. Jaime’s last name is also Lannister. Grey reminds Drogo of that one time at Daven’s nameday party in college — when they could’ve been arrested for fighting, but Jaime invoked the Lannister name and just got them off the hook. They should call Jaime.

“Grey,” Drogo says wearily. “I’m asking you, in a personal way, to please not call Jaime.”

“What? You don’t want to disappoint him? You want to preserve yourself in his eyes?”

Drogo looks upset and offended. “No,” he says, tilting his face down. “I don’t . . . want any of the special treatment that constantly follows him.”
He’s really cranky. She can tell even through his texts. He keeps calling Drogo an idiotic fucktard, and he keeps sending her random things to do — because it’s another four hours or more until he’s back home. And once he gets back home — he’s gonna be totally useless. He’s gonna crash. So she needs to fucking email in sick for him from his work computer because he might not have the wherewithal to remember. And she needs to prep the other bedroom and wash the sheets and all that stuff. He tacks on a, “Please,” seconds after his bitchy texts go through. Grey explains to her that it’s because that fucktard Drogo will be staying with them for a few days.

She tells him to stop texting her because he has to focus on driving.

And then a text comes in stating that Grey is not typing to her. Drogo is. Drogo’s just faithfully putting down what Grey is dictating, as he pissily drives the car, trying not to kill the both of them because he’s so distracted by his rage.

He is not in support of this, when Missandei greets Drogo with a lengthy hug and asks him if he’s okay. He wants to reach out and tear her away from Drogo’s grasp because Drogo doesn’t deserved to be hugged by Missandei.

“Of course he’s okay,” Grey snaps, as he actually reaches out to grab onto her shirt, lightly pulling her backward and away from Drogo. “He’s in one fucking piece, isn’t he?” Grey realizes he’s being a real douchebag — to her — he doesn’t give a fuck about Drogo at the moment — so he smooths over his impulsive grabbing by hugging her to his body, running his hand up and down her back, kissing her face.

Grey had to do all of the driving because Drogo’s license is suspended. That’s why he had to be picked up — a DUI. When she asks about Drogo’s job — Grey interrupts and tells her that fucking Daniel isn’t currently employed. He is too busy shoving his fucking life down the fucking crapper by being such a fucking cliche.

“Fucking poor little misunderstood boy from the fucking ‘hood who can’t fucking handle not being such a fucking typical cliche,” Grey spits. Drogo is quiet throughout — obviously not happy at all with any of this — uncharacteristically not putting up a fight or offering any arguments to the accusations being thrown at him. “You’re a fucking joke,” Grey says.

“You need to stop!” Missandei snaps, addressing Grey. “You’re being so horrible to your friend right now.”

When she opens the door — Jaime is on the other side of it — unshaven and not at all amused. “So what the fuck happened?” Jaime rasps.
“Oh, so you told Jaime,” Drogo says wearily to Grey, from where he’s sitting on the couch, trying to keep his voice quiet because he was distracting himself, playing with Momo 2.0 in his lap. “Thanks for respecting what I asked you not to do.”

Grey scoffs and rolls his eyes. And she cannot even get him to chill out. He is just hellbent on being insanely punishing and unsympathetic. And he has called his blond twin over to help him be horrible to Drogo, who obviously gets what he did wrong, who obviously feels super shitty over it.

She realizes that, lately, she’s been getting a glimpse of what Grey’s father must have been like, how he must’ve treated Grey when he was a child. She realizes that she’s been getting a glimpse of the potential future, of Grey as a father — with how he’s been teaching Momo 2.0 and how he is treating Drogo’s mistakes. He is punishing, hypercritical, and very rigid.

She realizes this is something that would send alarm bells blaring in the minds of other women — whiter women — but . . . she’s always been overly sympathetic to him and his general assholery. Even back when it was mostly directed at her.

Missandei plucks up Momo 2.0 out of Drogo’s hands. She cradles the dog on her shoulder, giving the dog’s back a quick kiss before she deposits her into Grey’s arms. Grey generally works hard to be unfailingly gentle with her — sometimes he messes up — but now, in this instance, even though he is incensed, she can see him make considerable efforts to relax his body so that it doesn’t stress out their dog. Missy touches Grey’s face, runs her hand over the light stubble on his check and chin. She frowns up at him — she gets it — she’s always too sympathetic when it comes to him — she knows he’s actually really scared, and he is just so horrible at expressing his emotions sometimes. All he can do when he is scared is to get angry and push people away blindly. He’s scared their dog won’t survive if she’s a wuss so he’s been obsessed with shoving knowledge in her head. He’s scared of what Drogo’s mistakes signifies.

She goes to grab her jacket out of the closet. And then she hooks her hand in Drogo’s arm. “Come on,” she says. “Let’s go grab a bite,” she tells him.

“You know, I actually thought to myself that he’s been drinking a lot — the last couple times I saw him,” Jaime says, sitting on the other end of the couch. He rubs his eyes tiredly. “But I guess I didn’t go far enough with that observation.”

“Yeah,” Grey says. “He’s been constantly drunk the last few times I’ve seen him.” He clenches his jaw. “I don’t know how I missed it, either.”

Drogo tells her he doesn’t really feel like eating. So they just park the car in an empty lot — at the waterfront where the shipping containers are. She’s tired, too. She didn’t get much sleep because she had no idea what was going on and all the worrying made it hard to sleep. She also called in sick to work.

She asks him if the car is warm enough. He tells her that it is. And then she reaches in between her
legs and shifts her seat so that it cranks backwards, giving herself more leg room. She reclines it a little bit.

“Thanks,” Drogo says quietly. “For being nice.”

She sighs. “You know he loves you,” she says, turning to Drogo. “They both do. They’re just like — actually, they’re both just freaking out because you’re supposed to be the one who always has his shit together.”

Drogo laughs humorlessly. “I know,” he says softly. “I know. That’s supposed to be my role.” He rubs his face, covers it in both of his hands. “God, this is so weird. Where did it all go so wrong?”

Drogo tells her that when they first met — at her twenty-first nameday party — one of his first thoughts about her was that she was really hot — totally his type. Totally what he usually goes for.

Missandei smiles and snorts. She tells Drogo that she has thought about it, too. Has had fleeting thoughts about him, too, in that way. Not at all seriously because — obviously — her foremost priority at the time was permanently getting into his beautiful-hot friend’s pants. But this is just the kind of the kind of random thought that flits through people’s head, sometimes, when sexual attractiveness is involved.

Drogo tells her that he brings this up because one reason he never went for it — never hit on her — was obviously because of Grey. It was mostly because of Grey.

“Bro code, and all that, huh? He called dibs?”

“Nah,” Drogo says, leaning back in his own seat, staring out at the early morning water. “You fucking know he didn’t have the balls to call dibs on you. That would’ve entailed admitting that he wanted you. And admitting that would’ve mean he had to do something about it.”

Drogo tells her that it was so obvious to him though — how crazy Grey was about her — from the very start. The dude was just so gone — taken — in his own incredibly cloaked way. And all bro code shit aside — there was something Drogo knew, with all of his guts. It’s that he wanted Grey to be in his life — always — and if Drogo like, tried to get with her — well, that was it. That was the very end of him and Grey. That was never something that Drogo wanted to give up. Not for some random girl.

“Gee, thanks,” she says, smiling a little bit, kind of sweet on the idea that Grey might’ve liked her for longer than she thinks.

“He’s so mad at me,” Drogo says, sighing.

“He’ll get over it,” she says. “I promise he will.”

He cannot sleep. Jaime decided to head off to work because he doesn’t want to cancel on one of his
clients. Grey and Momo 2.0 are chilling on the couch, watching daytime talk because that’s all that is on — besides soaps. Momo 2.0 was really a champ, with all of the commotion of the night and morning. Just a few months ago, she would’ve just shitted herself so hard at all the noise. But she managed to hold her shit inside of her body today. He’s so proud of her. He’s feeding her boiled chicken as a reward for being awesome, as she lies down on his chest, as he flips channels. He silently thanks her for not shitting herself on him, occasionally smelling her head because he really likes the smell of clean dog. She’s trying to sleep, but every time he moves, her brown eyes drift open and she looks at him.

She pops her head up and gets into that rigid flight/fight mode when the front door opens. He never lets himself touch her when she’s freaked out. He just lets her work out what’s going on for herself. When she sees Missandei and Drogo walk back into the house — she gradually relaxes — her tail wags against his shirt and face because she recognizes Missandei. She watches them put away their coats, but she doesn’t jump off the couch to go greet Missandei.

Instead, Missandei comes to them. “Oh my God, my little baby girl,” Missandei says, walking over and scooping Momo 2.0 from his chest. “You’re so freaking cute. Did you miss your mama?” Missandei then sits down on the couch, smushing her face against Momo 2.0’s. Grey shifts to accommodate her. He’s having such a miserable day. First he doesn’t get to finish having sex the way he wanted to. And then he had to drive hundreds of miles to pick up his idiot friend. And then he was made to feel bad for being right. Then his dog gets taken away.

Drogo’s standing awkwardly next to the TV, sticking out among their domesticity.

Missandei leans over and kisses Grey — like really kisses him with spit and a little bit of tongue and everything. It’s unexpected. When she pulls away, she says, “I’m so tired. We’re gonna go take a nap in the bedroom now. Will you please be nice to Drogo?”

“Have a good nap,” he says. "I might join you after I finish tearing Drogo a new ass hole."

She gives him a look. Like ha ha he is not funny at all. He palms her ass, lightly slaps it, as she stands up. She smiles back down at him. And then she and Momo 2.0 disappear into the bedroom, the door shutting closed softly behind them.

He looks at Drogo. And then he pushes himself into sitting position. “You wanna start at the beginning?”

His friendship with Drogo is very different from his friendship with Jaime. He and Jaime have generally always been on the same level. He and Jaime take turns being the adult — basically. When Jaime busted his hand for the second time and couldn’t leave his bedroom to go to his classes — when Jaime made zero money and was constantly stressed out about law school — Grey was the adult. He made sure Jaime was clothed and fed and was getting some exercise. And when Grey was detoxing miserably in his bedroom, Jaime was the adult — making sure he was taking his meds on the dot, stripping off his clothes and constantly throwing him into a hot bath.

His friendship with Drogo is different in the sense that Drogo has always been on another level above them, has always taken care of all of them. Drogo is the big brother, the non-fuck-up. Drogo always had all the answers. Drogo was the one who lectured Jaime and got him to get his ass out of bed and back into school. Drogo was the one who got on Grey’s ass about the drugs and told him
that he had a responsibility to be successful in life — because of who they are, where they come from, and the kind of people they represent. Drogo told him all of this long before he believed it for himself. Drogo was always all-knowing — even back when Grey was unhearing and hell-bent on self-destruction and dying young.

Jaime is communicative and affectionate — always trying to stay close to Grey in various ways. Drogo holds himself at a greater distance from them.

“Fuck, man,” Drogo says. “I think I spiraled. First, the startup just goes kaput — just fucking dies after I sank so much money, time, belief, and hope into it — and then I had a hard time finding work — and then my mom got sick for a while so I had to move back home to take care of her. I mean — I wanted to move back home to take care of her. But jobs prospects there — come on. I have a fucking business degree, and I was fucking punching numbers into spreadsheets at a fucking bank. I might as well have been a forklift operator or a roofer. That was the best I could do. And I just started feeling like — God — all of the hard work and all of the sacrifice — and I am back at where I started. I didn’t even move a fucking inch. I didn’t fucking go anywhere. I started to get so pissed all the time about it — people like me don’t go anywhere. I started thinking — fuck — is this where I’m going to die? And then I started drinking. And then I started thinking — holy shit. I am Bharbo. I am my father,” Drogo says bitterly. “All I need now is a woman to beat the shit out of and kids to terrorize and abuse.”

When she gets up to go empty her bladder — and to take Momo 2.0 out to go potty — she finds Grey and Drogo lying on the furniture — the smaller furniture pieces. Their sofa is uninhabited. Grey’s sleeping curled up in the armchair. And Drogo’s squished up on the loveseat, facing the back of the seat.

She can tell he’s purposefully buttering her up, when he presses his face into her neck as she washes the dishes — she hand washes them because he will freak out and be really annoying, give her a million reasons why it’s better to hand wash. He lays a kiss on her cheek as he hugs her from behind. His hands fall over her soapy ones. He tells her that he loves her. He embellishes the past a little bit, when he tells her he has always loved her. He makes her feel hopeful, when he tells her he will always love her. Then he asks her if it’s okay if his deadbeat, alcoholic friend comes and stays with them for a bit.

She spins around in place. He automatically presses their hips together, wedging her between his body and the kitchen counter. “Yeah, I told you,” she says. “It’s fine.”

He winces. “Not just for a few days. Maybe longer.”

She raises her brows.

“I think he needs a change of scenery — a change of pace. He’s just in a really shitty place right now. And he’s not working — so it’s not like he can afford to rent? But what’s he gonna do? Go back and live with his mom some more? That’s going to be really rough on him, to do that.”
“Babe,” she says reluctantly. “You know I really adore Drogo —”

“I know it’s a lot to ask,” he says.

“Let me think about it. And let’s talk about it some more later. I mean, he can definitely stay for a week or two — I’m totally happy with that. But I don’t know how long you’re thinking. Like, months?”

“I don’t know,” Grey says. “I honestly haven’t even talked to him about it. I don’t know how much he’ll fight me on this because of his pride. I just wanted to run it by you before I broach the topic with him.” He shrugs. “I dunno. Maybe Jaime will want to get in on this. Maybe we can do a Drogo timeshare. A week here. A week there. Who knows?”

She grabs him hand, just as he turns to leave. “Grey,” she says, as he looks at her over his shoulder. “You’re a good friend.”

When Missandei brings home the new dog tag — a celebratory purchase after a successful vet visit — he already knows what’s on it. It’s become a foregone conclusion. And they are horrible assholes. And he just can’t believe that out of so many people in the world, he actually found someone so perfect and so in sync with him. Her smile is almost maniacal, as she holds their dog up in the air — Momo 2.0 looks embarrassed over it — as Missandei dangles the new dog tag in her fingers, shoved in fur.

When Drogo calls the dog Momo — shortening the name — Missandei jumps all over him, telling him that the 2.0 bit is a very important of the name. Without it, her name would just be sad and inappropriate.

“You can shorten it to 2.0, I guess,” Grey says.
They’re naked and still a little sleepy. The early morning light woke them up because it is oppressive — they had forgotten to shut the blinds the night before. He needs to pee but he doesn’t want to interrupt this moment by getting up, putting on clothes, peeing — and then coming back, re-stripping, and crawling into bed again with her. That’s a lot of work. He already misses being able to go pee nakedly.

His lips touch her pulse point, on her neck, and he tells her it’s like living in the dorms again. She quietly laughs and reminds him that he actually never lived in the dorms. He tells her that he has seen them — he has visited them.

Missandei gives him an unimpressed look — she tells him that if he wants to get lucky, he really shouldn’t talk about all of the rooms he was familiar with, in the girls’ dormitory at Crownlands University.

He whispers to her coyly, asks her if she’s jealous or something. It’s a teeny inside joke — because of the two of them, he’s much more prone to possessiveness and jealousy. They both know this. He suddenly tickles her ribs under the covers — so unexpectedly that it makes her shriek loudly, squirming away from him. Her eyes immediately widen and she covers her own mouth in shock and horror.

He laughs, prying her hand off her face. He tells her, “Shh, it’s okay.”

Drogo is only one wall over — in their spare bedroom. Momo 2.0 is now in the living room — she’s such a brave girl — and Grey has already told Missandei that he used to be able to hear Jaime and Brienne having sex the next room over. The walls are kind of thin. And usually they wouldn’t care that much, if Drogo happened to hear them fooling around with each other. But at the moment, Drogo is like — monumentally depressed. They don’t really want to subject him to their happiness. Grey says he remembers what it was like to be around other people’s happiness, back when he was so fucking miserable. It really fucking sucked. Missandei says he is preaching to the choir. They will be good and considerate friends about boning with him in the next room.

Grey puts a finger on her lips. He says, “Okay, you need to be quiet.” The urgent need to pee is receding — due to the arousal.

“You need to be quiet,” she whispers back, smiling behind his finger.

“Shh. No, you need to be quiet,” he says, hand drifting down, in between their bodies. He touches her and parts her — finds her slick and wet. “Now, you better keep your mouth shut,” he says, raising himself up with his arms. And he starts to drag himself down her body, underneath the blankets.

She’s breathing heavily, panting already.
Her face is bleeding red and she’s gasping for air, as she comes down the rest of the way from her
orgasm — which took entirely too long, which almost caused her to pass out from suffocating
herself. He’s breathing hard, too. He’s all tired now, too. She feels like she just sprinted a mile. She
feels amazing. And also a little bit bad for him. Well, for them.

When he asks her how she wants to do this, she tells him she wants to be on top — mostly because
he’s so fucking cute-looking and all exhausted and out of breath from going down on her — so she
just wants him to be able to relax and chill while she does most of the sex work. She gets to her
knees and positions herself over his body — his hands automatically go to her hips and he says,
“Wait, hold on, babe.”

She waits as he shifts around underneath her, sliding down so his head isn’t angled at the headboard,
so that he’s more comfortable. And when he gives her the go-ahead, she positions him at her
entrance and she slowly sinks down on him, her eyes rolling back into her head because — well, this
*never* fucking gets old.

The morning sex is slow and fun and casual — devoid of intensity and urgency. They do a lot of
talking. They talk about talking to their banks, shopping around for loan terms. They talk about
setting up meetings with real estate agents. She notes — with awe — that they actually sync up really
well, in terms of how they like to accomplish tasks. She tells Grey that Jhiqui often complains about
how Nick is a feet-dragger and likes to avoid big decision-making. He’s such a sweetie, but Jhiqui’s
also kind of a ballbuster. Missy tells Grey that she and him are actually pretty good at figuring out
and doing these sorts of things together.

“Which is a relief,” she says. “Because we have enough things that we fight about.”

“We don’t fight,” he says lazily, languidly thrusting up into her. “We just discuss loudly and in a
very fast way. And there’s some name-calling sometimes.”

“From *you*. I never call you names.”

He frowns — realizing that she’s speaking the truth. “Oh, man. I’m sorry, baby,” he says.

Her eyes flutter shut and she bites down on her bottom lip, as she slowly sinks down on him again.
“I don’t care. I like it. I like how you sometimes talk to me like I’m a dude. Like, I’m one of your
guy friends.” She smiles down at him sheepishly. “I like that I’m not always your baby. Apparently,
sometimes I’m a dipshit.”

His hand travels from her neck, down her breasts, to her stomach. “Mmm, yeah. Sometimes.”

She tells him that there’s something she’s been talking about with her therapist — something that he
might take an interest in. He gives her a half-smile and asks her if they’re gonna talk about Black
masculinity again — which makes her laugh. She feels him twitch inside of her. She tells him no, it’s
not Black masculinity — but seriously, there’s so much interesting stuff about that and him that he
really should read about —

He holds her hips down, gluing them to his, grinding them together. He tries to get her back on topic
— asks her what interesting thing she’s talking about with her therapist.
“We’ve been talking about me going off my medication. Trying that and seeing how it goes. I’ve just been so happy lately. And I went on my sertraline during a big life event — when I was about to meet my parents. Sometimes big life events trigger bouts of depression. But now — stuff is pretty even. I would like to try to get off of it, to see how I do. Maybe I’ll stay off it, now that I have new ways to deal with my emotions. Or maybe I’ll find out that it’s something I will always need to be on. Who knows?”

He’s torn. On one hand, when he hears that she is going to try and get off her medication — his entire body spasms from excitement because it means their sex life is going to fucking level up to some epic shit. Currently, there is some predictability in sex — maybe too much predictability. But also, there is also a lot of earned knowledge they have about each other’s bodies. He’s never had sex with her off her medication — with all these new sex tricks he’s picked up.

The other part of him feels responsible and guilty — that he might have inspired her to go this route because he has been kind of a whiny bitch about the delayed orgasm thing.

“Baby,” she says, reading his face. “It’s not a big deal. We’re just trying it out. I’m not worried about it.”

When they can hear Drogo puttering around, heading to the bathroom — they decide to finish. It always takes a little bit longer to get him off, when she’s on top — probably because she’s not in his head the way he is, so she doesn’t know all of the buttons to push. But he tends to be direct and straightforward. She’s never seen him jack off — he will not let her watch because he thinks it’s weird — but she imagines that how he gives himself this sort of pleasure is very much a straight line. He’s just scratching an itch, taking the shortest route to get there.

There’s something to be said about flourishes and details. That’s why she says no, when he asks her if he can flip her over. She braces her hands on his chest, squeezes her kegels — asks him if he feels that — he choked out that he does. And then there is just a lot of inelegant grinding, with him inside of her, maybe in a way that hurts sometimes because she sees his face grimace.

But when she asks if it hurts, he rasps out, “Don’t stop.”

She asks, “Are you close?”

“Uh.” He’s concentrating, also looking up at how are breasts are squeezed together, with the new adjustment. “Uh, yeah. I’m close,” he says. And less than a minute later, he seizes up — tells her it’s happening — it’s coming — and he quietly grunts out his release, thrusting up into her rapidly a few times as her body absorbs him.

She lets herself sink down on top of him tiredly. “I love Saturdays,” she murmurs into his sweaty skin, feeling his semen already dripping out of her. “I love you. And I’m hungry. Do you think Drogo is making us breakfast right now?”
Grey coordinated this because he knows that Jaime — without fail — will be good at being a
distraction, whether he solicits anger, amusement, disbelief — whatever. Grey watches Tyrion walk
up to the service line, gripping the ball tightly in his hand. He slams the ball on the ground before
hitting it with impressive power. The ball hits the wall before it ricochets and easily sails over the
short line.

Jaime runs up to it and slams it back toward the front wall. The rally lasts for long seconds — Grey
finds racquetball very pleasant. It’s a lot of cardio — Tyrion has some impressive lungs — and it’s
not so repetitive on Grey’s muscles like running is. Tyrion has played this a lot — so he generally
can stay center court and doesn’t wear himself. He aims strategic shots that send his brother running
into walls.

And so predictably, after losing the first rally, Jaime’s red face is huffing and puffing and he’s
pointing his racket at Drogo, shouting at him. “D! Please take this shit more seriously!”

Jaime also knows what role he’s playing — there’s something artificial in his self-righteous
competitiveness. But Grey supposes that Drogo hasn’t been around them enough during the past few
years — to really pick out these subtle nuances about them. Not anymore at least.

Missandei asks if she can come, too. Even though she kind of wasn’t invited — is this like, a bro-trip
or something? But Jaime grins and says that she can come. It’s not really a bro-trip. It’s a let’s-drive-
hundreds-of-miles-to-get-this-dude’s-shit trip. It’ll be good if she comes because that way, there’s
four of them. That way, there’s not a person driving home all bored in silence on the way back,
when they grab Drogo’s car — which he is not allowed to drive at the moment. But eventually, he’ll
be able to drive again, and he will want it.

They’ve only lightly talked about Drogo temporarily moving in with them. Naturally, Drogo is
insanely uncomfortable with the idea of being a charity case — a concept that Grey and Jaime should
be much more sympathetic with — considering the amount of pride they both have in their own
respective self-sufficiency. But what tends to happen is that Jaime and Grey like to shift facts around
whenever it suits their needs. They keep telling Drogo to get over himself and his shit and to just
accept their charity already. It’s not like they’re fucking organizing a telethon in his name.

This is the reason why she wants to tag along. Jaime and Grey are kind of mean. They default to
meanness in moments like this. And she is just over-empathizing with Drogo. She keeps translating
to him — translating Grey-speak, telling Drogo what Grey actually means, versus what comes out of
his mouth.

Mildly, Drogo says, “You know. I used to be the expert on him. I used to have to explain him to
everyone. But now . . .”

“Oh, I know. But you’ve just lived far away for the past few years. You’ll pick it up again fast.”

“No, I was gonna say that I’m glad he has you.”
He tells Missandei not to smother him with her tits and ass — because this trip isn’t a fucking couple’s retreat. She looks like she wants to slap him in the face for that comment — and it makes him grin to himself with such self-satisfaction. She tells him that she knows that he doesn’t want to be all couple-y around Jaime and Drogo and make shit weird. Duh.

He’s the one who grabs her when he sees her in white shorts, bent over with half her body in the trunk of her Fit, trying to clear out as much space as she can for when it gets filled with Drogo’s essentials — and Drogo has told them that he actually doesn’t have much shit at all. He really just wants to go retrieve his computer, car, and some clothes.

Grey kisses her, sliding his hands over the seat of her shorts, lightly tugging her up a little higher on her tip toes by the belt loops. Her arm curls around his neck, holding his face to hers. Their mouths casually and wetly slides over one another, meandering in this thing that they do together everyday. She tastes like . . . a little bit like bacon, actually. And she’s just been so wonderful and so patient and so understanding lately.

A throat clears from behind them. “Yo.” It’s Jaime.

They break apart.

“It’s still so trippy watching you be a human being, dude,” Jaime mutters from behind sunglasses, trying to stop himself from laughing. He’s also holding onto Momo 2.0’s leash, with her sitting awkwardly on the sidewalk, waiting for the next move. “And I dig it. I want to record it and replay it all day. But we gotta get a move on soon. This is gonna be a longass drive.”

Grey wants to drive. And it only makes sense to shove Missandei, the dog, and Jaime in the backseat so they can talk the shit out of each other. Jaime tells them that Brienne is working — also, not a huge fan of long drives — so that’s why he’s single for the weekend. And by that, he means that he can eat what he wants, stay up as late as he wants — which he actually does anyway because Brienne is so not that kind of woman — the kind that likes to tell him what to do. But he likes to pretend that she is. Because it like, bugs her and makes her defensive when he tells people about how his bitch holds him down. And her general annoyance with him is super hilarious.

Drogo is very quiet, which makes Grey realize how quiet he himself is. If Drogo’s not talking — if Missandei isn’t talking — if Jaime isn’t talking — then there is no conversation ever being exchanged. He spends much of the beginning of the drive tense and in his own head — until he hears Missandei and Jaime practicing Summer Tongue in the backseat — which, sounds way fucking pornographic, how he’s articulating it to himself — enough that he checks on them in the rearview. Satisfied with what he’s seeing — they’re just chuckling like a couple of dummies over some mispronunciation or something. Grey chimes in with some verb conjugations.

Drogo doesn’t want his moms to know that he got a DUI — that is why Grey had to drive four hours
to pick him up in the first place. He also doesn’t want them to know that he no longer has a shitty job at a bank because he . . . kinda-sorta showed up drunk one day. He tells them that his mom will just worry and stress herself to sickness. Also because he hates the idea of her knowing that he is such a royal fuck up — and actually — that is the main motivating factor, behind him agreeing to stay in King’s Landing with Grey and Missandei for a while.

Jaime has a sociopathic talent for lying. Grey does not. Grey is only good at withholding the truth. So Jaime takes point on this and tells them all that they better not go off-script.

Drogo had already called his mom and told her that he was spending the weekend with Grey — because hanging out with Grey and Jaime on random weekends isn’t a rare occurrence, so it was something she took in stride.

It’s been a while since Grey has seen Drogo’s mom. He lets out a soft, “Oof!” when she yanks him down to her height and squeezes him tightly in a hug. She gushes over him and says that he looks so good now — she approves — she likes his clothes and he looks so healthy — he doesn’t look so horribly homeless anymore, like how he did when he was a kid. She’s wearing a wrist brace on her right hand — a work accident that led to her going on disability permanently. Drogo has told them it’s a paltry sum that she gets each month — and the lack of money has been stressing Lydia and him out — but it’s better than nothing.

“Oh my gosh, who is this!” Drogo’s mom gushes, looking over Missandei, who is holding Momo 2.0’s leash and standing next to Jaime. “Drogo!”

“No mine,” Drogo says immediately, a little panicked. He’s shaking his head. “Grey’s girl. God, Ma. Chill out.”

She reaches out to hit him — with her bad hand. “Don’t talk to me like that!”

They’ve never been in the house Drogo grew up in — because he has never invited them to it. So it’s very weird and eerie, to stare at his face on the walls — in framed pictures. They see him in many incarnations, at all ages. They see him in a bumblebee costume, in his football uniform, with his sisters, and scrawny and young and shirtless over a smoking grill. There are no pictures of Drogo’s dad, naturally.

Jaime is talking to Drogo’s mom and Lydia, showing them his own wrist and hand — showing them the scar tissue and some of his hiccups in dexterity. With a lack of sensitivity, he says that it makes him glad that he does white collar work. If he was dependent on his hand to do work — he’d be so fucked.

But there’s always been something about Jaime that makes people like them like him — that make people like them trust him. He purposefully elicits information in this way. He comforts in this way. This must be what it’s like — when he is working with his clients. Drogo’s mom says, “Yes, you are very lucky. And you’re lucky to still be young and healthy. I’m old. Too old to learn anymore. I can’t do anything else.”

Jaime stares at her steadily. “That sucks. I’m sorry.”

Drogo’s mom looks over to Drogo, smiling softly. “No. I am very lucky, too,” she says.
He catches Drogo pacing in the threadbare backyard — full of dead junk, car parts and scrap metal — and he patiently waits for a few seconds before he tiredly says, “D — you’re gonna be okay, man.”

“I am freaking out right now,” Drogo says. “I feel so fucking shitty. Like a fucking failure.”

Grey shrugs. “Okay, but save the self-pity for later. Right now, you need to talk to your mom. Then we need to get your shit. And get the fuck out of here.”

“God, she’s so prone to seeing the best in me.”

“Your life is not that sad. My mom sold my virginity and stuff.”

Drogo throws him a sharp look. And then in spite of himself, he starts to laugh. “God,” he chokes out. “You will never stop using that at the most opportune times, will you?”

Grey grins, shrugging.

Jaime smoothly tells Drogo’s mom and Lydia that there’s a job opportunity in King’s Landing that they really think Drogo should pursue. It’s like, perfect for him. Drogo’s mom either completely knows what’s going on — or she’s completely buying this shit. Lydia looks exhausted — emotionally, physically. She doesn’t even want to listen to Jaime’s lies. She’s just ready to agree or go along with whatever.

Drogo is actually the only one still living with his mom. His sisters have all absconded — he bitchily tells them that his sisters are all fucking annoying, selfish ingrates, so distracted with their stupid pointless lives, and they don’t visit their mom and Lydia enough. It’s clear that Drogo has been fighting with his younger sisters for a long time, now. It is also clear that his mom and Lydia are totally over it. There’s a whole history here.

Missandei puts a hand on Drogo’s arm, to get his attention before she pushes Momo 2.0 into his arms. It’s become Missandei’s trick — to get any of them from getting too worked up. It’s hard to fly into a bitter rage when there’s a vulnerable little animal in their arms.

“Guys,” he says to his moms, balancing Momo 2.0 up him on his shoulder. He pats her back. “I don’t want to abandon you.”

“You’re really not, sweetie,” Lydia says. “You’ve done more than enough. Just go do your thing for awhile. We’ll be all right.”
Drogo’s expression darkens. And it looks like he’s about to punch a wall. Little Momo 2.0 gets a little tight and rigid in his arms.

Missy gets pulled into the kitchen because Drogo’s mom insists on feeding them before they go. Missandei gets pulled into the kitchen because she is female — obviously — even though Jaime and Grey and even Drogo — actually everyone, everyone is a better cook than she is, in this house. But she gets pulled into the kitchen to help because she’s female. In this instance, though, it’s not something she minds. Drogo’s mom is so pleasant. They are speaking in Dothraki, something Drogo’s mom was so delighted to learn about Missandei.

Momo 2.0 is quietly exploring the fenced backyard — with all of the dangerous shit back there — and it’s freaking Missandei out — but Drogo’s mom is very blase about it, telling Missandei that dogs are smart and dogs are resilient. They don’t need to be babied. Just let them be dogs.

Missandei’s mind is only partly on the conversation when Drogo’s mom asks her if she has any friends like her, that she can introduce Drogo to.

“Ma!” Drogo snaps — his voice coming out disembodied and loud, from the other room — as he sits with Lydia and the guys.

In Dothraki, Drogo’s mom tells him to stop yelling at her.

Missandei laughs. Because she’s remembering how Drogo and Jhiqui had hooked up way, way back in the day. And how the fallout from that was really awkward and is part of the reason why Jhiqui has had a hard time with Grey over the years — considering he’s such good friends with some douchebag who was so cold to her after he got what he wanted from her — sex. Jhiqui likes to say that douchebags hang out in packs. Birds of a feather and all of that.

That incident scarred Missandei a little bit. She doesn’t want to lose friends, and she doesn’t want to constantly be vigilant about inviting Drogo to things that Jhiqui would be at. And now, knowing what she knows about Drogo’s dating history — she does not even want to mess with this stuff. Besides, setting up people isn’t really something she’s naturally interested in. The things that people find attractive and mesmerizing can be very unexpected.

She catches a glimpse of Grey in the other room, hanging out on the couch and laughing at something Jaime said. Her face flushes, as she continues picking leaves off of stems.

She feels him blindly grabbing for her hand under the table, intertwining their fingers together, his thumb pressing a divot into the middle of her palm. It makes her look over him. He’s such a dork. And she’s so obsessed. She naturally laughs — at nothing — maybe at just the mostly neutral expression his face. But he’s . . . just the best.

“How long have you two been together?” Lydia asks — making both of them jump a little bit in their seats, tugging their hands apart under the table.
“Oh,” Missy says. “Hard to say. We started really on-off and were just friends for a long while — and we don’t celebrate anniversaries or anything like that. But we’ve known each other for almost ten years now?” She looks over at Grey, who nods, confirming this fact.

“Ten years is a long time for people your age,” Drogo’s mom says lightly. “How do your parents feel — about the two of you living together and not being married? Are they traditional?” She looks over at Drogo, who continues to look uncomfortable whenever his mom brings up this subject. “I wouldn’t mind it at all — if he just found someone who cares about him.”

“Well,” Drogo says gruffly. “You used to care when it was Adilah moving in with her boyfriend.”

“Oh, God,” Lydia says. “That’s because Adilah makes horrible choices.”

“We’re pretty sure he’s a drug dealer,” Drogo says, explaining to the rest of them.

She catches Drogo’s mom watching her attentively, still waiting for an answer. Missandei clears her throat. She says, “So, my grandma and brothers are pretty traditional. So they don’t really like that we live together and aren’t married.” She shoots him a real quick glance. “But . . . we also recently decided to . . . um . . . get married. Mostly to get my family off our backs, actually.”

She’s not at all sure of how she expected Jaime and Drogo to respond to this. Jaime is antagonistically anti-marriage. Drogo cannot even bring himself to date the same girl for more than twenty consecutive days. She figures it was best to rip off the band-aid — get the taunting and the bewilderment out of the way already. She knows that Jaime and Drogo’s opinions are very important to Grey. Oh, God, what if he changes his mind because his bros give him too much shit over this?

She shakes off the thought. Because she’s a dummy. That’s not going to happen. She kind of gestures to Drogo’s mom. “So the lesson here . . . is that if you annoy your kid enough — he or she will eventually relent and get married.”

She hears Grey’s low chuckle coming out from beside her. “I think the lesson also is if you annoy the crap out of your significant other enough, she will also just relent and just marry you so you’d shut up about it.”


For a moment, she has no idea whether he is happy or if he is pissed.

“Congrats, guys,” Drogo says, smiling at them genuinely from across the table. “That’s really cool.”

“Shit, stop it,” Grey mutters. “It’s not even a big deal. Who knows when we’ll get off our asses to make this shit happen? And it’s like, a fucking spite marriage. It’s not like, one of the regular ones or whatever.”

Grey snaps to attention in his seat — suddenly — because he doesn’t expect for Drogo’s mom to lean over and slap his chest. “Would you watch your language!”
Jaime blithely tells them that this is his very first time at a police impound lot. Drogo is tense and violently quiet as Grey hands over his credit card to pay the fee. Drogo mutters that he’ll pay Grey back. And Grey says a whole lot of nothing in response to that — not wanting to heap more shame on Drogo’s immensely bruised pride by saying that it ain’t no thang. And it really isn’t — a thing that Grey cares about.

It becomes a little bit of a complicated endeavor, to split them up between cars. Obviously Drogo can’t drive, not until the breathalyzer is installed in his car — which won’t happen until they get back to King’s Landing and awkwardly not-fight some more about Grey paying for all of Drogo’s costs. Missandei spends enough time with Grey, so she is down to spend four hours with Jaime or Drogo. Grey is all worried about her driving for four hours — so he tells her to go with Jaime and have Jaime drive her car. She frowns and tells Grey that she like — drives all the time? He snaps at her in front of Jaime and Drogo — because he’s stressed out about Drogo’s whole shit — and he tells her that this isn’t a sexism thing. It’s because she drives like a person with a death wish — constantly on her phone, constantly fucking around with her mixes, her music.

Jaime lightly coughs, covering up his laugh.

She glowers at Grey. And then she asks him if he wants to take the dog, or if he wants her to take the dog.

“So,” Jaime says in a sing-song, lifting his eyes from the road. “You guys are getting maaarried like a bunch of conventionalssss.”

“Shut up,” she says. “God, you’re so annoying. I don’t know how Brienne puts up with you.”

“I’m really good at sex,” Jaime deadpans.

Missandei stares back at him. He’s looking at her out of the side of his eye, a smile touching the corner of his mouth, the dimple on his cheek. She says, “That’s not what I heard. I heard that you cry during sex.”

“You shut your face!” Jaime shouts. “No one asked you what you heard, slut!”

Missandei’s face breaks — Brienne has actually never told her the dirty details of their sex life because Brienne is kind of private about that stuff. Missy pushes out an elongated snort-laugh as she
slaps her hand on the passenger-side window, laughing loudly, making Momo 2.0 look up at her curiously.

They’ve driven in silence for the last hour, just listening to music. It’s a lot like the drive they took a few days ago, when Grey had to pick up Drogo at a police station, except during that drive, Grey didn’t even turn on music. Because he didn’t think Drogo deserved to derive any enjoyment at all, being in the predicament he put himself in.

Grey has since mellowed out. A little bit. Honestly, Jaime has been significantly more forgiving about this. Grey isn’t completely sure why he is just so livid and upset about this. It hasn’t been something he has deeply analyzed. And it’s not like it’s something he can’t empathized with or even sympathize with. He knows how how shitty things can compound over shittier things. He knows what it’s like to feel like life is completely out of his grasp, let alone out of his immediate control.

He just can’t make himself be much nicer to Drogo about this. He doesn’t even want to make himself by nicer about this.

“Dovoeddi?”

He sighs. “What?”

“I’m . . . honestly really tired and worn out from this whole day. Do you mind if I sleep for about an hour or so?”

“You don’t need to ask for my permission to take a nap, man.”

Drogo doesn’t say anything in response to that. He just reclines his seat back a little bit.

They stop off at a drive-thru for quick bite — well, for Grey and Jaime. She and Drogo are really there for the hot delicious, super watered-down coffee that costs almost nothing. When Grey exits out of Drogo’s old-ass car, chewing on a paper-wrapped burger, he leans down slightly and says, “Come here.”

Seriously, at first, she thought he was talking to her. She thought he was calling her like she was a dog. But then she sees Momo 2.0 trotting up to him, with her leash dragging on the asphalt.

Because the dog is only fifteen pounds — small enough for them to constantly pick her up — they do. Momo 2.0 expects it, jumping up on her hind legs to get closer to him. Grey holds her under his arm and walks around a little bit, continuing to eat his burger. She’s sniffing at his food — but Grey has a strict no-human-food policy with Momo 2.0. He told Missandei that he doesn’t want 2.0 to beg, because begging is pathetic and ugly to look at. He also told Missy that he doesn’t want 2.0 to get fat and get dog-diabetes. He wants for her to live forever.

Missandei turns to Drogo. “How’s it going?”
“Oh, just super,” he says sarcastically. “He spent half an hour just bitching about how dirty my car is.”

“Sounds about right,” she says, sipping her coffee.

“It made me miss the days when he only put out three sentences every twenty-four-hour period.”

“Do you want to switch? I can ride with him for a while, or Jaime can ride with him?”

Drogo sighs, his shoulders slumping. “No, it’s fine. If we switch, he’s gonna know it’s because I can’t stand him right now.”


She leans forward and wordlessly takes a tiny bite from his burger while it’s still in his hand, just to taste it. He obediently holds the burger still, watching her despondently. Momo 2.0 is still tucked underneath his arm, chilling quietly.

“Why don’t you just order a burger, if you’re hungry?” he says.

It’s not the first time he’s asked her this. It’s not the first time she’s answered this, either. She gestures up and down her body. She says, “Grey. This is not natural. This sweet bod is the result of constant self-denial.” Upon his look, she flicks her eyes to the sky for a split second. “Of food,” she adds unnecessarily.

He lightly shrugs, staring at her, taking another big bite out of his burger. And she wants to unhinge her jaw and get at that — she’s often jealous at how he gets to eat.

He smiles slyly. “I love you,” he says, with his mouth full.

“Will you still love me if I’m four hundred pounds and have to be forklifted out of the house?”

He gives her a look of mock-horror, before swallowing his bite. “God, no. Because you gotta wonder what the fuck happened in your life and your brain to get you to that point.”

When they hear Jaime shouting at them to hurry up and get back in the cars, Missandei takes Momo 2.0 from Grey and puts her on the ground before raising her own face to meet his in a quick kiss. His lips are greasy and beefy and salty and they make her knees weak — she chases his face when he pulls away, getting on her toes, pressing her lips back on his warm ones, deepening the kiss and shoving her tongue in his mouth, sweeping it across the roof, tasting more salt, more beef, more umami goodness. He’s stationary with surprise for just a split second, and then he tilts his head down to accommodate her, his hand goes to the small of her back, pressing there, bending her back a little with the force of his end of the kissing.

They are both a little out of breath when they pull apart. She reaches up and holds both of his ears in her hands, as her heartbeat begins to slow down. Grey looks pensive — but not unhappy — and he starts to say, “Thank you for —”

But Jaime interrupts with another shout at them to get the fuck moving.
After they move Missandei’s car into a guest parking spot and put Drogo’s junker in her assigned spot, Jaime bows out — says that he had a fun day and all, but he’s tired of them and just wants to go home to his lady. He grins widely before giving all of them hugs, before waving bye. Drogo kind of looks at Jaime’s departing back forlornly.

“Yeah, sorry you’re stuck with us,” Grey says, voice low.

“No,” Missy interjects, jutting her chin out at Grey. “Sorry you’re stuck with him. I’m a peach.”

A small number of things change in tiny ways once Drogo starts inhabiting their space all the time — which compound up to a massive effect on his life. One of the things he and Missandei used to do was just hang out on the couch — lying down and watching TV together, cuddling with Momo 2.0, or just full-on having sex on that thing.

That’s a no-go, now. He feels too vulnerable lying down and letting himself physically relax in front of Drogo. He definitely will not have sex in front of Drogo’s face — mostly for Missandei’s sake. It took Grey a while to get used to Jaime’s oppressive physical presence and closeness. He doesn’t anticipate that Drogo will be sticking around long enough for the effort in adjustment to be worth it.

Drogo is a ghost though. He barely leaves his room. He doesn’t want to hang out. He’s also constantly leaving the apartment during the day — with his computer tucked under his arm. Grey has been over-vigilant, trying to find traces of alcohol anywhere in his apartment or near Drogo. Missandei has been on his ass about it — telling him that he just has to give Drogo some of his trust.

The concept of blind trust is foreign and stupid to Grey. She has told him that it’s not supposed to feel blind. It’s not supposed to be blind.

Technically, she is engaged. It’s a very bizarre term to associate with herself, in terms of being with Grey. When she was with Neal, she often thought about what it would be like to flash a big rock to her friends and just squeal all over it. That incarnation of her is nothing like the current person. Marriage and Grey is nothing that she even imagined ever really actually saying in a tangible way. She might have just let go of the idea of it all, when they started dating — and she might have just exorcised it from her mind completely, when it turned into love. She loved him too much, that she imagined what he would want — or what she thought he would want. Marriage and them was always this far-off, removed, fantastical concept. Kids and them was also this far-off, removed, fantastical concept.

Now, things are eerily different. Her new world is a bit disorienting. And, she has discovered, part of the whole ritual surrounding getting married is in telling people about it. Well — first and foremost, she tells Terri about it, to make sure Terri doesn’t think she’s insane and impulsive and making a
horrible mistake.

Terri assures her that she’s fine. It’s actually been one of the least impulsive things Missandei has decided upon. With a smile, Terri tells her she’s kind of being an adult about this.

Naturally, Missandei puts off telling her family — her grandma and brothers. She knows this news will bring about complicated feelings in her. They aren’t Grey’s biggest fans. They aren’t her biggest fans. And their self-righteous smugness at being right may cause her to slit her wrists and die in order to punish them. She isn’t sure when she will be ready to elegantly tackle whatever they throw at her. So she’s been putting it off.

When she tells Brienne, well, Brienne already knew thanks to Jaime. Brienne takes it in stride — not too excited about it, but not too weird about it, either.

When she mentions it to Doreah and Clea over a group text, Doreah immediately demanded to see a picture of the ring.

It is the first time Missandei realizes that she doesn’t have a ring.

Drogo isn’t home, so that’s why they decided to have sex somewhat loudly. Their sex life has become even more restricted and scheduled. And to her, at the very least, these logistical problems have an end date. It’s a really cool deviation from the issues — she doesn’t like to call them problems — that they used to have. She can get around her medication making her physically numb to how fucking hot he is. She can get around her sullen, quiet, depressed friend being the biggest mood-killer ever. She can get around an insanely adorable little furbaby who is becoming incrementally more and more confident at life.

Even though they are confident Drogo isn’t home, Missy sprints to the bathroom nakedly anyway. She wants to try to pee so she doesn’t get a UTI, and she wants to clean herself up from the mess that he has made on her body.

When he appears at the doorway, he’s in sweatpants. And it makes her frown because now only one of them is vulnerable and completely naked. He’s watching her sit on the toilet, trying to pee. They’ve still haven’t gotten completely used to going to the bathroom with the door closed — for Drogo’s sake.

He’s not wiping himself — she can still smell herself on him. He’s a neat freak, but he’s not at all a germaphobe — something she never realized could be embodied in a human being until she met him. He’s always more relaxed and calmer, after sex — and even though they just did the deed — she still reaches out to him. She’s done peeing and wiping down. She’s just sitting now. She grabs him by his butt and pulls him close to her face, with him on his feet. She knows — that the innocuous action has piqued his interest — ringing these little alarm bells of terror and excitement in his head — alarm bells that he’s getting so good at managing. He touches her face. He says, “I’m not ready to go again yet. Give me fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, presumptuous!” She laughs. She lays a kiss on his stomach, on the trail of hair below his belly button. “I just wanted . . . to be close to you.”

“Oh,” he says lightly, kind of laughing at himself, too.
She stands up — nudges him out of her way — and flushes the toilet. She’s at the sink washing her hands when she feels him press himself to her naked backside. He’s actually really not ready to go, but it’s still cute that he does these things — that he feels that it’s okay to be funny and to be sexy and to mess around in the downtime.

He kisses her bare shoulder. His bright eyes are watching their reflection in the mirror, with him looming behind her. His hands start crawling around her exposed body, touching her all over, him carefully watching her reflection, her face. He palms her breasts, lightly skimming over her tightening nipples as he sinks his teeth into her still-sweaty neck, at the meaty apex where it meets her shoulder. And she’s just becoming a mess — down there — again. It’s a fact that he quickly notices — she can see his sneaky smile as his hand disappears below the edge of the sink vanity. She grips the sink counter tightly. “Oh, babe,” she gasps out. “God, close the door.”

He slams the door shut with his free arm and hand. He locks it.

And then it’s all hands and fingers — she knows it’s because he wants to stay standing, wants to watch her reflection the whole time. And multi-orgasms have been this fucking elusive unicorn for a while now — years. She doesn’t even know if this really counts — enough time has passed — but then, maybe he can take this as a win, if it happens. He sometimes gets a little bit angry — totally with himself. He has declared to her — uncharacteristically with a lofty amount of arrogance — that he is really good at this kind of sex. So it just pisses him off when it doesn’t fucking work.

She has told him that it’s really not him — it’s her and her body’s fault. She has laughed self-consciously and said that it’s a funny and unfortunate sort of role reversal. And she has joked that she can fake orgasms — if that will make him feel better.

That had really triggered something in him. He demanded her promises — that she never fake it when they are together.

He’s hard again. She can feel him leaning into her. Her body is just strung up all tight and clenched, as she grits her teeth and puts all of her focus to the area between her legs — now numb, like it’s encased in scar tissue. Her voice is low and guttural, when she tells him to go harder and faster on her clit — with bigger circles. She’s trying so hard to help facilitate this — because he can use a sex-win. He deserves sex-wins all the time.

Her eyes are closed and her face is oriented down at the sink, so she almost shrieks in surprise and almost completely knocks herself out of her sex-concentration when a white hand towel comes over her mouth and nose. There’s still space to breathe — behind his hand — but it’s hot, humid, and difficult.

Their reflection is insane to her. She notes, with a sense of humor, that this isn’t at all the kind of sex she thought she’d be having with her future husband — not when she was younger and had fleeting thoughts about this sort of scary thing. This wasn’t even the kind of sex she imagined having, when she first saw him in the language center and wanted his body. Her repertoire and creativity at that moment was limited to only her experiences with Neal.

This guy has expanded her horizons in crazy ways — and not just with sex.

And she almost brains herself on the sink faucet, choking behind the hand towel, when she feels him poke his thumb inside of her, for just a moment. He uses her arousal as lubricant so he can lightly push into her other hole — the ass one. She starts to try to talk behind the towel — mostly to say, whoaaa, babyyyy. But she’s muffled, and he’s in this mission-oriented tunnel vision.

“Relax,” he rasps harshly into her ear, as he counterintuitively handles her more roughly, being more
daring with what he’s doing. “God, I love you,” he says. “God, I need you so badly. Your fucking body drives me insane, and I want to fuck it all the time. And I really need for you to come for me.”

She’s starting to cry. And she has told him that for her — maybe for women in general — a lot of sex is mental and emotional. She has told him it helps when he talks to her.

She punches his wrist, knocking his hand off her face. She gasps loudly and starts sucking in huge gulps of cooler air. She automatically bends over a bit more, pressing deeper into his ministrations. She rambling now, in dark mutters. She’s asking him if he’d just fuck the shit out of her already, if he would just shove his fucking dick inside of her already.

He says no. He will not be doing that yet.

And she’s crying a little bit harder. And she starts to sound like she’s begging, as she asks him to please just not stop, and to please just get inside of her already. She wants to feel him. She just needs him. She just wants to feel him pounding her until it hurts. The words are purposeful — maybe they are even a test — and after a bunch of stutters and starts and stops — she feels the climb happening, steadily. She can feel her conscious self getting further and further away from her body. All there is are his fingers, moving all over, in and out, of her most sensitive nerve endings.

His response is also purposeful — it has to be. He tells her that he will fuck her until it fucking hurts — but not until he is finished making her scream his name. He reminds her that she wants this so badly — he can feel how much she wants it. He tells her, again, that he’s feels such fucking love for her. And this better happen. She better come screaming his name. Or else he will kill her.

Her end of the conversation becomes sparse and quiet — the closer she gets. When she comes — with his thumb in her ass — she’s sobbing. And his tone immediately changes. He sounds so relieved, and then so encouraging, and then so sweet, and then he tells her to keep on going and that she just looks so beautiful to him, in this moment, and that he’s going to always take care of her, and she’s going to be okay.

“Can I get your grandma’s phone number?”

Missandei weakly looks up at his face. She’s cradled in the body, sitting lifelessly on the bathroom floor, just cuddling for a bit. He still needs to fuck her until it hurts and stuff. That’s still on the books. They are so ridiculous. “Why?” she asks.

“It occurred to me that I should probably ask for her permission to marry you.”

Her jaw drops. She’s too tired to push him away. So she just sinks further into his hold on her. And she tries to muster the energy to sound self-righteous. She says, “Are you kidding me? I’m not actually something you can acquire or buy from my grandma. You don’t ask her for permission. You ask me.”

He laughs. “I did ask you for permission, though. Multiple times.” She lightly hits him in the chest. He laughs again, catching her hand. “Missandei — it’s important to her. And it’s what you guys do, right? The man goes over to the woman’s parents’ house and promises her father that she will be taken care of and adored for all time and that they will pump out male babies in a timely manner so that the family line can stay intact, right?”
“That was a great summation of my entire culture, you asshole,” she says sarcastically. “Thanks for drilling down to the salient points.”

He tells her he is joking. She tells him that she knows — he’s lucky that she knows. He tells her that — actually — the real reason is that when they were in Naath, he just remembers how . . . unimpressed and kinda pissed her grandma was at him, because she didn’t even understand why he was there, if not to ask for permission to marry Missandei. Grey tells Missy that at that point, it hadn’t even been something he had thought of — but it stuck in his head after that. He says he knows there’s some strictness and narrowness in this whole procedure and shit — but ultimately, what it does is show her family that they are not selfish and they are not unhearing. It will help show that they care — because of course they care.

He tells her it also makes a difference — and he was being careful about this. He’s not going to ask her father for permission to have her. He’s not even going to get anywhere near asking her brothers for permission to have her. That is not even in the realm of possibility. He will never do that to her. But this is her grandma — her grandma makes it a little bit different, doesn’t it?

Drogo is already awake and flipping over an egg sandwich on a pan, when Grey walks out of the bedroom dressed in a suit. They can both hear Missandei making noise — throwing her shoes around in a frantic blur, running back and forth across the bedroom finding the right outfit. Grey picks up the coffee cup that Drogo offers, before placing it on the counter so he can lean down and pick up 2.0. She can only tolerate being hugged for about ten seconds, before she tries to squirm out of his grasp.

“Come on, little girl,” he says to her, holding her in place, hugging her to his chest, forcing her to stay still. “Just hang out with me for a little bit longer.” Grey finally lets her hop out of his arms after a few more seconds.

“So, I got a job,” Drogo says, just tense as hell. “Once I get a few paychecks, I can get out of your hair.”

“He doesn’t have much hair for you get out of, though.” They both turn to look at Missandei, balancing against a wall with her hand as she puts on a pair of pumps. The way she walks changes in heels, and he’s watching her ass say hello to him, in her tight skirt, as she goes up to Drogo to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“What’s your job?” Grey says, narrowing his eyes. He has a hunch.

Drogo sighs. “Is it important?”

“The fuck, dude. Are you doing manual labor?”

“Fuck you, man,” Drogo snaps right back. “No.” And then reluctantly, he says, “It’s a restaurant job.”

Grey shakes his head. “Uh uh. Nope. Sorry. Tell them you changed your mind and you aren’t gonna be a fucking waiter again. You have a fucking business degree, man.”

“It’s easier to get a job when you have a job,” Drogo says. “And I am going fucking stir-crazy here. There are only so many resumes I can send out in a fucking day, only so much networking I can do.”
“We’re not kicking you out already! We want you to stay!”

“No, I get that,” Drogo says. “But I’m doing this for me. I don’t want to constantly be taking your money, man.”

“D —”

“I know you don’t care, man. I get it. But I fucking care.”

“So you’ll shoot yourself in the fucking face because of pride?”

“Guys,” Missandei says, breaking in. “This is escalating. And we have to go to work, so this conversation won’t be finished, and it’ll make everyone upset the rest of the day. So let’s put a pause on this, okay?”
Her doctor writes her a prescription for 25 milligram sertraline. She’s down from 100 milligrams a day to 75 milligrams a day. She tells Terri that the only real effect it has on her is that she sometimes feels a bit of vertigo or some tingling in her hands, whenever she stands up too fast.

Without judgement, Terri asks her — again — what her reasons are for getting off antidepressants. She seemed to be doing very well on them. Missandei kind of folds her hands in her lap, flipping them over a few times before she tells Terri that it’s a combination of a lot of things. The sex stuff is a big consideration and, she’s read, it’s usually the most common reason people cite for getting off the drugs. But beyond that, she’s had to work harder to maintain her weight while on the medication — or maybe that’s a byproduct of aging, she’s not sure. She tells Terri that she misses junk food a lot — which is probably a stupid reason to get off the drug. She’s also been just so happy lately — and it can’t just be the medication, it can’t be.

She also tells Terri that if she ever becomes pregnant — she’d like to not be on the drug. She’s read about that, too. The increased chance of complications during pregnancy, if she were to be on the drug.

At that, Terri quirks a brow and asks if Missandei and Grey are talking about having kids.

“Oh, God no. Not really. Not yet.” Missandei pauses. “I guess I’m preparing. I want to know that I can do it, if and when the time comes. Maybe I’ll titrate off and later, I will get back on it. But I will be armed with the knowledge that I can titrate off because I’ve done it already. I’ve watched my brother and Grey come down from drugs — and I know it’s not the same thing — you’re not really going through withdrawals in the same way — but watching them — it seems so insurmountable and difficult. What if — if and when it comes up, I’m too weak? I want to be prepared.”

Grey would rather not deal with a real estate agent at all. He’d rather go through the trouble of getting a license himself so that he doesn’t have to give someone commission for doing what he can do himself. At that, Missandei tells him that he’s a real idiot and that at some point, he has to stop being such a scrappy immigrant and realize that his time has value, too. So that’s why he will pay people to do shit that he can probably do himself — to save himself the time of actually doing it. Missandei also tells him that the seller pays commission.

“I just don’t want to deal with another person,” he says.

“That’s life, though,” she says neutrally. “We deal with people we don’t want to, all the time.”
His phone call with Missandei’s grandmother is doomed from the start. For one — it’s a phone call. He supposes that it would’ve been proper for him to buy an expensive plane ticket and fly over there just to get verbally beaten down in person. The fact that he is merely calling her signified some sort of laziness, lack of respect, and lack of reverence.

They talk in Low Valyrian, and as always, she condemningly tells him that they will do what they want to anyway, so what does her opinion even matter? He wants to wring her wrinkly neck through his cell phone and tell her that she is causing Missandei so much fucking grief and stress, which in turn is putting a strain on their fucking relationship because all they talk about these days is how much they really don’t want to get fucking married because all it means is more of this bullshit cultural shit over their heads. He wants to tell her he really doesn’t want to become part of some bullshit that subjugates daughters underneath sons. He comes from much of the same — he was the youngest, most expendable son — and it was utterly humiliating and dehumanizing. And people will rationalize it away like — his parents didn’t know better. But what he sees, with his eyes and with his brain — is that they willfully refused to know better. That, he will never forgive.

He knows he is essentially inviting a whole world of pain down on Missandei, if he dares to utter his angry true feelings to her grandma.

He does stick to another truth though. Over the course of five minutes, he tells her that he loves her granddaughter, far more than himself. He tells her that Missandei is very upset over the estrangement. He asks her what in the ever-loving fuck she wants him to do — to get back into her good graces.

She tells him that she doesn’t want to come to regret this. She doesn’t want to regret giving him permission to marry her granddaughter.

He asks her why she would regret. He asks her what she is thinking about — and what he has done to make her feel this way about him.

She tells him that Missandei has changed, in the time that she has known him.

Drogo moves out quickly. He’d rather live in a tiny one-room hovel with a communal bathroom in a firetrap of a brick building that was raised at the turn of the century, in the space that used to be occupied by a gambling den and brothel — than live with Grey. It pisses Grey off so much that he intentionally insinuates something to Drogo, about his precarious emotional condition and how alcohol exacerbates it.

And that makes Drogo look like he wants to murder. There is now so much tension between them that Grey actually wonders to himself — if they are still going to be friends after this.

When he steps into a puddle of cold pee, he completely loses his shit. He just loses his mind. He looks down at his bare foot in disbelief — he just took her out half an hour ago — and he angrily
hops to the bathroom so that he can clean his foot — so that he can get on with fucking beating the fucking shit out of her for being so fucking stupid and so fucking insolent.

He just runs some hot water over his foot. And it’s dripping wet as he stalks out of the bathroom and shouts her name — she is immediately scared and he sees her squirming her little body underneath the couch, to her old hiding spot.

He easily lifts the couch and shifts it a foot, dropping it down to the ground with a hard thump. Momo 2.0 makes a run for it, tail tightly tucked between her legs. And he is incensed that she would dare run from him when he’s telling her to stay put.

He snatches her up as she cowers in a corner, behind a standing lamp. He lunges and grabs her by the skin and fur, and he shouts, “What the fuck is wrong with you!” as he carries her to the puddle of pee. He puts her feet on the ground and shoves her body into the floor, stopping her nose shy of the puddle. She’s wriggling in his hands and it only makes him press her into the floor harder. Her butt is in the air, and he harshly hits it. She screams out a squeal, and he is unmoved. He says, “No!” He asks her if she fucking understands.

She has a headache, and when she arrives home, Grey is already in bed — which is strange because it’s still very early. She drops her purse on a side table and picks up the leash underneath it, that they keep in a basket.

She also finds that Momo 2.0’s cage is empty, which is really strange.

Dropping the leash back down, she crosses their apartment and quietly pushes open the bedroom door.

“Babe?” she calls out.

He’s awake, rolled over on his side with his arm tucked underneath his head. Little 2.0 is lying next to him, sleeping. His free hand is gently stroking her fur, over the full length of her body.

He’s usually adamant about not letting her sleep with them.

Missandei quickly strips off her work clothes and steps out of her heels. In a pair of his basketball shorts and a t-shirt, she carefully crawls into bed — watching 2.0’s eyes flutter open momentarily before she goes back to sleep.


His face breaks into a scowl. “God,” he says. “I was a fucking lunatic. I fucked up and lost my cool, and I just scared the shit out of her. Not literally. She was really good about keeping it in. God, I feel so shitty about it. She was so scared of me. I gave her steak for dinner.”

It almost makes her laugh. But instead, Missandei holds the back of his head in her hand, the dog in between their bodies. She understands why 2.0 doesn’t sleep with them — because of this separation. “She evidently got over it,” Missandei says lightly, petting 2.0’s soft body too, running her fingers into his.

“Do I do this to human beings?” He is talking about Drogo. “What if I end doing this to . . . other
human beings?” He is talking about the future.

“Then you apologize afterward and give them steak,” she says lightly. 

“Be serious.”

She sighs tiredly, breathing through the painful throb of her headache. She is being serious. He should apologize to Drogo. And she might be an idiot, but she’s never all that concerned about him. “I learned in therapy that we invariably act out what we have known,” she says. “This is what you have known. Change comes from being self-aware and acting with intention. And that’s all I can handle right now, babe. My head is fucking killing me.”

He frowns, reaching over to cup her cheek.

He tells her that she doesn’t have to fucking get off her medication just so they can fuck like rabbits. She foggily shakes her head and tells him to shut up, he’s wrong. And also really arrogant. That is not the reason she is doing this. Her heart is pounding in her throat, and she tells herself that her brain is just going a bit berserk because it is no longer getting what it expects to get. It will take a while for it to adjust and to deal.

Her body is hot — physically. She’s hot enough that Momo 2.0 gets to her feet and leaves them, walking all the way to the edge of the bed, her dog tag jingling against her collar. Little 2.0 collapses back down on top of the cushiony blankets and promptly falls back asleep.

He helps Missandei take off the clothes she just put on. He pulls off her shorts, and peels off her t-shirt, leaving her underwear on. He rolls her over onto her stomach, and he digs his hands and his fingers and his knuckles into her flesh.

She quietly tells him why she’s getting off the medication. She tells him she doesn’t mean to scare him with all of her assumptions, but it’s just that things have really ramped up lately — they’re like, really serious about being together. They have a dog. They’re buying a house with his money, which she still feels deeply uncomfortable about. And they’re getting married at some point. Kids is a possibility, right?

“Yeah,” he says thickly. “It’s a possibility.”

He tells her he’s scared he will be a really shitty parent. He’s scared he will be an angry parent. He’s scared he will be a withholding parent. He’s scared he will punish instead of console, when he feels anxiety and fear. He’s scared that he will ruin the people that he has made.

What he doesn’t talk about much is his own mother and father — but it’s clear that they’ve been hanging over his head — in his head.

“You . . . you want to have kids,” she says — slowly coming to the realization in the painful, swollen ache of her brain. “You actually want to have kids. With me.”

“Yeah. I do.”

He tells her that he knows she would be a good mother. That part he doesn’t question. She’s so patient and so loving and so fair when it comes to Momo 2.0 and everyone else. It’s obvious. The
problem is him.

She tells him that he’s so prone to carrying all the responsibility and all of the blame — when it comes to them, when it comes to everything. It’s a quality in him that she’s sometimes very frustrated by. She rolls into him, tucks herself into his body even though she is uncomfortably hot — the flat of his hand falls on her back. She tells him she’s not altogether sure she’ll be a good mother. Maybe the reality is that she coddles and she makes those in her orbit weaker and unambitious. Maybe the reality is that he makes survivors and winners, with his high standards and steep demands.

“Why would anyone ever assume they’d be a good parent?” she whispers into him.

Missandei is always tired these days — and they haven’t had sex in over a month because she hasn’t wanted to. He’s been pushed off of her a few times, with her bluntly telling him no thanks. And each time, he flares red. And then gets out of bed to go into the bathroom to spend time with himself, instead of with a fucking jerk.

When she isn’t tired, she is cranky. Sometimes she is both — tired and cranky and a fucking bitch to him about little ass shit. She has told him that it takes about three months or so, for the sertraline to completely be gone from her body. He has all but marked the date on his calendar, the date in which his girl will stop being such a batshit PMSing hag and go back to her normal, beautiful self. He’s going to throw a fucking party.

He’s told Jaime about the change. They have jokingly started calling it that — mostly behind Missandei’s back. Jaime is interested — or fascinated — by it, his vantage point of drugs has always been fairly removed. He wasn’t privy to the on-ramping or off-ramping, whenever he used to dole out the orange bottles filled with this stuff.

Grey realizes too late that when Jaime suggested they try something different for Grey’s nameday, that Jaime is being a fucking nosy piece of shit who won’t mind his own fucking business. They are in the lobby of the restaurant Drogo works at. Grey is almost completely sure that Jaime has requested that they get seated in Drogo’s zone. The restaurant isn’t exactly fine dining, but it’s not a burger shack either. Jaime had sold this to him as a three- to four-dollar-sign restaurant. It’s new and it’s been getting a lot of good buzz.

“Remember when we used to go to the restaurant Drogo used to work at late, at night?” Jaime says, referring back to college. “He used to throw us so many freebies. Do you think he can still do that.”

“No,” Grey says. “And don’t ask for it. Fuck, man.”

“Oh, I’m going to ask for it. It’s up to him to say no.”

Brienne apologizes to Missandei, right before they leave the hustle and bustle of the busy restaurant bar and enter into a private room.

Missandei nearly jumps out of her skin when a bunch of female voices scream out. “SURPRISE!”
She feels Brienne’s hand on her back, steadying her.

“What is this?” Missandei asks, trying and struggling to smile.

A waft of flowery perfume and Clea’s arms are thrown at her, hitting her nose and her body. Missandei takes a step backward, to absorb the hug, unsteady in her shoes. The vertigo is still very much a part of her existence. “It’s a nameday-engagement party surprise combo!” Clea shouts.

“My nameday is more than a month away,” Missandei says blearily.

“Duh!” Doreah says — already drunk. “That’s why we did it now! You weren’t expecting it, were you? Ha-ha!” She continues laughing in punctuated machine gun style for long seconds. Missandei looks over at Brienne — who is sweating from the people packed in the room, who is pink from the shame of what she has done. Missandei has specifically told them all, over and over, that she is not interested in this stuff.

A bunch of people she’s not altogether sure she even wants to see are lining up to greet her. There are coworkers from her old job, for instance. Mary grabbed her left hand to see her ring — only to act very embarrassed when she doesn’t see a ring. She says that Missy must have it off, because it’s being resized. Missandei says that it’s not being resized, on account of not existing. Mary and the rest of them take it to mean that Missy is really bitter about not having a ring. They tell her they are sorry for bringing it up. It’s obviously a sore spot.

“It’s not a sore spot,” Missandei snaps. Her fuse has been incredibly short these days. “I just don’t have a ring.”

“He’ll get around to it, hon,” Mary says, trying to soothe her. “You know how men are.”

“Not really,” Missandei says. “He’s really precise and on top of his shit. He does everything intentionally.”

Missandei turns her face to Brienne’s and looks at her friend with murder in her eyes.

Dinner is really shitty. The food is great, actually. But the company is shitty. And their server is aggressively angry, but still professional.

“Is there anything else I can get you?” Drogo says, eyes boring a fiery hole through Jaime’s head.

“If you can get us a dessert menu in a reasonable amount of time, there will be a good tip in it for you.”

“Bieber,” Grey says warningly.

When Doreah complains that she’s no fun — that she’s not even having some celebratory sparkling wine with them — Missandei says that if she has alcohol, she’s going to shit the flatbread they all just
ate in liquid form and make the toilet bowl look like a scummy cesspool of death. So no. She will not be drinking sparkling wine.

Next to her, Dany kind of quietly snickers.

“You’re being such a killjoy!” Doreah says. “We’ve been planning this for weeks, and you don’t appreciate it at all!”

Missandei wants to sarcastically bite out that she’s so sorry they spent all of two weeks brainstorming this half-baked shit that she explicitly told them all she didn’t want.

He feels like . . . like lower than the lowest fucking shit . . . when Drogo comes back and tells them that their bill is taken care of. Jaime actually shuts up at that — stunned into breaking character. For some reason, his favorite character to play is that of a white entitled asshole. Jaime falters and his eyes go wide. They all know that there’s no such thing as freebies, not really. Drogo is actually paying for this. Jaime says, “D, oh my God. We were just playin’. You really don’t have to —”

“I know,” Drogo says, casting his eyes around the room. “It’s fine. Whatever.” He glances at Grey. “Happy nameday, man. I missed the last few, so I figured I owe you one.”

Grey wants to punch Jaime in the face over this. He’s not even a little bit satisfied, that Jaime looks like he wants to punch himself in the face.

After Missandei alienates most of her party guests, they give her a wide berth. And she’s guessing that most of them are assuming that she and Grey had some fight or something — and that’s why she’s being such a bitch.

Dany comes over and sits down next to her. She knowingly tells Missy that it’s hard to constantly be told what she wants, isn’t it? Dany says that it’s a labor-intensive endeavor, to constantly have to fight against expectations, isn’t it?

“No one gets to owns me,” Missandei mutters bitterly, clenching her left hand into a fist. “No one gets to buy me. With trinkets. Not even him.”

They hang around until after the end of Drogo’s shift. Drogo slides over three small tipples of some infusions they’ve got steeping at the restaurant. He says that it’s still not completely ripe yet, but they can try it anyway. Drogo casts an unimpressed look at Jaime and tells him not to shoot it.

Jaime rolls his eyes. “Duh, bro. Duh.”
"Don't worry," Drogo says suddenly. "I'm not an alcoholic. I know that sounds like fucking denial. But I know alcoholism. This is not what it looks like." He sighs. "I wish there was a way to prove it to you."

Grey is bad at this. He finds that he never knows when the appropriate moment is — or what the appropriate situation is. To apologize. So he blurts, “D — I’m really sorry, man. For being such an asshole to you these last few months.”

Drogo sighs tiredly. “It’s okay,” he says. “I get it. I know you worry about me.”

This is the evening she really wanted — just a quiet one in with a modest number of her best friends. Missandei is nursing a bottle of water, cuddled up on the couch with Momo 2.0, laughing at a joke Dany made. It’s only funny because it’s so weird to see Dany make a joke.

Brienne flips her phone over when she hears it buzz. After reading from it, she sighs. And then she says, “Jaime says they’re almost back home with Grey. And fair warning, I think they are totally plastered. Jaime’s text is insane.” Brienne holds up her phone, and Missandei doesn’t even need to squint to read the small text. She’s not at all surprised that Jaime went ahead and got Grey super wasted and is coming back to leave him in her care for the rest of the night. It’s exactly what she wanted to deal with tonight. Exactly. How on earth did Jaime know?

The apartment explodes into high volume drunken noise after Jaime bursts through the door, flushed and rambling on loudly about deportation. Dany stiffens in her seat and kind of looks like she’s steeling herself for this. Brienne immediately gets to her feet — she’s such a pro at wrangling Jaime — and she bodily pushes the guys into the kitchen for a bit, muttering that they should all grab some waters.

Jaime comes back with a bottle of his dad’s whiskey, that he pulled from their freezer. They will forever have an unending supply of Jaime’s dad’s whiskey. Jaime collapses on the couch, pulling Brienne down with him, lightly bumping into Dany, who gives him a death glare.

A shadow falls over her and she looks up. Grey is holding his arms out — asking for her permission. Missandei lifts up a sleepy 2.0 and places the dog into his arms. He gives her a quick smile and then he walks over to the armchair and settles into it, petting 2.0 and hugging her out of her sleepy daze, talking to her quietly.

“Hey, I’m Drogo, by the way,” Drogo says, holding out his hand to Dany.

“Daenerys,” she says, taking his hand and shaking it.

Drogo silently takes the other armchair — next to Jaime and Brienne. He holds out his empty glass to Jaime, who immediately puts his full concentration toward filling it.

After Grey leashes Momo 2.0 and disappears out of the front door to take her to go potty one last time before bed, as Brienne and Dany start clearing the glasses from the coffee table, Jaime yawns
and stretches and says to Missandei, “Dude, it’s his nameday. You should give him sex. Just an idea. Just a suggestion.”

Drogo noisily snorts.

She is immediately on edge. “Jaime,” she says. “Mind your own business.”

He holds up both his hands in surrender. “I’m just sayin’.”

“Why don’t you give him sex, if it’s so important to you?”

“Because,” Brienne says lightly, walking back into the room. “I might not be okay with that.”

Jaime laughs, reaching out to grab her hand, to let her pull him up off the couch, to his feet. On his feet, he grabs her and whispers something inaudible in her ear — which makes her flush red. Missandei rolls her eyes — she’s currently completely over Jaime.

Grey is a little surprised to see them all getting ready to leave, when he gets back with 2.0. He tells them that they don’t have to all go just because they’re getting their dog ready for bed. Drogo yawns and says he’s had a longass day — he’s beat. He actually wants to go home to count some sheep for a while. Grey frowns and says that they drove Drogo here. Maybe Drogo can stay over, and Grey can take him home in the morning. Drogo’s room is still made up and stuff.

He catches Drogo glancing quickly at Missandei. Drogo waves Grey off, mumbling that he’d rather go home. And then Dany smoothly says that she can drive Drogo home.

After he shuts the door behind their friends and locks it, he turns around quizzically to Missandei. He says, “That got weird at the end there. What the hell happened while I was taking Momo 2.0 on a walk?”

She looks tired, but also like she’s in a good mood. She kind of laughs. She tells him, “They got out of here in a hurry so that we can have sex.”

His whole body is on alert — just immediately responsive to that. And he has like, so many questions. But the overriding one is, “Are you sure?”

She nods. “Happy nameday, baby.”

He is so excited, like — so excited. Maybe too excited. Maybe after years and years of having the very opposite problem, tonight, his problem will be premature ejaculation. That’s how excited he is about this. He can barely breathe as she takes off her clothes, standing in front of him as he sits on
the bed, staring at her body like a psychopath.

She cracks up. “Baby! Come on! Has it been that long?”

“Oh my God,” he says, voice low and guttural. “Yes. It has.”

Naked, she walks up to him. She picks up his hand and places it on her breast. She laughs again, when he does nothing — just frozen in an arousal-induced stupor. “Babe!”

“I don’t even know where to start,” he says, shaking his head.

She apologizes to him for withholding sex for so long. He distractedly tells her not to apologize for it — it’s fine. She wasn’t feeling him. And that’s fine. As long as she eventually comes back around, he’s fine with it. She tells him that it wasn’t exactly that she wasn’t feeling him. Well, literally — she wasn’t feeling him. But she always feels him — figuratively. It was more that she wasn’t feeling herself. She has just been so fucking physically uncomfortable and she just doesn’t feel sexy. And she isn’t altogether confident she won’t accidentally shit on him or throw up on him or cry all over him — during sex.

He’s so serious, as he tells her he doesn’t care.

She laughs.

She tells him that she didn’t drink any alcohol tonight — and upon his blank look that signals his utter lack of comprehension — she explains that she didn’t drink and she’s been hydrating like a motherfucker and being careful about what she eats — because she had been planning on giving him sex tonight — from the get. So this isn’t like — Jaime’s doing. That fucker can’t take credit for this.

“Oh my God, can we not talk about Jaime right now?” he says, gasping and panting as he slowly pushes into her, biting down on her neck. “Oh my God. You feel amazing. Hold on. Don’t move.” He shudders a little bit, in her arms. “This is not going to last long, babe. Sorry. Not sorry.”

She’s already crying. Tears are leaking out of her eyes because she just feels so emotional already. She’s thinking about how she had said the exact same thing to him, the second time they had sex, in her bed at the old studio. And all of the misunderstandings and trials and tribulations that followed that. And she’s remembering how she felt in that moment, too, with him inside of her — much like this — and how she just didn’t want it to ever end. She would murder for him, too.
Their disparate aesthetics and ways of dealing with people come back to bite them both in the ass, as
they start spending four exhausting hours after work three days a week with Melanie, their real estate
agent, walking through different houses. Grey is rude to their agent — which bothers Missandei. He
basically views her as a living, breathing door opener — the person with the keys to houses that he
found online himself. He’d rather she never talk to him. He has told Missandei that he finds Melanie
to be distracting and generally useless when it comes to knowing pertinent information. He is
inattentive and constantly walking away, when Melanie starts to gently sell them on home features,
when she points to travertine tiles in the entryway of a three-bedroom and tells them that it’s an
upgrade, when she points to the crown at the ceiling and tells them that its custom. All Grey can see
is the quality of the finish, the way the crown is wrapped and the way he can still the ghosting of nail
holes. He tells Melanie it’s not really high quality work.

It’s not that he’s wrong. It’s that he’s an utter dick about it. His issue is that he hangs out with dicks
all the time. All of his friends are super handsome, entitled assholes. He doesn’t know how normal
people operate anymore. Missandei has asked him to stop being such a dick to their agent, but he
kind of has played dumb — telling her that he’s not sure what she means. He was perfectly polite to
their agent.

Missandei tells him he was dismissive — and people can sense that, even if they don’t call him out
on his rudeness explicitly.

He tells Missandei that he will *not* stand around smiling like an idiot, like some shoddy crown is
making his fucking day.

She groans in frustration — at his general denseness when it comes to this stuff.

On their way home, having struck out with everything they’ve looked at — they grab a quick bite to
eat at an outdoor pizza place. Picnic tables surround a hot domed brick oven as hipsters man the
register and pizza peels. He randomly picks out a pizza with figs and honey, before he shrugs and
accepts the ambiguously gendered cashier’s beer suggestion, a light-bodied porter. When the cashier
quotes them the total, Missandei pushes forward with her credit card, handing it over to the cashier as
Grey is just cracking open his wallet.

He looks at her, a little amused, taking a sip from his overflowing beer glass so that it doesn’t spill.
Money continues to be a thing she struggles with. Her credit cards are carrying a too-high-for-her-
comfort-level balance because she’s been putting more small charges — like this one — on them.
She knows it’s not a sustainable system, and at some point, she will have to come to terms with him
paying for things disproportionately. Unless she starts making a lot more money, which she does not
anticipate doing. She suspects she just needs more time.

Missandei still struggles sometimes with her incessant need to make people — him — happy. She
will probably go home and start something — sex — because she feels that she owes him. She’s
pretty sure that sort of sounds hooker-y.
Grey looks around at the other tables as they wait for their pizza. He tells Missandei that he feels old all of a sudden.

Maybe a part of her — a part of him — unrealistically expected it to be like a light switch turning on. Maybe they both thought she’d start having a million orgasms in a row, once she stopped her medication. But as the effects of the sertraline continue to linger in her brain, the change in how responsive she is to sex unfolds gradually.

She doesn’t have to suffocate herself so much anymore. Sometimes she still catches herself holding her breath — naturally — in the moment. She still has to apply a lot of concentration toward what is happening, because even the smallest distractions still shoot oncoming orgasms in the head.

They generally only have sex in the bedroom — they both feel really weird about having sex in front of Momo 2.0, because she’s basically their child. But Missandei had started messing around with him during the drive back home — running her hand over the planes of his body, sneaking underneath his clothes, in his pants — pulling down his zipper — sadistically and stupidly goal-oriented, her mouth on his skin — in trying to get him close to crashing the car and killing the both of them. He’s a fantastic driver. And he kept smacking the back of his head against the rest and telling her that he’s going to fuck her bad when they get home — the word bad this ambiguous thing that has gotten her pretty excited.

Grey shuts Momo 2.0 in the bathroom before he stalks back to the kitchen, where she is getting them a glass of water. She can taste the lingering bitterness of the porter on his tongue. And her eyes are so heavy and her voice so thick, as he strips her naked from the waist down and gets down to his knees.

What he does to her makes her cheeks burn, causes these desperate, keening noises to come out of her throat. She’s finding that she doesn’t have to even contribute to this. She doesn’t have to direct her attention. He is naturally her whole world right now. She cannot even rip her attention away from him, even if she wants to. She grips the counter tightly, behind her, in both of her hands, letting her arms hold some of her body weight so she doesn’t just collapse on top of his face. Her legs are jelly. And she can’t help but wantonly allow herself to grind against his mouth a little bit.

This is familiar to her, too — Jesus, she’s been having sex with this guy since forever —

“Babe —” The orgasm totally blindsides her. It’s like a punch to the vagina — that’s how she has heard one of her colleagues describe it one time. She wails like she’s in pain, as she loses her footing — uncaring about crashing to the floor — but she feels his hands and his fingers pinching into her ass, slowing her descent as her body shakes in tremors and spastic shudders. The water glass she left on the counter smashes into the floor, shattering. Against her wet body, she can feel him mutter to ignore it. Her eyes are screwed shut and all she can coherently think about is, Jesus fucking Christ, he is so wonderful.

“Hey, hey,” Grey says, shifting her body so that it’s resting on the other side of him, away from the broken glass. “Careful, babe. Hang tight while I clean this shit up, okay?”

She wrenches her fist into the front of his shirt and yanks his face — God — towards her, shoving her tongue past his swollen lips, into his mouth, tasting the numbing remnant-scent of her neediness for him. She growls and tells him he’s such a neat freak and it’s so fucking annoying, before she stands up on her shaky bare legs — leaving her pants and panties on the kitchen floor — urgently
dragging him toward the bedroom with his hands in hers.

“Dude, I should take her out,” Grey says, reluctantly looking at the closed bathroom door. “2.0’s bladder is gonna explode.”

“We will be fast,” Missandei promises.

After talking with Terri a little bit about it, it’s on her mind. Brienne actually seems like the perfect person to bump brains with, on this. Missandei sits on a stool at the kitchen island at Brienne’s, watching Brienne mess around with pots and pans, heating up some soup that Jaime had made. Jaime and Grey are playing racquetball with Tyrion and Drogo.

Missy asks Brienne how Brienne deals with having such an asshole for a life partner. Brienne looks momentarily disoriented — before she widely shifts into a loud laugh. She says, “Have you been talking to Jaime? Did he tell you about the disastrous dinner party at Clea's we went to the other night?”


“Oh, God. He totally killed the party.” Another chuckle sneaks out of Brienne. Then she clears her throat — trying to shake off the giggles — before she says, “You know how he loves to talk about criminals, white people, and racism all the time?”


“No, seriously. His favorite subjects,” Brienne grins. “Well, all Clea’s new boyfriend did was peel off a bit of chicken skin — and Jaime didn't even make the food — but Jaime saw it and asked Mike if he’s a racist or something. Which is just the most baiting question ever. And Mike kind of was a good sport and kind joked around a little bit about it. But Jaime was like, ‘No, really. Why don’t you eat chicken skin?’ asking if it was a health thing. Mike said it’s partly a health thing, it’s partly that he doesn’t like the texture — to just chew on fat. And then Jaime just started grilling the poor guy on what he does eat. And it’s standard meat and potatoes stuff. And then Jaime said that it must be nice to be able to pick and choose prime cuts of meat and decide what parts are worthy of being eaten and what parts are to be discarded. That’s a nice luxury that Mike has.” Brienne pauses. “Then it got totally out of hand after that. The dinner party died. Everyone was so tense and so scared to talk, probably worried that Jaime was going to accuse them of being racist.” Brienne rakes her blond bangs out of her eyes, off of her face, laughing.

Okay, so this,” Missandei says, pointing to Brienne’s face. “You are so entertained by this and by him, clearly. That’s awesome. But I’d be really embarrassed if it were me, and I’d feel really bad if my friends felt so attacked and upset by what Grey said to them. And I’d worry about what they thought of him — and what they think of me, for being with him. Because we kind of are representatives for each other.” It’s the reason why she was so nervous about meeting his boss and making a good first impression.

Brienne pushes over a bowl of soup and a hunk of bread to Missandei. Brienne thoughtfully breaks apart some of her own piece of loaf — the crumbs dispersing on the smooth kitchen counter — before dipping it into the steaming soup. She tells Missy that she actually used to be really embarrassed, being around Jaime. But it was never because of his behavior or what he said to people
— she honestly never paid much attention to it because he’s so good-looking. Brienne says that she figures good-looking people just get away with all sorts of insane shit that regular people don’t get away with. Brienne tells Missy that her embarrassment around Jaime used to stem from the wide contrast in their looks — in how Jaime looks versus how she looks.

Brienne raises her hand — as Missy starts to protest, stopping Missy’s words about how Brienne is just a super cute person. Brienne tells Missandei that she doesn’t need the reassurance. It’s cool. She’s pretty much come a long way since being sixteen and being super insecure.

“But you must have a different experience, right?” Brienne says. “Because both you guys — you and Grey — are beautiful people. So that’s your reality. And you’re sweet and you keep your true feelings deep inside, so people will be happy and will feel good around you. And he’s standoffish and loves to be very honest with people about where they stand with him. And people often don’t feel good around him.” Brienne scrunches up her face. “I think I can imagine it. I think I get it. I mean, it’s not my experience, but I think I get what you’re feeling.”

“Plus,” Missandei adds. “I hate to say it. I hate to play this card. But Jaime is white. And blond. And handsome. All the toxic shit he says can read as amusing and funny and nonthreatening. But I think — Grey can be as pretty and as beautiful as a human being can possibly be — but it’s easier to move past his looks. Because he’s Black. I know the stuff he sometimes says reads as really aggressive and militant to other people.” What Missandei doesn’t say — because it’s just hammering home a point that she has already made to death — is that her looks have their limitations, too. She’s treated like an object sometimes — as most women are. But — wrong or right — reality or perception — her truth within herself is that she is objectified to a greater extent than other women — because of her skin color. And it’s not always flattering. It’s not always about the privilege of being sexually attractive. Sometimes there are people who are not attracted to her at all — because she is not white. And sometimes objectification is as simple as being made to feel inhuman. And she cannot even stand debating the truth of this with anyone.

That’s probably the real reason she’s not actually bringing it up. She doesn’t even want to deal with the possibility that Brienne would disagree with her, tell her that this is all in her head and it’s not what people see — when they look at her. Missandei doesn’t really believe Brienne would respond that way. But mentally — there’s still a blockage. A protective measure.

Vaguely, Missandei says, “I think the issue is really that I don’t want to be an angry Black woman. And he’s really okay with being an angry Black man. And it’s giving me anxiety. Which, granted, has been a bit more intense because I’m off my meds.”

“Just — stop caring about what people think, babe,” Brienne says. “That’s kind of what I went through. At some point, you just gotta stop giving a shit about what people think or say about you. They’re just words.”

“No,” Missandei says, voice suddenly hard, suddenly stressed out now that the limitation, in her friendship with Brienne, is just staring her right in the face. “It’s not actually just words. Not for me. Not for him. I understand that it is — for you, maybe. But people like me and him — we are killed over words sometimes.”

Jaime has picked up racquetball fairly quickly, a fact that irritates his brother. That is why Grey generally tries to get Tyrion and Jaime to play on the same team. It makes the group dynamic much
smoother. Jaime isn’t killing himself trying to fuck over his brother, to prove that he is physically better than Tyrion in every which way — which is really fucking bent, but Grey doesn’t think Jaime is looking at himself and this dynamic with enough clarity sometimes. And Tyrion isn’t saying meanass shit that gets in Jaime’s craw, shit that contains years and years of resentment and bitterness over their unique familial dynamic.

When Jaime and Tyrion are on the same team, they are laughing. They are joking around. They are randomly bringing up good memories of their childhood. They are high-fiving. They become this righteous super white super-team, joining forces against the dark forces of evil — Grey and Drogo. Jaime has really articulated it like that — because he’s Jaime. And while Grey generally tries not to let Jaime mind-fuck with him — sometimes the guy is so fucking annoying that it makes Grey temporarily lose his wits — and he lets these fucking annoying-ass comments sink in, underneath his skin.

And then it becomes his mission, to beat Jaime to death. At racquetball. And Drogo is always three or four steps ahead of him — emotionally. Drogo has always found Jaime’s whiteness to be hugely inconvenient and really irritating, more so than Grey. Drogo likes to quietly rage-play.

So — instead of watching two Lannisters just make things awkward as all hell, by randomly bringing up incest or having to pay for sex, in between rounds — the more preferable alternative is to have two Lannisters loudly gloat and loudly goad them with racist rhetoric — as they absorb it and remember that Jaime actually wants for them to walk over and smash his face in for all the things he’s saying to them. Grey will not give Jaime the satisfaction of getting angry.

They are starving, and Jaime said he’d have pizza delivered, if he and Tyrion lost. Which they did. They were too busy being a couple of dickholes, so high on how clever they think they are, that their game wasn’t very tight today. Grey and Drogo handily beat them — decisively, definitively.

Jaime’s house is strangely tense — when he walks into it. He can feel the tension even before they walk into the kitchen, where Brienne and Missandei are hanging out.

He walks over to give her a kiss.

“Oh, ew,” she says against his mouth. “You’re sticky and salty.”

“Oh my God,” Jaime mutters in a stage whisper. “So many jokes I could make about that.” He turns to Brienne. “Hey, baby. You guys having a good lunch? You mind if we join you?”


“Drogo!” Missandei says, her voice a touch higher than normal. “You’re looking good, bro! Have you lost weight?”

Drogo looks at her with skepticism and suspicion. And then he blandly says, “Not really. But I’m coming to terms with my body. This is just how it’s gonna be now.”
When they are in Missandei’s car, with him in the driver’s seat — per usual — as he pulls out of the driveway with his hand against the back of her headrest, he says, “Is everything okay with you and Brienne?”

Missandei sighs. “Yeah. It is. We just had a bit of an awkward moment and stuff. Mostly because she was being so white about something, and I got all touchy about it.”

It makes him laugh, right away. Because parallel lives and all that. He looks over at her — they are at a red light — grinning at her warmly. She kind of glances around the interior of the car, unsure of why he’s so doofy. And he thinks to himself — that he’s going to spend the rest of his life with this person. He is not alone. She makes him feel not alone. All the time. It is so cool.

He tells her to keep an open mind, when he leans forward and puts his tablet into her lap, showing her the picture of a shack. She presses her lips into a thin line, and she asks him what she’s supposed to be looking at.

He says, “Our new home?”

“Jesus, why is this crackhouse so expensive?”

He laughs at her expression of disgust. And then he gets to his knees, on the couch, lurching forward and pushing her body down with his. Momo 2.0 scrambles to get out of the disaster zone, climbing out from in between their bodies so she doesn’t get crushed. When they first got 2.0, he was so careful and so gentle with her — so worried that he’d accidentally hurt her or kill her if he stepped on her or rolled onto her. She’s just a little dog. And there are actually a lot of parallels to how he used to feel about Missandei — scared he’d accidentally hurt her or kill her.

But, like Missandei, he has found that the dog is really good at keeping herself alive. When he does roll over onto her, her cute little paws start clawing couch cushions or blankets, to wriggle out from under him. And he has accidentally stepped on her a few times — just her tail or her feet. And she yelps — which scares the shit out of him and makes him feel like scum — but it’s effective. He always immediately gets off of her tail or foot.

He took her to the dog park for the first time the other week. It might be too late to cram in socialization with her — she’s older now. She’s always going to be a shy and nervous dog, in some respects. But the both of them really hated the dog park. Some of the other dogs were too big for her to play with and were huge assholes. And Momo 2.0 is an awkward little loser too, he has found. She generally hides behind his feet, as he urges her to go play and go make new friends. She likes to hide behind his feet like a little bitch and carefully watch the other dogs run around.

God, he loves this dog so much. He has a million pictures of this dog on his phone. But no one can know how much he loves this dog. It’d ruin his street cred.

Momo 2.0 climbs on top of him — on top of his hip — settling down on her perch for a bit — as Grey runs his hand up and down the side of Missandei’s body, her curves. He says, “It’s waterfront. Whoever buys that will definitely demolish that house. And build from scratch on top of it. The value is in the property.” He clears his throat. “I was just thinking — since you come from islands — and I come from islands — we both love water, you know? So I was thinking —”
He doesn’t get to finish his thought — because Missandei pitches her face forward and starts making out with him. Momo 2.0 gets knocked around some more — he’s uncaring as she gives up and hops onto the ground, to lie down the shag rug that they had bought — just for her.

“Baby?” she sleepily says into the pillow, as he draws aimless patterns on her naked back.

“Yeah?”

“How come you alway call me Missandei?”

“Huh?”

“I think everyone else calls me Missy. But you never do.”

“Oh,” he says, “Does it bother you?”

She rolls onto her side, facing him. Her bare breasts and her stomach gets pulled down by gravity. He transfers his hand from her back to her front — lightly rubbing and pinching and just generally playing around with her body, without much intent. He’s exhausted and his dick is really, really sore. From how well and how comprehensively he fucked her, obviously.

He kinds of laughs. “I don’t know. It’s just instinct on my part,” he says. “But maybe — Missy is the name of a girl. Missandei is the name of a woman?”

She’s totally into that answer. She looks delighted. Her tired face perks up, and she is smiling at him so hard. It’s infectious. It makes him smile back at her too, like he’s a teenager who’s smitten. And he remembers being a teenager and being around her — actually being smitten. It was never so transparent and so open like this.

He tells her, whatever — her fucking family is his fucking family now — or whatever. Charge it, bitch. He tosses his wallet over to her — an empty gesture because they share several accounts together. He’s blessedly has not been an insane penny-pincher — at least, never when it comes to her shit. She knows it’s a deliberate and concerted effort on his part. She still feels weird about it. But it’s gradually getting easier and easier.

When she requests some time off of work the week that her family is in town, her boss tells her that it’s cool — it’s so cool! Missy works with a bunch of bleeding heart liberals — naturally — so they are naturally very supportive with this sort of stuff. They keep asking her if she’s excited.

Excited is not really the word. Grey’s been going insane with the cleaning — even as he knows it will be fruitless. No amount of cleansing will erase the dirty taint from her grandma’s eyes — when she sees all of their grotesquely extravagant possessions intermingling, when she sees that they sleep in the same bedroom, in the same bed — every night.

Grey is about to rent a few hotel rooms not too far from their apartment — but she stops him in time
and tells him he’s a fucking idiot. He can’t rent hotel rooms for her family members. They will be really insulted by it.

He tells her that her fucking Naathi shit is sometimes not very intuitive or easy to understand. He tells her, obviously, the right answer is to cram a shit ton of people into a two-bedroom apartment and make some of them sleep on the fucking floor.

She has him fuck her in the shower, against the wall, right after he goes down on her under the spray. Sex will be completely off the table, the entire time her family is in town. She tells him she cannot live with the shame — if her grandma even catches a whiff of them being intimate together. Missandei can’t even handle it. This is why they need to get it out of their system, before the arrivals.
It’s not that he’s incapable of listening to feedback — it’s just that he doesn’t like having to change himself, and he doesn’t like to listen to other people talk about their problems because most people are boring. But there are a handful of people that he finds deeply interesting. Obviously, his number one is Missandei. Obviously, he puts up with Jaime for whatever fucking reason — he doesn’t even know sometimes, but it’s been years and he has put in too much time and investment into that relationship — so he can’t start over with someone else. Obviously, Drogo is his boy.

He shouldn’t call attention to the extreme discomfort he feels — at a networking event at the west campus of a major enterprise software development company. He generally wants to shout at all these imploring eyes and tell them to give him some fucking space. Jesus. He already has a fucking job that he is very comfortable in. And no, he’s not a Black man software engineer, so no, they cannot fill their diversity quota with him.

Grey pulls at the collar of his shirt, loosening his tie a little bit, watching Drogo shake hands. Grey’s really just here for the moral support. And the free food. Missandei likes to joke with him — about how free food is always such a draw from him and Jaime — that they’d show up to a Sparrows presentation, if there was the promise of free food.

He tilts his glass of free beer at Drogo and asks him why he’s not drinking. Grey drove them. Drogo awkwardly says that he’s trying to cut down — he throws Grey a look — not for emotional reasons, but because there are a lot of empty calories in beer. Also, after losing his job by showing up drunk — Drogo has to lowly whisper this — he is just way fucking gunshy about drinking in a professional setting.

He almost gets away with saying no — but Missandei says yes for the both of them. That’s another bogus thing about being part of a two-person unit. Missandei has become his social scheduler. Things have naturally fallen into place like that. She is naturally more social than he is, so she naturally has more stuff planned out or going on — and at some point, he got sick of her constantly asking him if he wanted to go to this or that. He told her that she knows him better than anyone on the entire fucking planet — she can pick out the shit he’s interested in going to and the shit he isn’t. Just . . . let him know the night before or something.

It’s a great system when Missandei is doing all of the heavy lifting. It’s a shitty system when he has to go track her down — like a little kid — to ask her if he can go to his friend’s house.

And he actually doesn’t want to move Jaime and Brienne’s shit again, for what feels like the billionth time in two years, but it is really only the second time. The longer those two cohabitate, the more shit they accumulate and the longer it takes to move them.

But Missandei put them both down as a yes. He tries to get her to skip it, to get her to stay in bed
longer, by putting all of his weight on her, by pressing her down into the mattress as her hands fight him, as her body twists around in the sheets, trying to find a pocket of air to breathe in. He tells her to go by herself and to tell Jaime that he’s sick. She’s laughing and punching at him, telling him that he’s never sick. Jaime will know what’s up. She tells him she’s also not really an asset at all — he is, with his general speed and physical strength and physical endurance.

He palms her warm butt under the blankets, lightly slapping. “You’re definitely an asset,” he tells her, rolling them over so she’s on top of him, as she laughs, struggling to catch her breath. “Your endurance is pretty good, too,” he says, firmly dragging her body against his, his breath hitching as the heat in between her legs closes over his hardening dick.

“Oh,” she breathes, pulling off her shirt. He immediately starts touching her. She tells him, “You’re trying to make us late.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re late,” Jaime immediately says when he opens the door.

Grey throws his friend a dirty look. Because he really can’t be so picky when it’s free labor, out of the goodness of their fucking hearts.

“Sorry,” Missandei says smoothly, pushing past Jaime, walking into the half-packed rental house.

“She doesn’t actually sound very sorry at all,” Jaime mutters.

“She’s not,” Grey says, staring at his woman’s retreating backside — plainly remembering exactly what they were doing that made them late.

When Missandei remarks that they’re all kinda being ethnic about this — gesturing across the room — pointing out that all the women are in the kitchen putting things in boxes and that the men are in the living room carrying the big furniture pieces and loading it into the truck — Jaime dryly responds with, “Okay, don’t act like you invented segregation and shoving women into the kitchen. My people mastered it. How dare you. Give credit where credit is due.”

Jaime starts laughing at his own joke right away.

And it’s one of those times when Grey is just not policing himself carefully enough. A chuckle slips out and he kind of turns his head and accidentally makes eye contact with Jaime, who looks so happy to have elicited a laugh from Grey.
“So what’s going on with you and Daenerys?” Jaime says to Drogo, his eyes drifting into the house to look at the woman in question, before ripping off a bottle cap with an opener, before handing the beer over to Grey on the back deck of the house that he and Brienne have finally closed on.

Grey is totally clueless with this kind of shit — not exceptionally observant. This is the first time he’s heard of this.

Drogo rolls his eyes and lightly shrugs, sinking deeper into the fraying lawn chair — one of their scrappy, cheap ones, from back when they used to do beach barbeques. “Nothing, man,” Drogo says. “She’s nice.” Drogo shrugs again.

“Oh shit, there’s definitely something going on,” Jaime says, grinning. “And dude, she’s totally not nice.” Jaime slaps the air in jest. “You so silly. And stupid. In love.”

“God, shut up, Bieber,” Drogo grits out. “Just because you guys are all fucking shacked up and all fucking domesticated doesn’t mean that fucking life is for everyone. It doesn’t mean everyone wants that life.”

It comes out shockingly bitter and angry. And the smile just droops off of Jaime’s face. “Dude,” he says. “I’m sorry. Did I say something wrong?”

Drogo sighs. “No, dude. I’m sorry. I’m being touchy like a stupid bitch on her rag.”

“Okay, well —” Missandei kind of breaks into an honest laugh in the doorway. They turn to her in surprise, not realizing she had been listening in. “That was a really sexist way of articulating that. Good job, D.”

One of Brienne’s favorite things to do when they’re all together is to brutally make fun of Jaime. Brienne has a whole hilarious act where she mimics Jaime and has all of these anecdotes about how Jaime is a idiot. Jaime always seems to be a fantastic sport about it, always smiling and slowly shaking his head at Brienne — like he can’t believe it, but he also can. He always has this kind of pride in his eyes, as he watches her completely eviscerate him in front of witnesses — witnesses who invariably pile on because, of course, they all have their own stories about how Jaime was being a rich, spoiled idiot at various points in life.

It’s an interesting thing to Missandei. And it’s very at-odds with what she’s been taught, about how women are supposed to treat their men — that is, with reverence and as the heads of households. The domestic work in her household as she was growing up was very delineated of course — that’s why her grandma lost her marbles when she saw Grey wash dishes.

“Oh, honestly, Biebs,” Drogo says, “your fatal flaw is really . . . that you care too much.”

Jaime gives Drogo an unimpressed look. “No, dude. That’s not my flaw —”

“Man,” Grey says from his chair. “That’s totally his thing!” Grey uses both hands to mime just . . . just blood and pus and bones and feelings pouring out of his chest. “Bieb likes to just emote. All of these feelings. That he has about so many things. He just gets so sad. About so many things. Like injustices.”

“Hey!” Jaime says, frowning.
Missandei can tell that the conversation has shifted. It’s getting into a more serious territory, and Jaime is starting to actually get sensitive about it.

“Oh man,” Drogo says, grinning broadly. “If there’s a fucking teenager being threatened with deportation — oh man — I bet Jaime cries about it for days.”

“He kind of does,” Brienne says slowly, biting back a grin, casting careful glances to Jaime. Who is descending deeper and deeper into the tension in his head.

“I bet Jaime ends a lot of his days just sitting in a dark room with a glass of whiskey, his heart just breaking. And his brain is melodramatically wailing, ‘What is even the point of this mortal coil!’” Grey says. “As a lone tear carves down his face.”

The force of Brienne’s hand hitting her mouth is so hard and rough that it cracks. Her blue eyes widen and she’s muffling herself. Drogo does the opposite — he lets it all out — jaw dropping — loud peals of laughter ring out, as he slaps his knee. “Oh my God,” he says, choking on hair. “I totally see it! I totally see it!”

Missandei’s own face is aching, from holding back her own laughter.

Dany looks like she doesn’t exactly know what’s going on.

Jaime is gripping the neck of his beer bottle and simultaneously pointing to them at the same time. “Fuck you, guys!” he spits. He points to Drogo. “Fuck you!” He points to Grey. “Most of all, fuck you!”

Grey snickers. “Oh,” he says patronizingly. “Look at him. So many feelings. He’s having feelings right now in front of us!”

Jaime screams before he chuck his half-finished bottle of beer on the grass. It lands in one piece, impotently in the middle of the lawn, frothy beer slowly leaking out of it.

“Babe, go get that,” Brienne says. “Sheesh. You can’t just be throwing things around just because you get upset.”

“Sorry,” Jaime says sullenly, hopping off the sturdy railing of the deck.

“Yo, guys,” Jaime says, addressing Grey and Missandei. “When Missy’s relatives roll into town, do you wanna do a barbeque here? I mean technically not a barbeque unless we smoke some meat — I mean, we can smoke meat if you want — but I’m just talking about putting shit on the grill. You interested? We got the space now.” Jaime gestures to the yard. “Dude, I haven’t seen your broskis since graduation, Missy. But I remember them being real cool. It’d be awesome to see them again.”

“Yeah, they’re real cool,” Missandei says sarcastically, folding her arms across her chest.

Grey makes a slashing motion across his throat. “Don’t even get her started. I have been listening to this shit all month.
Jaime jokingly tells her that she’s so lucky because Grey’s parents are probably dead and stuff, because in-laws are the fucking worst. Brienne swats Jaime for that, saying that her dad and stepmom are not the worst. Jaime blocks her second blow and says that, no, Selwyn is not the worst. He’s actually the greatest. But he wasn’t talking about Brienne’s dad. He was talking about his own dad and how every family dinner devolves into resentment and unshed tears because Jaime won’t get a fucking real job and Brienne is apparently not smart or clever enough to be deemed worthy of being spoken to.

Grey blandly says that Missy’s family isn’t that bad — but she passionately corrects him and says that they are annoying as fuck. Originally, it was just supposed to be Adara visiting with her parents and checking out the colleges — but then her fucking parents came up with a bunch of idiotic, bogus reasons for why they couldn’t come and why it wasn’t a good time for them. And Missandei’s gone through years of therapy, so she fucking let that shit go — and figured, it was their fucking damage, whatever.

And then she was like, oh what if Grandma and Moss and Mars meet them over here so that they can meet Adara? Of course, Missandei had to go around fetching permission from everyone to make sure it was on the up-and-up. It was a bunch of fucking whiny-ass conversations with her grandma and her fucking brothers, those fucking girls. And then it was her furiously trying to convince her parents that she wasn’t fucking trying to brainwash their daughter or steal her away — but also, fuck them because those two asshole abandoned her as a child and now all of a sudden they care about the loss of children? But Missandei has really like, worked on herself, so she let that shit go, too.

And then her grandma and brothers just started fucking bossing her around like she’s some idiot twerp even though they are taking her money to get to this fucking place. And it’s not like she begrudges them for taking her money — she shakes her head and immediately corrects herself, reaching out to briefly squeeze Grey’s hand — she gently says, “I mean our money.” Missandei then goes back on her aggressive rant and says she really, really wants them to take the fucking money. And to not feel like there are strings attached — but there are sort of strings attached!

“The strings are, please stop fucking lecturing me on my slut-whore lifestyle! It’s my fucking slutting around and it’s my fucking trick that is paying for all this shit anyway. So have some fucking awareness. Fuck!”

She sees Grey’s face lightly scrunch up comically — at being called a trick.

“And then yesterday, my parents rang me up and was like, ‘Oh, is it too late to come after all? Tee hee!’ And it’s like, fuck yeah, it’s way too late you fucking assholes. I fucking worked myself up into a frenzy trying to fucking convince you to come in the beginning, and now you pull this bullshit with me? Grandma don’t fucking want to see you assholes. So no, you can’t come no more. Fucking Naathi bullshit.”

“Yeah,” Grey says. “So I’ve been getting the play-by-play of this, all month. It’s been great.”

Missandei and Jaime start getting dirty-drunk because they have complicated relationships with their parents. Brienne loves her stepmom and dad, so she just sips from a glass of rose. Drogo loves his
moms and their relationships are solid, but he does have a deadbeat, violent criminal father. But Drogo also cannot drink — or else his car won’t start. So he is sipping from a mug of hot tea that Brienne had prepared for him.

And like him — apparently Dany’s parents are totally dead. And he liked his aunt, in the short time he knew her. So. Yeah. They are drinking like normal people. Not people with an ugly vendetta. Not people with something to prove, by counterintuitively poisoning their bodies. Drogo jokingly tells them — the sober ones — that he’s been down that dark path. And it is really fun. Like, really fun. He really misses it.

He has always maintained that a super plastered Missandei is not his favorite version of Missandei. There are upsides — like she’s really funny and uninhibited so a lot of her true personality traits slip out, which he likes. The parts that are not his favorite are when she starts playing grab-ass too enthusiastically in public and he has to be constantly vigilant so he can block her hands because — honestly — when she grabs at him in front of people, it makes him feel awkwardly human and thus, vulnerable. There were a lot of advantages, back when people mostly thought he was closeted and gay, or repressed and asexual — no one overly identified with him or felt sorry for him or tried to understand him — he was outside the norm of understanding. There was something comfortable in that.

He knows this is another one of those double standards that he apparently loves to dwell in. He doesn’t have much of a problem when he grabs her in public. He knows what this probably says about him — that he is a flawed person — but he’s not sure this is something that he can change about himself.

The other thing he dislikes about super-drunk Missandei is that she is very loose-lipped. He doesn’t really care if she wants to draw his fucking dick and paste it on a billboard or whatever — that is clinical and factual. It’s when she starts applying values to the things she shares that makes him want to eject himself off a cliff. It’s when she starts bragging to Jaime about how he is in bed that he wants to walk over, yank her up, bid goodnight to everyone, and shove her in their fucking car.

He tiredly rubs his face before he clasps his hands together, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. He’s not stopping her. He’s not freaking out. He’s just watching this mortifying trainwreck unfold in front of his eyes. He’s going to call this character growth.

Barristan has told him that he has a really shitty problem — when it comes to accepting compliments. But the thing is — it’s not that he can’t accept compliments. When people tell him he’s good at running, he’s like, yeah, well obviously he’s good at running. He does it a lot and he works really hard at it. When people tell him he’s good at his job, he says, yeah, well obviously he’s competent because he was educated and trained to do the work he does, and he has figured out ways to do it optimally.

His problem is when people over-exaggerate and talk about him like he’s the second coming of the messiah, when they talk as if crunching numbers and figures is a superhuman feat, when they talk like running long distances is superhuman. It’s so white. And he just can’t stand to look at people’s faces, when he catches a glimmer of them thinking that they know something about him.
Her legs are folded underneath her bottom — her shoes are off — and Jaime is laughing and lightly pushing his toes against the deck, swaying this rickety two-person glider. He sloppily reaches over and refills her shot glass, spilling some whiskey onto her lap. Her face is resting in her palm, her elbow braced against the back of the bench. They’ve been quietly talking together, apart from the rest of the group — and it’s nice. It’s really, really nice. It started off with them just exchanging these war stories about his father, his stepmother, her father, her mother — and over the course of the evening, it’s evolved to other things. Mostly Grey.

She mostly just says that he’s so great — like, so great. She loves him so much. He’s so thoughtful and so deliberate and so sweet — and he hides it — but he just cares so much sometimes. Maybe that’s why he avoids letting people see that he does — because he feels like he stands to lose so much.

“No, seriously. He’s so awesome,” Jaime says, slurring. “He used to wash my sheets for me, every Sunday. He used to line up my shoes for me — and over time, he figured out which ones I wore on which days, and he started to prioritize them. And he used to do these little things — when I wasn’t making money — to never like, maybe me feel bad or ashamed about it. He just intuitively knew when I was gonna be short on rent or whatever, and he’d just silently help me out by like, stocking the fridge with food he stole from work so we didn’t have to go grocery shopping. Or he’d just turn off the heat. And it’s not like he couldn’t afford heat. But he also knew that it would’ve sucked for me, if I had to be like, ‘Hey, dude, I’m short a hundred — can you spot me?’ He knew that would’ve sucked, so he didn’t let me ever do that.”

She finds herself tearing up. Because she’s so fucking drunk. And she tells herself that this is who her man is. This is the person that she is with. And it’s just like — so crazy.

And then she suddenly gets pissed — because she remembers how much shit her family has given this guy, when all he ever does is be a fucking patient-as-fuck saint.

She corners him at the bathroom door. Sort of. She’s hammered as fuck, and he can see her coming from miles away — bumping into walls from miles away. She smells like a distillery, as she presses her entire front to his entire front, her eyes lazy and hazy. She wraps an arm around his neck and she leans up for a kiss.

“Let’s elope,” she says, when she pulls away.

He kind of laughs at that. Because she certainly keeps him on his toes. He says, “Let’s talk about this tomorrow — if you even can remember this conversation.”

“No, really,” she says, as he carries her to their bed and lays her down, after tending to Momo 2.0. “We can secretly get married — and then pretend we didn’t — and then get married again.”
He smiles down at her, as he starts taking off her clothes. She can’t even keep her eyes open for a second. “And what purpose does this serve, exactly?” he asks.

She frowns, her eyes shut. “It’s romantic, baby.”

He tilts his head, laughing softly. “Is it, though?”

She nods, letting him unclip her bra, letting him pull it off, before she blindly reaches out, grasps his shirt, and tries to pull it over his head. Her other hand is feeling around for his dick. And she’s being too rough — he winces when she kind of hits him in the balls, accidentally. He grabs her wrist. “Babe, you’re like — so fucking hammered. I don’t think you can actually consent to sex right now.”

“I’m consenting!” She grunts out this growl. Her eyes are still shut. “I want you. But the room is spinning a little,” she says. “So I’m just going to lay here. And you’re going to have to be careful. I might puke.”

He laughs, looking down at her miserable, half-naked body, curled over in the fetal position. “Babe, I love you so much,” he says.

“I love you too, Grey. So much.”

“You’re so hilarious and cute right now.”

“No, dude,” she says, her voice whiny. “I’m sexy right now. You want to hit this.”

He smiles down at her, running the flat of his hand down her bare thigh, before pulling up the blanket over and on top of her.

“T-minus ten hours, before my family is here,” she mutters into the sheets. “Come here,” she says, blindly reaching for him again. “We gotta fit in some quality time together before those assholes ruin everything.”

“How about in the morning?” he says, quickly pulling off his jeans and his shirt. Neither of them have brushed their teeth. He’s bone tired, and she’s nearly dead — so he lets it slide.

He falls down on the bed next to her, pulling her body against his, so they are skin to skin. He hugs her tightly from behind, and quickly, she passes out. He knows because she’s snoring loudly.

When she wakes up, she feels nasty. Her mouth is rank and dry — and she’s totally still a little bit drunk. It’s that heady mixture of being drunk and being hungover. It feels like there are bubbles in her stomach. Luckily, the sertraline has made its way out of her body enough that she’s been able to hold dinner inside her body.

She has to do a little bit of climbing, to get to the end of the bed, to get to the bathroom. It’s all careful and meticulous movements — one wrong move and she might unload some dying vomit on the bed.

She runs to the bathroom. She doesn’t have time to lift the seat before she doubles over and heaves into the bowl, for long minutes — tears pricking her eyes. And she also needs to pee. And she might
also need to poop. This is utterly the worst. She will never drink ever again.

She feels weak and dehydrated as she lifts the edge of the covers and peeks underneath it. He’s still sleeping — he had woken up for a bit and had hollered out her name when she was running to the bathroom — but he evidently got over his concern for her fast.

She crawls back into bed, having brushed her teeth, with Momo 2.0 in her arms, this time on his other side, because it’s easier. He scoots over in his sleep, muttering and asking her what time it is. She tells him it’s still way early. He clears out space on his arm for her.

“I feel like shit,” she mumbles into his bare skin, smelling a little bit of sweat and body odor — he didn’t shower after moving Jaime and Brienne’s stuff.

“Serves you right,” he says, eyes closed, face oriented up to the ceiling. “You did it to yourself.” He jolts a little bit, when he feels Momo 2.0 licking his cheek, before the dog crawls up to the spare pillow, the one Missandei had vacated. Momo 2.0 settles in after doing some circles on the pillow. Such a chill little dog. Missandei reaches out and digs her fingers into 2.0’s butt, because it’s the closest thing in reach.

Her hand drifts over his bare chest, then down his stomach — he clenches a little — and then it dips into his boxers.

He cracks one eye open. “Are you serious?” he says. “You are not in a good state, man. And little girl is in bed with us.”

“It’s a comfort hold, babe,” she says. “I’m not trying to start something. I’m just trying to gain the fortitude to withstand my family by harvesting power from your penis.”

He kind simultaneously laughs and rolls into her, kissing her chin, his warm hand coming over her breast, squeezing. “Comfort hold, huh? What do I get out it?”

“Nothing,” she says, taking in an audible sniff of his neck. “There’s nothing cool to be gained from my boobs.”

She’s urgently praying — sort of — she doesn’t really believe in their religion for real — but habits and all that — she’s praying when she spots her grandma and brothers, hoping that they will be cool.

Mars is first to get to her, stooping down and ramming into her — just about knocking the air out of her lungs. He says, “Lil Miss, not so little anymore!” and he twirls her around, her sandaled feet swinging lifelessly in the air. She’s kind of super duper hungover.

Moss walks up to Grey, clapping him twice on the shoulder, smiling, before he pulls Grey into a hug. Grey looks disoriented and is being stiff and weird. He’s so cute sometimes, she can’t even stand it. “Hey, brother,” Moss says to him. “Really good to see you, man.”
Even though she’s doing a good job of faking it, Grey knows that Missandei is very tense and miserable and hungover, as she makes small talk with her brothers and grandmother. In her angriest moments, she has told him that her people are a bunch of pussies. They are non-confrontational, peace-loving folks. Which may sound super relaxed and awesome and low-drama — but what it ultimately meant is that it they are complacent, and it was fairly easy for them to be colonized and then enslaved. Missandei bitterly told him there’s a fucking reason why the Dothrakis have never been colonized — that’s because those motherfuckers have the pride and the willpower to fight to the death to keep their autonomy.

He has told her it’s not so straightforward as all of that — for one, the refusal of the Dothrakis to be colonized led to them being splintered, fractured — and nationless. But that he also generally understands what she means. It’s also easy for him to flatten things down into parables, to kind of make sense of the horrific nature of the things that have happened to all of them.

She has told him that it’ll be very normal for her grandma and brother to be very nice to their faces — that’s very Naathi. The disapproval will be sneaky and will blindside them at times. The criticism will hit them from behind their backs. And she has told him that whatever they say to him — they are wrong. They are wrong about him. Missandei has grabbed his face and his body, holding him, and she has urgently told him that he is perfection, and he must know this about himself.

It made him laugh in her face. He tried not to. But she was so grave and serious and nuts.

“Do you see her?” Mossador asks casually. He doesn’t know what Adara looks like, but he’s still scanning the crowds for a young woman who looks like she could be his long-lost sister.

“No,” Missandei says, frowning, standing on her tiptoes to see past the loitering crowd at baggage claim.

Grey clears his throat. “There she is,” he says, pointing to tiny girl standing underneath a restroom sign.

“ADARA!” Missandei screams, waving her arm furiously, making her grandma jump — startled — next to her. “OVER HERE!”

He finds that it’s pointless to ask Missandei’s family members what they want — because they invariably want what is least inconvenient for him and Missandei. He’s starting to understand a lot of things, now — why her family has to stay squished up in a two-bedroom apartment with them. And it’s very much at odds with what he’s used to dealing with — with Missandei and with his friends — all of whom have pointlessly strong opinions about everything.
What they end up doing right after leaving the airport — where they end up eating — becomes
dependent on what he decides. He can see how this would drive Missandei nuts over time. She is a
woman, a really bossy one at that — and that’s qualified as a Western trait, though Grey is sure that
it’s just a Missandei thing. She’s constantly making decisions for her family — who come to resent
her a little bit over time because they feel like she’s taking her education and her job — the things
they helped give her — and throwing it back into their faces. Grey understands this, too. But,
without Missandei’s interjections, her family would be left wildly inefficient — if she doesn’t step in
stubbornly and force them into getting things moving. He also understands that it must be hard to
have Missandei shoving her opinions at them — when she’s not in the trenches, day in, day out. It
must be hard to disentangle all of this shit — the stuff that works from the stuff that makes them all
angry with each other.

One thing that’s really obvious to Grey, though, is that her brothers really love her — so much. And
her grandmother really loves her, too — so much.

Adara — naturally — is a stranger to them.

He’s driving a car — they decided to take both cars so that it’s more comfortable. Marselen is
actually driving the other car so that Missandei and her grandma can have “woman time” with
Adara. Mossador is riding with him — kind of a bizarre sacrifice so that Grey doesn’t have to be all
alone. They are headed to lunch. Missandei has already told him that her grandma will hate
everything that’s not Naathi food. But her brothers are pretty adventurous.

“Hey, man,” Mossador says, running his hands down his legs. “I just want to say — thanks a lot,
man. You know. For everything. Mars and I really appreciate it. I know that . . . shit has been
difficult. And it’s not that we don’t like you. It’s just —”

“It’s complicated,” Grey supplies.

“Yeah,” he says. “It’s complicated.”

“I really love your sister, you know,” Grey says — forcing himself to articulate it. “I’ve loved her for
about as long as I’ve known her. I’d do anything for her. So . . . I promise I will take care of her.
You don’t have to worry.”

“Thank you for saying that.” Moss laughs quietly. “But you and I both know that she’s good at
taking care of herself.” He lightly shrugs. “The buildings are so tall. And it looks so clean here.”

Grey shrugs, too. “Sometimes, to me, it looks sterile and lifeless.”

At the restaurant, a pasta and sandwich place, Missandei asks their server to bring out the food as it’s
finished — and to also bring out six extra plates. They are all going to share. The server says that she
can actually split some of the plates — if that’s easier? Missandei tells the server that it’s not really
easier. Six extra plates is fine.

After their server leaves, Moss says to Missandei, “You didn’t have to trouble her like that.”

“It’s not that much trouble. She didn’t seem to care.”

“We don’t have to stand out, you know,” he says. “We can eat like Westerners, you know.”
Missandei scrunches up her face. “It’s not like that,” she says. “I just like variety. It’s weird to not share food. I do this all the time anyway. With him and our friends.” She gestures to Grey. She looks like she’s about to say something else — but in the end, after a quick internal battle, she decides to bite her tongue.

It’s really kind of nice and convenient, that they can all speak Low Valyrian. Grey’s picked up a lot of vocabulary from Missandei, and his accent has become a little bit more and more muddled — it’s not exactly that his accent has changed. She has said that his accent is still an Astapori accent, but he also takes his cadence from English and transfers it to Low Valyrian. There’s a sing-song quality to his words. It’s unmistakable — where he comes from, where he has been, who he is — it is all wholly reflected in the way he speaks. She has told him that it’s just so fucking cool.

When she first told him this, he was in denial. And then he found it distasteful. Having a slave accent is one thing, but he is not down with an English accent flattening out his Low Valyrian. But Missandei told him it’s not exactly an accent shift. It’s a rhythm and flow sort of thing. It’s a slight mannish up-talk kind of thing. She also told him to get over it — because he actually sounds really, really cute when he speaks Low Valyrian. Much cuter than he sounds when he speaks English or Summer Tongue.

Adara looks completely overwhelmed and is therefore, very quiet. Missandei’s grandma is unexpectedly emotional — no one expected their hard-as-nails grandma to get maudlin and soft upon seeing Adara. She keeps reaching out for Adara’s hand, keeps silently searching her face for something.

They are just blowing through their list of shit they might do with her relatives — because her family just doesn’t love to linger. They like to briskly walk through parks and say that it’s really pretty, without seeming to look at anything, making this beeline back to the car.

Missandei is crashing. He can tell from her sluggish movements and her general inattentiveness — the way her face keeps plummeting into a dour frown whenever she thinks no one is looking at her. It makes him a little sad as it simultaneously just amuses him so much.

He grabs her hand, pulling her back as the rest of her family walks over a red bridge, over a small little pond littered with lily pads. She blinks against the sunlight — she had forgotten her sunglasses in the car. He palms her cheek, brushing his thumb over her natural lashes and her shiny, sweaty, makeup-less face. She looks torn. He feels torn. He settles for smelling her face really quickly before giving her a quick peck on the corner of her mouth.

She whimpers when he pulls away.

And then he quietly laughs at her. “You are so pathetic, right now,” he says.

She nods. “Baby. I am so pathetic. I just wanna nap so bad. My feet hurt. My head is pounding. I don’t want to be here anymore. I just wanna lie down.”
He carefully dumps Grandma’s and Adara’s bags in their bedrooms, as Missandei makes a beeline to the fridge to go grab everyone some water, already apologizing for the state of the place — for the size of the place. Missandei’s grandma tells her that it’s such a waste of money, to buy water in bottles when they can just drink it from the tap.

Little Momo 2.0 is out of her cage — he has to take her to pee in a second — and she’s a little freaked out by all of the new people, so she’s nervously following him from room to room, her little butt wiggling nervously — the visual can be mistaken for excitement, but he knows his dog. She keeps tucking her head in between his shins, as he stands at the foot of the beds and tries to do some last-minute smoothing and tugging, with the sheets.

He hates this — he utterly hates this — but Adara is going to sleep in their bedroom with Missandei. Missandei figured that it’s the most efficient — space wise — and it’s the most comfortable for Adara since she and Missandei actually like, know each other. He hates it because he hasn’t not slept with Missandei since they moved in together. He’s been a whiny bitch to her about it. It’s funny, how he’s gone from being shit-scared of sleeping with her to being incapable of not sleeping with her.

He also knows that her secondary motive is to keep them physically apart so that they don’t constantly remind her grandma that Missandei’s virtue is like, so gone. So beyond dead. Which is a bullshit concept — especially within his own context of what virtue means — but whatever. He’s bunking down with Missandei’s brothers in the living room. Her grandma is in the spare bedroom.

He’s decided that while Missandei’s family is in town, Momo 2.0 can sleep with him. He picks up the pooch and holds her so that she’s hanging out on his shoulder, as he walks back into the living room with her.

When her grandma says that she wants to cook dinner, Grey offers to drive her to go get groceries. Missy winces, because she’s scared that her grandma will be a random bitch to him and say that she doesn’t want to be driven by him.

So it’s surprising to her, when grandma gingerly lifts herself up from the table and goes to fetch her purse.

Her brothers keep observing that Adara and Mossador looks like their father while Missandei and Marselen looks like their mother. Missandei tells them that Kamil looks like both, but perhaps a touch more like their mother. She also says that Melaku actually looked like — their grandfather, more than anyone else.

He takes her to an ethnic grocery store, broadly catering to Southern Islanders. It’s the very best that
he can do because there isn’t a huge Naathi population in King’s Landing. The drive is near silent — not altogether unpleasant — but not smooth either. The last time he and Missandei’s grandmother spoke, the words they exchanged were heated.

She randomly asks him how he is doing, if his health is good.

He tells her that his health is good. He asks her if she’s enjoying King’s Landing so far.

She shrugs. She says it’s fine.

He’s basically a really fancy mule, following Missandei’s grandmother around with a cart as she silently loads greens into it, as she occasionally tutts at the prices, the quality of produce, and the lack of variety. Sometimes he suggests things — or he tries to help her. And she’s not impressed at all. Like, when she wants to find some herb called fish paddy herb — he’s not Missandei, so he doesn’t even know what the hell she’s talking about — obviously a literal translation is garbage — so he pulls out his phone and wastes time doing a search — and when he finds the English name of the herb and shows Missandei’s grandma where it is, she frowns and tells him that it’s not very green, is it? Then she just walks past him. And he generally stops from punching himself in the face because he’s such a freaking boner.

He’s tempted to pull a Jaime and ask her what her favorite part of this supremely awkward shopping trip is. His favorite is probably going to be how they’re gonna fight when it comes time to pay for groceries.

He can hear the angry screaming right when the elevator doors open. And if their neighbors don’t already hate him and Missandei for the loud sex, they will definitely hate them for the loud immigrant fighting.

Adara is a sobbing, loud mess when he wrenches open the door. Her face is so red that it’s almost purple, and her eyes are almost swollen shut as tears stream down her face. And she’s screaming — over and over in Low Valyrian — that she hates them, that they’re not her family, that she hates everything about them, that she wants them to die, that she doesn’t understand why they have to be in her life at all.

Missandei looks very tense. Moss and Mars just look stiff and really upset. He can’t see 2.0 anywhere, but he suspects she’s hiding.

When Grey takes a step toward Adara — to do God knows what, he’s unsure — maybe to clamp his hand over her mouth and suffocate her so she can just pass out and shut the fuck up already — or to try to talk to her and calm her down, she takes a blind swing at him, misses, and screams, “Don’t touch me! Get away from me!” in this really savage voice, at the top of her lungs. She tries to hit Grey again, which he ducks away from, and he’s trying to grab her wrists so she’d stop trying to hit him.

The sound of the slap when Missandei’s hand makes contact with Adara’s face is insanely sharp and
loud — it’s almost ringing in his ears. “You don’t treat him like that! You don't talk to him with such disrespect. You don’t behave this way in my house!” Missandei yells. “Do you fucking want to go home? You fucking want me to buy you a fucking plane ticket home right now? Because I fucking will if that’s what you want, you ungrateful brat. Don’t you dare treat me like I’m your jailer! This is not a prison!”

Adara slowly crumples to the ground, dissolving into her sobs. Which, blessedly, have become quieter.

“Nice,” he says, walking out on their balcony, shutting the sliding door behind him. “You hit a child tonight. We can check that off your bucket list.”

“She’s eighteen,” Missandei mutters darkly. “Technically, I hit an adult tonight.”

He laughs — he can’t help it. He reaches out to pull her to his body, even though the blinds from inside aren’t drawn. “Baby,” he says into her hair. “We were gone for only twenty minutes! What the hell happened?” He continues laughing, burying the sound against her head, which smells musky because she didn’t have time to shower this morning. He fucking loves her. He apparently loves her the most after she’s been violent. It was thrilling and scary and hilarious and sexually arousing.

Adara has holed herself up in the bedroom to lick her wounds, after Missandei had apologized to her for slapping her.

They hear a knock on the window and turn to see Moss and Mars standing there. They gently slide the door open before stepping out on the balcony, closing the door shut behind them, too.

Grey starts to extricate himself from Missandei — untangle his fingers from her hair and push his body away from hers, but she encircles her arm around his waist and keeps him in place.


“What a beast,” Mars says.

“Well, she got a lot of practice in,” Moss says, gesturing to Missandei. “With this one.”

Missandei’s jaw drops. “Oh my God, I wasn’t that bad! I would never say I hated you!”

“Teenage girls, man,” Mars says, shaking his head, undoubtedly thinking of his own daughters. “I’m not looking forward, man. Jesus.”

His back is against the railing — the sounds of cars and machinery is quiet below them. They can see the city lights from miles away in multiple directions — the temperature must be colder than what Missandei’s brothers are used to — and they are telling him that the whole thing kind of crept up on them really unexpectedly. They were just talking about how Missandei looks like their mother and how Adara looks like their father and all that generic stuff. And Adara must’ve been feeling sensitive about it somehow — she must’ve been feeling like her family was being attacked — which is really rich because they have the same set of parents and stuff, but of course, it’s different. They’re her parents, not theirs. So she got really upset about that and asked for them to stop making fun of her and her parents. And they were bewildered and told her that they weren’t making fun.
“It’s actually really easy for us to fucking bitch out those motherfucking abandoners, man,” Mars says to Grey. “We do it like, all the time. But we were making a concerted effort to not be bastards. I mean, that’s her family, right?”

“But she *freaked out* anyway, man,” Moss says. “Started just yelling at us and telling us that she hated us.”

“And I told her that we loved her,” Missandei says, frowning angrily, recalling the memory. “And she was a huge cunt about that. Was saying that we are horrible people who just ruined her family and that she hates us. It’s like — are you fucking serious, dude? What the fuck did we even do to *your family* other than get fucking *abandoned* by them as children? I didn’t say that out loud though. We just kept saying she’s our sister, so we love her. And she kept saying she hates us and wants us all to die. You get the gist.”

“Yikes,” Grey says.

“She’s young,” Moss says. “We are all stupid when we are young. Missandei used to say all sorts of mean shit to us, too, when she was little.”

Missandei sighs. “Dude, her mother is our mother. Genetics. I mean, that woman is like, fucking crazy. I was on antidepressants probably because of that woman’s brain shit being passed down and stuff. Dude — should we medicate her?”

Mars snickers. “Okay, chill, Dr. Miss.”

“God, bitches be crazy,” Missandei says.

Mossador points to her. “Oh, word. For real. God.”

Adara’s meltdown ends up being this blessing in disguise. Missandei and her brothers suddenly have something to bond over — which they do, very quietly over dinner because they’re afraid that the kid can hear through the doorway and will freak out on them with round two. Missandei is really bent on letting Adara starve and go without dinner — unless she decides to be a freaking human being and come out, apologize to them, and then sit at the table like a normal person.

Moss and Mars are so giddy over this personality trait in their sister — so happy over it — and they tell Grey it’s because she’s really getting her comeuppance. She used to be be a real asshole when she was a teenager, just doing whatever the hell she wanted like she was an adult who already knew everything, just sneaking out at night to be with her boyfriend, making their grandma cry over it and making their grandpa worry himself into some ulcer. She used to treat them with contempt sometimes and tell them that they were controlling and suffocating her with their old-fashioned Naathi ways — and that when she has kids, she will not be like them.

And now look at her — so militant, so rigid, so controlling, so demanding, so conservative like a Naathi woman. It’s so lovely! Mossador holds onto his stomach, laughing. Missandei looks like a mixture of sheepishness — but also pride and amusement. She concedes that she was a real bitch when she was younger. And she’s sorry — they know this, right? She’s really sorry for all of that.

Against Missandei’s wishes — she wants Adara to starve until she feels bad enough to apologize to them — Grey takes a bowl of food to the bedroom door, knocks on it, and through the door, he tells
Adara that he’s gonna real quickly open the door and to put down dinner. Don’t freak out. It’ll take half a second.

Their grandma huffs when she sees him stand up to start clearing away dishes. Grey straight up tells her that if she’s so offended with him clearing the dishes by himself, then she can help him, if she wishes.

A stunned silence falls over the table.

After their grandma retires to the bedroom at nine — after not hearing a peep out of Adara for the last few hours — the rest of them hang out in the living room. The TV is on, just so there’s a little bit of background noise. Missandei started off lying down on the couch, cuddling and playing with Momo 2.0, but she passes out fairly quickly — her sleep deprivation from the night before catching up to her.

He drags one of their throws over her body, after tucking a pillow under her head. Mossador comes out of the kitchen holding three bottle of beers, handing one to him and another to Marselen.

“I’m pretty pooped, too,” he says, situating himself back on the arm chair. “The time difference is killer.”

“Oh, dude. Do you want to go to sleep?” Grey says, looking over at Missandei. Her brothers are supposed to take the fold-out couch.

“Oh, no. It’s okay. Let her sleep for a little bit longer.”

She wakes up early in the morning because she needs to pee — and because she can hear her grandma puttering around already. She can hear snoring — her brothers or Grey — no, her brothers. She notes, with surprise, that Grey is right next to her on the floor, Momo 2.0’s head is on his back. She’s on her camping pad and he’s just face down on the carpet. They are lying next to the glass sliding door. The kitchen light flips on and for a second, Missy tries to go back to sleep. She pulls the blanket higher up over them, from their waists to their shoulders. Even though he’s hot — lightly sweating in his sleep — she wants to touch him. She sneaks her hand underneath his shirt and just feels around for his heartbeat. He softly sighs in his sleep, mumbling her name, as she closes her eyes and pushes her face into his arm.
Naathi are not really good at apologizing for real. They are good at apologizing when they bump into one another in doorways, or when they accidentally speak out of turn. But real apologizing involves acknowledging that there was a conflict, so that was not something Missy was raised doing. It was actually something she learned too late in life. She remembers that old arguments with her grandma or her grandfather just ended when they gradually and carefully eased back into normalcy.

She doesn’t like this. This is why she always makes it a point to really apologize to Grey, whenever she does something fucked up to him, around him, whatever.

She knows Adara isn’t going to apologize. It mostly bothers her on the parts of her brothers. She didn’t think that her brothers deserved any of those brutal words from a kid. All they did was meet her a day ago. But as they’ve said to one another, over and over, kids are stupid. It takes people a while to mature and to grow up. In some respects, it’s a lifelong endeavor. Missandei is still working on certain things. Like letting stuff like this go — for real — for good. Missandei is just going to have to let it go. She’s going to keep giving this kid money for her education, because it’s utterly spiteful to snatch it away because this girl had an emotional outburst. She can’t punish Adara’s entire future based on a small blip in the present.

And maybe they will never be close. Maybe they will never be sisters. Maybe this will forever be poisoned, and they will forever be seen as Adara’s enemies — and Missandei is struggling to ignore that dark voice in the back of her head, blaming their fucking mother for all of this, for all of her fucking delusions and her lies — but Missandei’s not really giving this kid an education expecting anything back. It’s just the right thing to do.

She’s actually really upset and sad about this. Mostly upset. Alternating with sad.

Adara is still holed up in the bedroom — when Missandei walks in there to gather clothes for her and Grey to change into. Adara is sitting on the bed just fucking around on her tablet like nothing is amiss. Missandei rolls her eyes to herself and grabs the bowl on the nightstand — empty and haphazardly discarded — on the way out of the bedroom.

She sneakily taps him on the butt, as dat ass bends over to pick up a candy wrapper on the floor, which might have fallen out of her purse. The look on his face when he spots her in workout clothes is full of disbelief and skepticism.

“I’m gonna run with you!” she whispers excitedly. “Spend some quality time together!”
She was short-sighted. There’s no quality time to be had during during this torture. He’s really fit and can talk and carry on a conversation as he runs at her very non-competitive eight-minute mile pace — while she’s fighting to keep her breathing steady and non-erratic. She’s pushing herself extra hard to try to impress him. This eight-minute-and-some-change mile time is killing her. It’s horrible. It’s is too fast. She feels like she has emphysema. She doesn’t even know why she’s working so hard to impress him because she has already tricked him into marrying her slow ass. She keeps uh-huh-ing intermittently, as he rambles on about work, the underwriting of their loan, the paperwork that he needs to remember to send in, Momo 2.0 needing a haircut — or face-cut because her hair is getting in her eyes — and what her family might want to eat for dinner.

She’s so sweaty, just dripping buckets. It’s not cute, but — she must be losing a lot of water weight. Which is kind of nice. She really hopes everyone is already showered by the time they get back so that she can just directly walk into the bathroom and scrub down. Maybe if she starts running enough, this will be less painful. She has kept trying to run regularly ever since she met him. And she has kept failing dismally at it. But maybe this time will stick. Maybe she can become a runner? Maybe she can do a 5k?

“Baby,” he says, fighting some laughter. “You’re mumbling some of this shit out loud. And you can totally do a 5k, are you kidding me?”

“We should . . . do one . . . together,” she says, panting.

“Yeah?”

“Not a competitive one . . . but maybe a mud run . . . or a bubble run . . . or a color run.”

“I’m down,” he says. “Sounds fun.”

In the elevator, he watches as she pulls up her shirt to her face and wipes perspiration on it, exposing her purple sports bra and her taut bare stomach. He reaches out to run the flat of his hand, from her tummy to her back — feeling her jump a little underneath his touch because she’s ticklish.

He pulls her body close to his and kisses her when she drops her shirt. They’re both sweaty and her mouth tastes salty and warm and wet. She hums appreciatively against his mouth.

When the elevator dings and the doors open — he grabs her hand and slowly leads her into the familiar hallway, dragging his feet as they slowly take him toward their apartment. Once they open the door, then this nice quiet time with her is over. Missandei’s following behind, staying close, pressing her mouth to his spine, in between his shoulder blades.

“I bet you have a gym membership,” Mars says to Missandei, chuckling. “Like you don’t know that you can exercise for free in the park or just at home.”
Missy raises her coffee cup to him. “I do have a gym membership!” she says. “I also pay for towel service.” She peppers Momo 2.0’s face with kisses and constantly hugs the little dog — as she sits on the couch with Moss and Mars, shooting the shit about how bougie she’s become.

“I bet you buy food based on packaging alone — based on what you think looks cute,” Mars says.

“Oh my God,” she says, her voice lilting into a whine. “Oh my God, I do. I’m that person. It’s how I pick out my booze.” She starts laughing, teetering her body back and forth on the couch.

“I pay hundreds to register for races,” Grey chimes in, after stepping out of the bathroom, releasing damp air into the room. He’s freshly showered. He was the last to use the bathroom — because he’s so awesome and was just a sneaky little bitch, ushering all of her relatives into the bathroom — saving all of the cold water for himself. The thought of him just makes her whole body kind of tingle, because he’s so sweet. And also because he was stark naked in there. And that’s neat. The novelty of being in a relationship with him still sometimes hits her in the oddest of moments. “I pay money so that I can have the privilege of running long distances in city areas that are roped off from cars,” he says.

Missandei’s eyes widen. “Oh my God, guys. You don’t even want to know how much this guy pays for his shirts. And his shoes. And his socks. I won’t tell you. Because you will no longer respect him as a human being.”

“I bet you go to a tailor, bro!” Moss says to Grey.

“Well, yeah,” Grey says. “Gotta. Fit is important.”

She gets no verbal confirmation from Adara, when — through the door — she tells Adara that they’re going to leave soon, to check out the three college campuses in the area. It’s a lot of campus tours — but Missandei wasn’t thinking that they’d be so tired — and fighting — when she scheduled all of these. She was thinking they’d make a fun day of it and pack it all in close, so that it’s easy to compare.

He’s so fucking bored because he knows all this shit already. And Grandma is so fucking tired and cranky because it’s sunny and hot and she’s old. He’s been told that the air here is stifling because of all the concrete. At least in Myr, there’s an openness and less radiant heat coming from the asphalt. Grey can’t argue with her on this. He just generally shrugs and generally says, yeah, sucks, right?

Missandei points to the man-made lake. She tells them that Grey used to row boats competitively in that lake. To Mars and Moss, it’s almost not a sport, something that Grey doesn’t really fight them on. Adara is off with a tour group of other prospective students, so they get a reprieve from her sullen silence. They don’t have to walk on eggshells currently. They don’t have to be ever-vigilant of the things they say. That’s been kind of nice.

It’s kind of trippy to be back on campus. He feels so much older now. He looks around at the students who are currently enrolled — and they look like babies. And it makes him realize that when
he started here, he was a little baby, too.

Missandei’s in a summer dress and sandals — managing to bounce around the place cheerily even though he knows that she’s still ragged with exhaustion. She’s been passionate about showing her grandma and brothers around campus, even though they’ve already seen it before — because she wants them to know where their money for her went. She points to the language center and tells them she was making a few above minimum wage, and that was really exciting, back in the day. And then she spins on her feet — her flowy skirt slow to catch up with the movement, rustling against her thighs. She smiles at Grey, a sly look on her face, biting down on her bottom lip momentarily.

“This is where we met,” she says to him. “Do you remember?”

“Oh course I remember,” he says.

“No, I mean — do you remember the exact moment?”

“Yeah!” he says, grinning at her girliness. “I remember the exact moment!”

He had failed a quiz. An old white lady was trying to shake him down for money because her oldass house had a broken window. He was so cranky and in a shitty mood when he showed up. And she was so beautiful that he hated looking at her, and he was angry that he was being made to participate in a stupid cosmic joke of a game. She was so nervous around him because she saw something in him. And that scared the shit out of him because he believed himself to be so ugly and so broken inside. She definitely wanted to bang him right away. And that made him intensely uncomfortable because it was obvious that she just didn’t know that he was planning on dying young and dying alone because he had to, just had to. She also didn’t know he was convinced he’d be the worst lay of her life. And then after that — she just basically dismantled all of his defense mechanisms, piece by piece, and made him slowly descend into insanity, as he became more and more hopeful and optimistic about life. That’s their story.

She is sick of the avoidance so Missandei doesn’t bother asking Adara which campus was her favorite — which school she’s feeling the most. Adara applied to all three — has been accepted into all three. So — the world is her oyster and shit.

Missandei gives Adara some cash so that Adara can go buy lunch with some random kids she met on the tour.

She leans back on her hands, sitting on the lawn with Grey, her grandmother, and her brothers, her legs cross at the ankles. They are just waiting for Adara to come back from lunch. So that the rest of them can all go eat for real — at a restaurant.

Missandei asks her grandma what’s going on in her mind, right now? What is she thinking?
Her grandma kind of smiles — she says that she’s thinking that God must have a sense of humor.

He kind of voices something they’ve all thought about — at some point in their lives. He asks Marselen, Mossador, and Grandma if they would consider moving to King’s Landing with their families — so that they can all be closer. Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem like he and Missandei will relocate to Myr anytime soon — because of the nature of their jobs and stuff. There are no similar industries in Myr.

And this kind of thing — schooling — it doesn’t end with Adara. It doesn’t end with Kamil, either. There are Moss’ and Mars’ kids, too. And the cost for international students is insane highway robbery because international students are basically seen as cash cows for universities. But if they became citizens — after all, Missandei is a citizen, having had the forethought to prepare for this very possibility — it’d be cheaper to educate their children. Missandei could sponsor them.

Moss groans, tilting his head back. “Okha and I actually fight about this all the time,” he says. Before they can ask for an explanation, he says, “She’s attached to Myr. The kids are attached to Myr and our house because they go to school there and have friends. But they’re kids. They don’t know to plan ahead, plan out their lives. But they . . . influence Okha a lot.” He sighs. “I dunno, man. We haven’t come to a resolution yet, and it’s been years of me fighting the whole family about it.”

“You also don’t have to carry all of our shit on your back,” Marselen says, turning to face his sister. “We get it. You feel really responsible for us. But man, you really don’t have to be constantly paying us back for the rest of your life.” He pauses. “That’s not why we sent you to school. I don’t expect for you to pay for my kids to go to school. That’s not your responsibility. That’s mine. And we know you guys work your asses off — doing your bougie white people line of work — so you know, chill. Enjoy it. It’s okay.” And then he spontaneously laughs, when he catches Missandei’s expression. “Shit, so serious. Chill out!”

They have no privacy. None at all. She hates it. She can’t even give him a quick kiss without looking over her shoulder. She misses being close to him. She didn’t know that it was possible to miss him when he’s constantly in her space — but she manages. She’s been bunking with Grandma because Adara sucks and is annoying. Adara is constantly biding her time around them, always eager to go back into the bedroom, to go back to videochatting or playing games or whatever on her iPad.

They watch as Adara scarfs down dinner, not even tasting it, before she passive-aggressively asks Missandei if she can be excused. Missandei says sure. And Adara just leaves her dishes at the table — pushing her chair back before peacing out into the bedroom. Missandei dryly mutters that she wants to whup the crap out of that child. And that she’s going to get her fucking tubes tied, like tomorrow.

Mossador coughs — he had been in the middle of a sip from his water glass.

In Low Valyrian, Grey casually tells her not to be silly. Obviously he will get a vasectomy tomorrow. The procedure is far less invasive than her getting a tubal ligation. He doesn’t know the
Missy has to wonder if he’s doing this on purpose, conditioning her family into being used to the idea of them being this close — or this far along.

She knows he’s doing this on purpose.

Mars pointedly ignores the fact that his little sister is sexually active — which is like, Jesus, she’s nearing thirty years, come on — and Mars says that Adara kind of exemplifies this theory he has about displacement and the Naathi. He says that he thinks they are frozen relics — just people stuck in time. Because they fled from Naath the way they did — their memories of it are sad and terrible — and their concept of it are stuck there, from that time period of survival, from decades ago. But Adara grew up in Naath, she lived in a country that is rebuilding and struggling to modernize. She’s kind of an annoying punk kid — just like their own kids — just like Western kids. It’s all the same. But them — Mars gestures to everyone around the table — they are all austere and old-fashioned and prickly and have these rigid codes of conduct, because that’s what they lived through — and that was what their beliefs were based on — that was the foundation of their survival. It’s a unique moment in time that they were all born in.

“But these kids,” he says. “These kids aren’t preoccupied with surviving. They have the luxury of focusing on everything beyond that, all the extras. And I used to get pissed over it — I used to be pissed at Miss, whenever I saw it in her. But you know — I’m older now. And I think — well, fuck, what were we even fighting so hard for? We were fighting so hard so that our kids could be fucking entitled dipshits, so that they didn’t have to know what it means to have to survive.”

Missy is blinking back her tears, sniffing loudly. And then to cover up how sad she is, she croaks, “Kids these days are so annoying though. I hate them.”

Grandma chuckles — and she points at Missandei. She reminds Missandei that she and Grey don’t even have kids yet. Just wait. It will be really “annoying” then. Grandma said annoying in English, mimicking Missandei’s girly whine. And it makes the rest of the burst out laughing.

Missandei says nope. They are both going to get snipped tomorrow.

Adara wanted to stay at the apartment — which Grey had to talk Missandei into — and Missandei told their doorman, Peter, to call her if he spots a little Naathi girl trying to leave the building.

Exiting out of the car, Missandei sarcastically tells her family that it must be such a drag, to have relatives that care about you and want to spend time with you and want to pay for all of your fucking shit. Such a fucking drag.

Her grandma tells her to please, try to at least sort of make a little small attempt at sounding like a lady. And then her grandma turns on Moss and Mars and tells them that it’s all their fault — they and Melaku taught Missandei all the bad words.

Missandei hold out her arms, showing them the overgrown, weedy grass, the graffitied walls of the...
condemned house, and the immediate and dangerous drop off, before they see the soft beach, about fifteen feet below craggly rocks.

“Ta-da!” Grey says, gesturing to the unhabitable house. In Low Valyrian, he tells them that the next time they visit, they will probably be staying at this place. They will buy a new door. Maybe hang up some curtains.

Her grandma puts her hands on her hips and says that they got ripped off — they completely got ripped off.

They hear sobbing, when they get back to the apartment, coming from the bedroom that Adara is occupying. They are stopping off at the apartment so that they could go grab the girl and take her to dinner and feed her ungrateful ass.

Grey says, “Are you shitting me? I’m hungry. Is this gonna take long?”

Missandei throws him a look. Until she realizes he’s baiting her. And then her face breaks into a grin.

Then Grey mutters, “Poor 2.0,” as he starts hunting around for their dog, looking in the bathroom because her cage is empty. “My poor little baby. Scared and stuck in a house. With a hormonal shrew.” He walks out with the dog after disappearing in the guest bedroom. He’s cradling her in his arms, petting her and kissing her face — things that he told Missandei not to do when Momo 2.0 is stressed out. He is the biggest hypocrite sometimes.

Momo 2.0 is pulling hard on her leash because she’s so interested in all of the goings on around her, tangling herself in the legs of the chairs. Grey tells her that it’ll be her own fault, if she chokes herself to death — before he untangles her and pulls her into his lap. He looks over at Grandma and asks if she’s cold, sitting outside on the patio. She says she’s fine, using a term of endearment to refer to him that he’s not quite familiar with. But he assumes it’s a nice one. He puts Momo 2.0 in her lap anyway, because the dog is warm. Grandma has already remarked that their dog is cute like Lucy, a little dirtier-looking — but cute. The name is stupid, though.

They are at one of the bottom-floor restaurants — a tapas place. Grey’s not the biggest fan. It’s fake tapas, like flatbread pizza tapas. It wasn’t their original plan to go to this place — but it’s really close by and they can at least hang out with Momo 2.0 while Missandei talks Adara down from whatever ledge she’s on now.

They order three beers and a glass of the house red — after cajoling Grandma into boozing it up a little. Grandma had protested, telling them they are being stupid and idiotic and wine is so expensive at restaurants, but she also relented. Grey’s been paying for nearly everything — something that makes them tense every time. And he’s been trying to be cool about it — to not call too much attention to it.

Midway through her first glass, Grandma asks Grey when he and Missandei are actually planning on getting married. Is this some trick where they just stay engaged forever just to torture her?
He snorts. He asks her if this means she finally approves of them getting married. He gets a weak, but intentional slap to the arm in response. Then she tells him that in the old ways — all they needed to do to make a vow is to loudly declare their intentions — to God — and then it is done. Grey glances at Moss and Mars quickly, before asking Grandma if it’s really that easy. Because if it’s that easy, then he and Missandei are already married.

“Oh my God, it’s not that easy,” Mars says, chuckling. He tells Grey there are rituals. Like, rituals upon fucking rituals. He will want to kill himself by the end of it.

Grey laughs. “That’s what I thought.” He gestures at Grandma, tells her they will get married whenever she wants them to — whenever is convenient for her.

“Brother, I’m so glad we got a chance to visit with you and talk to you and clear the air on some shit,” Mossador says. “I feel better about stuff. Sometimes I think, so much gets lost in translation, when you don’t see a person’s face and their gestures and their mannerisms. You know?”

Missandei asks Adara what the fuck her fucking problem is today. And when Adara bursts into tears again, Missandei says, “God, I’m joking. Don’t be so sensitive.”

Over the course of half an hour, it comes pouring out — in a really convoluted and repetitive way. Missandei generally gets the gist about ten minutes in — but Adara insists on drawing out every stupid detail. Adara tells Missandei that she has a boyfriend. His name is Yussef. They love each other — Missandei tries not to roll her eyes at this declaration — and they are going to be together forever. Adara wastes a lot of time talking about Yussef — that shitty selfish teenage boy — and how amazing he is. He doesn’t sound at all amazing — he actually sounds like a power-tripping dipshit.

But apparently Yussef is really upset that Adara wants to leave him and break them up, by going to college in Westeros. He wants her to stay in Naath and give them and their love a chance. He apparently doesn’t have a rich relative that will bankroll his education. He’s stuck on Naath. And Adara’s been so torn over this because she wants to be with him, too. But she also thinks she should go to school. And all she ever hears at home is how perfect and how beautiful and how hard-working Missandei is. And how she needs to be more like her older sister and not be the way she is, all ugly and stupid and lazy. And it’s unfair because Missandei gets all of this credit and this adoration — without even having to put in any of the time with their parents. It’s so unfair.

“Oh my God,” Missandei says to the ceiling. “Oh my God, where to start. Where to start. First, we’re not rich. Dude, we are really not rich. How many times do I need to tell you guys that? Secondly, Mom is totally batshit. You have to know this. She’s totally batshit. Don’t listen to everything she says. God.”

Adara is shocked into laughing.

Missandei says that she doesn’t want be another adult in Adara’s life that lectures her on what she’s supposed to do. But the fact of the matter is that Adara will probably love — multiple times in her
life — and she will probably love different people, too. And every time she goes through heartbreak — she will learn a lot from it — namely that it’s really fucked up when men try to tell her what is good for her — but it’s really about what is good for them. Missandei tells Adara that school is important — and education is everything for people like them. And she’s not going to even waste her breath explaining why. They both already know this — in their fucking bones.

“If he loves you — he will want the best for you. He wait for you,” Missandei says. “That’s it. The end. It’s that simple, kiddo.”

He jolts up in his seat and just about spills beer in his lap, when her arms come around him from behind, when she stoops over and gives him a hug and a hard kiss on the corner of his mouth in front of her family. He looks at her like she’s grown a second head. “Thanks so much for waiting for us,” she says earnestly, staring at him and beaming.

“I mean, we waited for you, too,” Mars cracks. “Where’s our gratitude?”

His hand is in Missandei’s lap, squeezed in between her knees, as they all pile on Grandma, trying to get her to spill the beans about how she and Grandpa hooked up. Grandma insists that it was all on the up-and-up, all clean and proper. Their parents approved of the match and everything. But Missandei says she’s done the math — Grandma might have already been pregnant with their mother when Grandma and Grandpa married — right? Unless their mother was fairly premature.

Grandma swats at Missandei and asks her why she’s even thinking about things like this.

“I mean, I dunno about you guys,” she says, addressing the English speakers. “But I almost always think about my grandparents boning at various important moments in my life.”

“Oh my God!” Moss says. “Gross!”

“Dude, grow up,” Missandei says. “I think it’s nice that Grandma and Grandpa had a vibrant sex life at one point.”

She swallows the lump in her throat. They are sitting on the couch, waiting for their turn in the bathroom, so they can brush their teeth. She tells him that maybe tonight, she will sleep on the floor with him. He tells her not to be ridiculous. They have reached an amazing place with her family members. What they really don’t need is to be caught fooling around in the middle of the living room.

“What makes you think we’ll fool around?” she says quietly, leaning into him, pressing her breasts into his arm.
“Because you can’t keep your hands off me,” he says.

“You can’t keep your hands off me,” she whispers.

He quietly laughs — his eyes shifting around the room really quickly, before he leans forward and kisses her, stroking her tongue with his before he pulls back.

“T-minus two days,” she whispers into his ear.

He looks at her out of the corner of his eye, suspicious.

“Until, you know,” she says, smoothly running her hand from his knee, inside his leg, up and toward his crotch.

“What the hell!” he hisses, when she actually skims him. He spazzes out and slaps her hand away, jumping a foot backwards on the couch, away from her. He tilts his head into the kitchen, where Grandma and Adara are packing away their leftovers.

“I’m just messing around!” she whispers back to him, smiling. “You’re so easy! God, fear on you is so sexy.”

Her family doesn’t like to do activities that cost a lot of money. Because they’re cool like that. Probably because they think Grey is paying for too much. So that’s why she takes Jaime up on his offer — to buy a bunch of food and booze, and to cook it all for them — and then to feed them all on nice plates and stuff.

Jaime and Drogo have already met her family, but Jaime still boldly reintroduces himself as Grey’s best friend — right in front of Drogo, who completely knows when he’s being teased and baited. After Jaime, Drogo reintroduces himself as Grey’s actual best friend.

Drogo, Grey, and her brothers are like — kindred spirits. They have the same kind of deal. And they’re running around in the yard with Momo 2.0 as Jaime cooks, trying to teach 2.0 how to dribble and fetch a soccer ball — which looks so cute and so stupidly ridiculous, because the ball is just a little bit below her height. And she also freaks out and freezes, whenever the ball comes close to her. Grey keeps gently rolling the ball to her chest — the ball keeps bouncing off of her as her body trembles and shakes in place. Moss keeps saying he doesn’t know any dog that doesn’t know how to fetch.

Missandei’s loud, “Ha!” nearly turns into a rough cough — because it’s so violent and self-satisfied — when her grandma asks her to ask Drogo if he has a girlfriend. Missandei then happily translates the question to Drogo, whose smiling face totally falters.

“Why does the world care, so much, that I’m going to be alone, forever?” he asks.

“Oh, you want me to translate that?” Missandei asks.

“No,” Drogo says. “Can you just tell her that I don’t respect women and I can’t hold down a job and that’s my problem in life?”
Toward the end of the night, as they laze around the firepit that Jaime had put in — totally too close to a fence — but he says the city is fucking hysterical and stupid about it — and no big deal. His Uncle Kevan is the county executive and his lil’ bro is basically gunning for and is gonna be deputy mayor soon — and then maybe mayor one day — and then maybe king of the world before he dies. So — whatever. The city can’t get on Jaime’s ass about his firepit. He is above the law.

Adara squeals, before she points to Momo 2.0 — who is humping Drogo’s jacket.

Grandma tells Missandei to get the dog to stop that. In Low Valyrian, Missandei tells Grandma that it’s not a sexual thing, when little dogs that have been spayed do it. It’s just . . . a thing that 2.0 does sometimes. “I don’t want her to feel ashamed or stigmatize what is just a random, natural thing she does,” Missandei says, explaining to the rest of the group. “Who’s she harming?”

Marselen tells them that they should all visit Myr sometimes. It’ll be cool to get everyone together — and there’s lots of stuff that he and Moss can show them, lots of cool things to eat.

“Dude, I’m in,” Jaime says. “Let’s do it.”
I feel like this story is pretty much done. It was probably done like, twelve chapters ago. I'm just writing into the abyss, beating a dead horse to death now. So --- I mean, you know it. I know it. I just need to acknowledge it. We can pretend this is now just an ongoing series of vignettes from the same universe.

It’s funny — the beginning of the trip was all tense and weird. And now — at the end — she’s having trouble letting go of her little sister. Missandei hugs Adara tightly, pressing a kiss into the side of her head, reminding her to remember that their mother is crazy, and to call Missandei whenever she feels like venting.

Grey gets passed around her family members, too. Even Adara — who’s generally nervous around him because their mother is hysterical and taught Adara that all handsome men who aren’t related to them are sexual predators and-or rapists — lightly gives him a quick hug, her face blushing furiously when they pull apart. Her brothers and Grey are thick as thieves now, and there’s something seemingly safe and counterintuitive, in the hypermasculinity of ass-slapping and bro-hugging.

It’s really the way her grandma gives Grey her hand for him to squeeze goodbye, before she reaches up to palm his cheek, that affects Missandei the most.

Right when she’s clipped into her seatbelt in the passenger seat of their car, he leans over, says, “Come here,” grabs the waistband of her jeans, and yanks her entire body closer to the middle console. It only takes a micro-second for her to be ready for him, for her to meet his mouth in a rough, frantic kiss, their mouths fusing together, wet and noisily pulling in air between the sucking, biting, and touching. Their hands are everywhere, underneath her shirt, pressing into her skin, thumbing over the swell of her breasts, snapping her bra against her rib cage, clawing down her stomach, over his head, under his shirt, clawing down his back through the the crew neck of his t-shirt — she whimpers against his lips when he grabs ahold of the edge of her underwear and deliberately yanks up, digging it into her tender, swollen flesh. Her hips automatically start grinding and scraping herself against the taut fabric, trying to alleviate the delicious ache he is causing with his proximity.

She can feel his smirking smile, when he feels her gasp against his mouth.
She pushes him away with her hand on his chest. “Oh man,” she says, breathing hard. “We can’t. Not in the car.”

They are comically lost and rendered so stupid and dumb because none of their blood is in their brains, when they stumble back into the apartment. They’re tripping over their own feet as they make their way to the bedroom — he gets fed up with their collective clumsiness so he just picks her up, her thighs squeezing his hips, her body accidentally, purposely rubbing against the bulge in his pants. He accidentally slams her against the closed door, before he wrenches it open and they nearly tumble in because she leans backwards, toward the bed. He trips and then nearly runs them into the ground.

When he lays her down, she looks at the neatly made bed and realizes that her little sister was just sleeping in this bed — mere hours ago. Missandei pushes him off of her body — he grunts — and she says they have to strip the bed and wash the sheets, before she will feel comfortable fucking on it.

He growls and asks her if she has issues with fucking on the bed her grandma slept in. Missandei actually thinks about it — and no, she actually doesn’t. Her grandma is a woman of the world. It’s different.

He grabs her hand and drags her to the other room, before he shoves her on the other bed and starts attacking the closure of her jeans, before yanking them off her legs, impressively undoing his own pants at the same time, telling her that he has been looking forward to this shit all week. She’s about to tell him something sappy, something about how she has missed cuddling up with him at night, but instead she loudly cries out when he lifts her legs and jams himself into her — oh God, he didn’t even wait — then they both groan in unison as they adjust to each other — and then it’s immediately hard and fast and desperate. The heels of her bare feet dig into his tight ass, clenching her muscles down around him, kind of trying to milk his body as he pumps in and out — her jaw hinging and unhinging as her eyes roll back into her head. She likes this kind of sex a lot. Not being together for more than week really sucked — but this resulting shit — his feral need for her body — it’s really fucking nice. This is really good. It’s almost worth abstaining from sex — to get to this point.

“Ah,” she grunts out, as she feels him slow down the pace just a little bit — so it’s more controlled, less erratic and desperate. She watches him as he looks down at their joined bodies — he shakes his head with an expression of disbelief on his face — and then he firmly presses his thumb over her clit, anchoring it against the steady in and out of his dick. Her face breaks out in this tingly hot mess — tears leak out of her eyes — and she’s struggling to shove out breaths. She’s gasping and saying, “Oh my God, oh my God. What the heck.” It’s so much more sensitive now. It’s driving her mad, because it’s so sensitive now.

He can tell there is a difference — right away. “Oh shit,” he says, daring to even laugh a little bit. “You gotta tell me when, okay?” he says, voice low and just so ridiculously beautiful. “You gotta help me time this correctly, okay?”

“Baby.” She quietly grunts, grinding herself against him — trying to alleviating the ache in between her legs, right where he is pressing.

“Ah, shit,” he says, coming to a full stop, as she gasps — and then whines.

When her brain catches up with her body, she freezes before he can tell her not to move — because
She’s familiar with this — this is one of their sex patterns — she feels him twitching inside of her. She can feel and see his monumental effort — at holding back. His face looks tortured for a moment. He repeats himself, saying, “ah shit,” clearing his throat. “I lost a little.” He means he just came inside of her — just a little bit. “But we’re still okay.” He laughs again. “God, you feel so fucking good. Oh my God. I’ve missed you.”

“You feel good,” she says. “I’ve missed you.”

He stays stock still because it’s clear that this is happening for him way faster than it is happening for her. He stays inside of her, as his thumb steadily starts working her again, as he rolls tight circles over her nerves.

Enough time has passed since she’s been off sertraline. And perhaps, this kind of adult sex will still manage to be different than how she remembers very youthful sex to be. The fact of the matter is that they’ve never actually climaxed at the same time before. It’s this holy grail that he’s sort of forever chasing — because it means something to him. It means less to her — she just needs him to be there, with her. When he’s there, she’s happy and having a good time.

He changes the angle — he explains, “My knees are getting sore,” as he raises himself a little bit, as he pulls her hips up higher off of the bed so that they stay connected. He experimentally allows himself a few strokes, in and out of her, as he continues working her. This is new. And inside of her, his dick is hitting, dragging, against the inside-back of her front — dragging behind her belly button.

She exhales out a random shout, breaking eye contact with him. He completely freezes — his thumb on her clit, his penis inside her body — it all freezes — because her response surprised him and he doesn’t know yet whether it hurts or if it’s cool. She exhales again and tells him, “God, don’t stop. Keep going.”

She’s lying down on the bed, face up to the ceiling, her pelvis higher than her head. She can’t see what’s going on. He’s watching the whole show — his face tense in concentration — being the mastermind behind it all. There’s a lot for him to juggle, she realizes, as her face burns, as she gasps when he continues to hit that sensitive spot inside of her with his strokes — as he’s just fucking messing with her clit steadily and comfortably and insanely.

He tells her, “God, you’re really wet. You’re like, slippery.”

A far away part of her wants to laugh at that observation and his accompanying tone — but she can’t even make herself talk to him. She just bites down on all the sounds she wants to make, as she inches closer and closer to her orgasm.

“We’re gonna spend the rest of the day fucking,” he tells her. “It’s going to be really, really fun.”

When she’s close — really, really close — she manages to choke out to him that she’s very, very close.

And he bites out, “Thank God. Shit.”

And then her eyes are shut tight as it breaks inside of her — as the valve releases — her mind whites out — she cries out because it feels so good, as her entire body releases the tension. She can hear herself calling out his name, over and over — asking him please as she works through spasms and shudders, bearing down tightly around him. She can hear him say something — she can just make out the sound of his voice. His thumb is still in between their bodies, still running circles. She’s way too sensitive, and it almost hurts — her hand grabs his wrist and tries to yank him off her clit. He’s an asshole. He refuses to budge. He just keeps going, and she muffles her scream into the pillow. He’s
telling her yes, as he finally takes his hand off her pelvis. And she manages to shove out the word, “Please,” and he understands the signal — he leans forward, grabs her head for leverage, and fucks her hard and fast through the waves of her orgasm, really expertly — like they’ve been practicing this shit for years — which they have been. She grabs ahold of his body, and he feels fucking amazing and full and thick inside of her. God, she’s never been fucked through an orgasm before. And this one is soul-destroying. It is really fucking nice.

She doesn’t realize she’s screaming, that she’s being too loud — not until his hand clamps down on her mouth absently, as he continues slamming his body into hers.

And it’s not that long before he loses himself inside of her, too.

“Oh my God,” she says in a daze, sighing as she comes back down the earth. “Dude,” she says in awe.

“I’m exhausted,” he says. “God. That was hard.” And then he must realize how his words sound, because he starts laughing — as he rolls them over, with her on top. He’s still inside of her, pushing the sound of his laughter into the crook of her shoulder. “Baby, that felt so good,” he says, gushing. He spontaneously shivers underneath her, kind of giggling — or about as close as Grey can get to giggling. “Man, that was awesome. I can’t get over how awesome that was. I just meant it took a lot of work and concentration.”

She tilts her face so that she can kiss him. She raises her hand to lay her fingers on his jaw and she gently orients his lips toward hers. She kisses him roughly and in a highly-sexualized way, her tongue just invading his mouth. Usually their kisses are soft and weak, small lippy pecks after sex. But now, here, she wants to convey her gratitude to him.

He’s beaming when they break apart. It must be all of the lingering endorphins in her body, but she feels so attached to him right now. She clutches her entire naked body tighter and closer around his body — they are both sweaty and sticky — she smells hims — and she smells like him.

“What did it feel like for you?” she asks against his neck, kissing him there. “When I came?”

He thinks about it for a second, aimlessly running his hand up and down her back, stopping at the cleft of her butt before he pats her there. “Honestly? Not too much different. It maybe got a little wetter, a little warmer. Maybe there were contractions? I don’t know. I was too brain-dead to really pay much attention to the subtleties. But it was mostly vocal. You screaming. And your nails scratching me. You were just losing your mind as I fucked you. I was scared someone was gonna call the cops. But it was so hot and so exciting.” He laughs.

“I like how we just fucked on the bed my grandma was just inhabiting just some hours ago. You’re so nasty.”

“You wanted to. I saw the way your face lit up when I suggested it, you freak,” he says, as he experimentally grinds against her — she gasps because she’s still so sensitive down there — and he’s spent. His penis has softened and is gradually shrinking inside of her. “I love you,” he whispers, framing her face with his hands. “I just can’t believe it sometimes,” he says. “You. Me. Us.”
He’s such a fucking stud. She’s all properly sexed up, and they’re just goofing around, getting ready for dinner. Sometimes she just wants to scream it from the mountaintops, that he is so good at fucking — that he fucks her real good. That he eats her out real good. It’s just bone-rattling sex that just gets into her brain like a parasite and just lives there for good, infecting her with this physical want and neediness.

In the past, when she’s gushed at him about his sexual prowess, he’s mostly extricated himself and his dick from her grasp and he generally told her that she doesn’t have to fluff him up. He has told her his ego is not fragile. He has told her that he knows what the reality is.

She has gotten frustrated with him. She has asked him what he even thinks it looks like, when other people have sex.

Tonight, she roughly gropes him through his fancy pants — making him hiss in pain before it transitions into something heated. The area between her legs throbs as she tells him that he is such a fucking stud.

Tonight, his dark eyes don’t leave her face, as he presses a kiss to the inside of her bicep, lightly biting at the flesh there. He says, “Thanks,” giving her a funny look. “You’re okay, too.”

She tries to hide her smile from him. And she can smell her own perfume. He never wears cologne outside of work because he actually hates it — and she wants it so whenever anyone hugs him tonight — they’re going to smell her on him, first and foremost.

“Are you sure you want to go out tonight?” he asks, voice quiet and intense. “We can just say we’re too tired. And we can just stay home,” he says, trailing off.

She laughs, as he pulls her body against his. She feels younger than she is. She feels light and unencumbered. “Jaime hates it when people flake on him,” she says. “We’ll never hear the end of it.” Her hand starts wandering down his chest, pretending to hunt around even though they both know its destination.

“Oh, who cares? Fuck Jaime.”

She pulls the zipper to his slacks down. “We have to eat, Grey.” She touches him through the thin, smooth fabric of his boxer briefs, before her hand sneaks in through the slit, touching him skin to skin. “And I got dressed and put on my face and everything.”

He groans, breathing through the feel of her hand on his body. He says, “I’m really sore, babe.” And after a pause, he grins slyly and says, “So you’ll have to be gentle.”

She sits him down on their desk chair, kneeling in front of him. He gets ample view of her cleavage this way — not planned — a happy accident that she’s running with. He’s already pawing at her boobs, still encased in her black dress, skimming his knuckles over the swells at the neckline. And she’s saving up a lot of spit in her mouth quietly, lightly cupping his balls, as he works his own self up into a sex-daze.

When there’s enough spit in her mouth, she leans forward and starts.
His face is on fire. His body is on fire. Her face is attentive. Those eyes are watching him. He can’t even feel self-conscious. That fucking mouth is hot. She’s wearing red lipstick. And it’s just wet, warm, suction. Jesus. He can’t really even think right now. It is crazy. He loves her so much. Not because of this. Though yes, also a little bit because of this. But he loves her fucking mind, too. But this — this is fucking great, too.

She’s been getting better at this. She’s been stockpiling a lot of information — about what does it for him and what doesn’t. And he’s been getting more and more comfortable, in general, with it. They’ve been doing this a lot. There are certain modes of compartmentalization that he’s good at. He has found that he can easily sequester everything that touches Missandei in its own universe. He is a person that naturally wonders when love ends and when it dies and when it fades away. She makes him believe that the answer is never. He cannot comprehend a future in which he doesn’t always feel this way — about her.

He has told her he doesn’t want to be like other men she has known. He doesn’t want to take from her, either. She has told him that it’s impossible for him to be anyone but himself.

Ah. It’s getting to be that time. The time when he signals her that he’s really close and she should finish him off with her hand. He lightly — blindly — reaches out and taps her cheek. He can’t think. He can barely breathe — he’s looking up at the ceiling — all dark and shadowed. He vaguely feels her pause — so that she can tell him to look at her. And he numbly turns his head back down, to look at her as she takes him in her mouth again.

And then it’s this zip of lightning, that makes his balls shudder and tighten, makes his dick turn to hard stone — that he realizes that his bitch is intending for him to come in her mouth.

She immediately gags — not just once or twice — but three times. Grey gets knocked right out of his post-coital bliss — looking immediately guilty and upset. Missandei gives him the one-minute sign — her forefinger pointing up to the ceiling, as she shakily gets to her feet — teetering on her heels. He can hear her clomping steps all the way to the kitchen.

She comes back with water — a bottle for him and a bottle for her.

After a long, continuous gulp, she’s panting. She says, “Sorry, baby. I guess I still really don’t like jizz down my throat. Not even your amazing jizz.”

He reaches for her, pulling her into his lap, his pants still undone. “Oh my God, don’t be sorry. You’re so ridiculous.”

“I just feel lame because you like, can and do drink from my vagina like a champ. And I can’t even handle a little spoonful of your stuff. There is an inequity here, Grey.”

“Fuck.” He grunts out his disbelief, reaching up to blindly palm her cheek. “You’re so obsessed with fairness.”

“I’m obsessed with you,” she whispers.

“I’m obsessed with you, too,” he whispers back.
“Next time I’m not going to swallow,” she announces firmly. “I’m going to spit it out.”

He kind of laughs at that, with his forehead resting on her shoulder. “It’s good to have a plan,” he says, looking down at their intertwined hands. “Oh shit,” he says, touching her skirt. “I got your dress dirty. Somehow.”

“What! No!”

“You guys are late,” Jaime says in irritation, when they walk up to the table. “Again. We have been waiting half an hour for you to get here. You didn’t even text that you were going to be late until you were already late. That’s a real dick move. What gives?”

Missandei freezes next to Grey, before she stiffly takes her chair and pulls it out. He silently follows suit, just letting this awkward bullshit and pointless guilt-trip just wash all over them. Missandei says, “We’re really sorry. We lost track of time.”

“Were you guys fighting or what? What were you guys fighting about?”

“Jaime!” Brienne immediately swats his chest with the back of her hand. To Grey and Missandei, she says, “It’s okay. It happens.”

“We were having sex,” Grey says bluntly. “That is why we’re late. That is why we didn’t think to text. We were busy. And she already feels bad about it,” he says, gesturing to Missandei. “But I’m not sorry at all. I don’t even want to be here right now. I still want to be at home, with her. But she insisted we show up to dinner because she didn’t want you to freak out — for cancelling on you. So stop being such an ass to her.”

Drogo leans forward and refills all of their wine glasses, including his own, before sitting back and grinning. Grey’s spontaneous sex confession led them all to play a game — because fucking Jaime loves games. They are playing a sex version of Never Have I Ever.

He’s learned a lot of stuff about his friends. Other than some weird random one-offs involving weird safety pin shit, Drogo’s actually surprisingly limited in the variety of sex adventures he’s had. It’s still a good amount — but just considering the amount of sex Drogo has had — they all thought it’d be more crazy stuff. Jaime says it’s because Drogo has never had a long-term girlfriend. “It’s really the moments you are both so fucking bored,” Jaime says. “So fucking sick of boning each other the same ol’ same ol’ way, so fucking drunk —”

Missandei raises her glass to that, which Jaime eagerly clinks.

“— that you come up with random crazy shit to try,” Jaime finishes, swiveling his head to look at Brienne, who is blushing, of course. “Right?”

“Uh, yeah,” she says, blinking rapidly.
“I’m saving the hardcore ass stuff for after we get married,” Missandei announces.

“Keeping it spicy?” Drogo says, raising a brow.

“Oh, no. It’s just — there could be a poop on the dick situation and, after he sees that, he might never want to have sex with me ever again because I’m like, disgusting. But at that point, it’s like, ha! Too late, motherfucker. I have trapped you! Legally, financially, psychologically, emotionally — I have trapped you! You can’t leave! Bwa-ha-ha!”

Grey looks at her — face serious until he catches her sheepishness creeping on her face. That’s when he cracks a small smile. And then he slowly shakes his head. She’s good at putting on a show.

He doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like it at all when Drogo admits that he thought Missandei was hot when they first met and that he would’ve tried to get with her if Grey hadn’t been in the picture. Grey doesn’t like that she’s joking back with Drogo, saying that she probably would have given Drogo a go, if Grey hadn’t been in the picture.

“She’s cool,” Drogo says. “She’s fun and stuff sometimes. And she’s really, really smart. So there’s
that.” He pauses. “She’s like, a big fucking deal. And I’m like, this lite-alcoholic with a shitty non-job that kids in high school have.” He grunts, rubbing his face in his hand. “And I’ve gained fucking fifty pounds since college so I feel shitty about my body. I dunno, guys. It sucks, all over. She won’t have sex in my apartment. She won’t even be in my shitty rat-infested building after that first night she took me home. I think she offered me spending money after we finished, the other day, because she felt sorry for me. I think I might actually be a prostitute now.” He grunts again — all of this honesty apparently just torturous for him. “I’ve also been feeling bad — guilty — because I get now — how I was treating women — back when I was hot and had a job. And this shit is mean. And it sucks. It sucks not being hot. And not having a real job.”

Jaime times it perfectly. He passionately rips Drogo’s phone away from him after Drogo unlocks it via fingerprint to show them a funny video. Jaime is fighting off Drogo, who has reached across Brienne, trying to claw at Jaime’s face to get his phone back.

“Dude, I’ll tell that bitch what’s the what,” Jaime mutters. “You don’t just fuck around with people’s feelings like that.”

“Jaime!” Drogo shouts — garnering looks from other restaurant patrons.

Grey smooth snatches the glowing phone out of Jaime’s grasp. He looks at the screen. Jaime was just fucking around. It’s just a text message full of gibberish. Grey hands the phone back to Drogo.

They decide to hit up a bar nearby, after Drogo texted Dany back and told her that he’s busy for the entire night.

Drogo’s breathalyzer is due to be off soon, and he’s not risking it. So he orders himself sparkling water. Missandei and Brienne are leaning heavily on Drogo — because they’re girls and they feel bad for him and they have adopted him as one of their own — and Drogo is like, sharing stuff with them — sharing his thoughts and his insecurities and his feelings and stuff. They are cooing over him and telling him that he’s not fat or hideous or stupid or worthless. It reminds Grey that Drogo grew up among women and only women — and there must be some comfort in that, for him. Grey and Jaime generally try to hang back in the periphery, lest their insane testosterone-fueled pheromones muck up whatever thing is going on tonight.


Grey says, “Yeah, sure.”

Jaime cracks up, pulling his credit card out of his wallet. “I’m joking, boo. I gotcha. Treat yourself. It’s on me!”
Over the din of the bar — Drogo has to shout at them a few times to be heard. He tells them that he’s thinking of doing something with food — like, with authentic Dothraki food. It’s so popular everywhere now — that shitty fast food, convenience shit — but at least it means it’s not just a flash in the pan. Drogo says he’s not baller enough to do a restaurant, but maybe some prepared boxed lunches or some homestyle shit? Some real shit. Maybe a food cart? Maybe catering? His mom can be a part of it — because even though her arm is fucked — she still has this knowledge in her head, right? And Drogo loves the food — obviously it’s why he is so fucking fat and disgusting and no longer hot — and he also has the business acumen — sort of — he’s failed monumentally already, in a business venture. But fuck, whatever. At some point, this shit has got to stick. He can’t possibly be a failure forever.

“Or maybe I can be? Maybe I will a failure forever? Am I crazy!” Drogo shouts over the noise. “Am I fucking crazy! People hate authenticity! I’m going to fail! Again!”


“Or fail hard!” Grey adds, watching Drogo’s frown deepen.

“Yes!” Jaime says, nodding. “Honestly, that is always a possibility!”

Grey grins, deliberately looking over at Missandei, who stares back at him. “But that’s what makes it worth it!”

She’s not wrong. The messiness of drunk sex is often great. But he’s too plastered to actually get his dick up — too many caramel appletinis. She tells him that he’s going to have a killer headache in the morning, from all the sugar — the very thing he hates.

As she presses him down on the bed — again, grandma’s bed because they still haven’t gotten around to doing laundry — he tells her that in some respects, it’s really nice that they had such a hard time getting busy at the beginning of their relationship. Because he’s not like most guys. He doesn’t even give much of a shit anymore when his plumbing doesn’t work. He no longer does that stupid thing other guys do, where he stupidly associates his manhood with his dick.

He tells her he’s manly enough. Just as-is. He’s an average amount of manly.

He hears her husky laugh, as she straddles him and starts stripping off her dress. Then her bra. And then her underwear. And then his clothes — his sweater, his belt, his pants, his boxer briefs. He reminds her that he can’t really fuck her all manly in this state — so what is she doing? Does she want him to fuck her kindly and sweetly with his mouth or his hands, then? She has to be explicit about what she wants.

“I’m gonna sit on your cock and grind on you until you sober up enough to fuck me like an animal,” she says, grabbing her bare breasts, squeezing them, her hair wild and messy around her black-lined eyes.

And it’s all just words. And he sucks. Because suddenly — he jolts awake again — and he can feel her poking him lightly, telling him to climb up higher on the bed, toward the pillows.

And he must’ve fallen asleep again, because she pokes him again — this time with a toothbrush. She
tells him to open his mouth. She actually carefully brushes his teeth for him. She hands him a glass of water and has him spit into a bucket that he uses to clean the floors with. He’s so fucking tired and drunk that he’s unsure if he’s properly telling her that he loves her.

She covers him in blankets — he asks her where she’s going — catching a glimpse of her in pajamas. She tells him she’s going to take Momo 2.0 for a quick walk, of course.
He’s a little late getting home because he stopped off to pick up their blueprints. After he walks through the front door, little Momo 2.0 barks at him, tail wagging enthusiastically. He bends down and picks her up, giving her squirming body a hug. The apartment is warm from oven heat, and it smells wonderfully garlicky. He can hear the TV droning on in the living room, the sound of a man narrating something, it sounds like a documentary, as Grey takes 2.0 and carries her back into the living room.

He’s smiling at Missandei and is on his way to giving her a kiss hello, still holding 2.0 like a baby, when Missandei suddenly realizes he’s home — she must be really absorbed in whatever she’s watching. She straightens her back on the couch and immediately shuts the lid to her laptop, forgetting that their cast device still plays on the TV even after the computer screen is closed. Missandei scrambles for the remote on the coffee table, awkwardly fumbling with it, pointing it at the screen and turning it off.

“Okay,” he deadpans. “That’s not suspicious at all. What are you watching?”

He follows her into the kitchen, still in his suit and tie, as she generally ignores him — opening up the fridge to cool down the flush on her face. She pretends she’s gathering ingredients for a salad — actually, she doesn’t have to pretend. She can like, actually do that. She starts digging in the crisper drawer, looking for lettuce, tomatoes, and an avocado that she knows is hiding in there somewhere.

He looks amused and is smiling at her, when she pulls her head out of the fridge with a bunch of vegetables in her arms.

“Were you watching porn?” he asks.

She nearly drops the vegetables. “No!” she says immediately, her face burning up again. This must be what it’s like to be Brienne. It sucks.

“I don’t care if you watch porn,” he says. “I watch porn sometimes.”

“I don’t watch porn!” she says adamantly. She halts at the sink. “Wait, what? When? I have never
seen you watch porn.”

He shrugs. “Usually when you’re not home. And usually not for sexy reasons. Usually to check on stuff, benchmark stuff.”

She blinks hard. “What?”

He waves her off. “Missandei, that’s beside the point. What kind of porn were you just watching just now?”

Dinner is very quiet — just the clinking of their utensils hitting the plates. She’s wearing an oversized sweatshirt — one of his — and just a pair of loose shorts. They’re an odd-looking couple because he’s still in his work get-up, all precise and fancy-looking. She takes a slow sip of water, clenching the glass in her hand before she places it back on the table. She sort of moves the vegetables and chicken around on her plate for a bit, before dabbing her mouth with a napkin.

She looks at him — he’s watching her, chewing, holding his food in his cheek. She gestures to the rolled-up blueprint on the table and starts to ask him if he’s looked at it yet.

“Seriously,” he says, interrupting. “What were you watching when I came home?”

She groans. She says, “Grey. Shut up.”

She’s ready for bed before he is. She’s moisturized and she has taken off her bra — and she’s rolling her head around, trying to stretch out those sore muscles she has from sitting in meetings for most of the day. She closes her eyes and reaches her hands over her head in a really wide stretch, grunting as her muscles pull apart in a nice sort of pain. She squeaks a little bit, when she feels his hands come around her wrists — as he lightly laughs and pulls her upward a little bit, elongating the stretch. She opens her eyes and smiles up at him, watching him as he leans down to her face.

She’s cozy — all ensconce in blankets and in him — just all warm. Their bed smells so good. He smells so good. The blankets feel so good. His body feels so good. It’s been a long day. She’s content and happy — and she’s drifting off to sleep when he roughly pokes her in the ribs, waking her back up.

“Missandei,” he says. “You are never embarrassed by anything. I can’t even imagine what it is, that has made you so secretive tonight.”

“Grey,” she says warningly. “We both have to get up early tomorrow.”
“Wanna play twenty questions? What if I guess it?”

She lifts her head, snatches her pillow out from under, and she hits him with it.

She finally relents. She groans in frustration and lightly kicks his legs under the blankets because he’s so annoying. And she tells him she wasn’t watching porn, but she was watching a sex video. Before he can ask her what that even means, she tells him that she was watching a how-to video on prostate gland stimulation. It was very TED-talk-esque. The presentation was given by a sexologist. And she was watching it because Jhiqui was talking about it — mostly that she wanted to try it but Neal is a bit of a pussy when it comes to any ass stuff. And the ladies were all just hanging out and stuff — and Missandei made the brutal mistake of asking, what is prostate stimulation?

And then they just started like, kind of making fun of her about it. Even fucking Doreah! Like, Jhiqui kind of made Missandei feel like a lame prude for not knowing what it was. Missandei tells Grey that she’s not a lame prude — expectantly waiting for him to confirm this fact.

Which he does not.

“Grey!” she snaps.

“What?” And then he snickers. “I am not gonna stroke your ego by saying something nice to you, man.”

She kicks him again underneath the blanket. She goes on to tell him she was watching a video because it was just a curiosity. She honestly thought prostates were the same things as testicles. But spoiler alert — it’s not the same thing at all. She tells him there are so many glands in his body and stuff.

“Did you know what it is?” she asks.

“Well, yeah,” he says, trying and failing at not laughing. He clears his throat. “My doctor checks it every time I have a physical.”

“Oh.”

“That’s a relief!” he says. “I thought you were watching some weird sex shit and were suddenly into it or something! Like goat sex. Like slave-master stuff. Like anything with urine or blood.”

He sleepily tells her that once upon a time, a woman constantly had her finger up his ass because he had this whole rectal bleeding problem, and the lady was trying to figure out the root cause of it. He chuckles quietly at the memory. He tells Missandei that the culprit was a tiny hemorrhoid. She asks him why that is even funny. He tells her it’s because he thought he was dying — like such a melodramatic bitch.

“Babe. That’s still not funny. That sounds sad, actually,” Missandei says. “I guess you had to be
there or something.”

“You were there,” he says. “I was still recovering from it the first time we fucked. I actually remember being really nervous — beyond the other reasons I had to be nervous, when it came to having sex with you. I was worried that vigorous activity would pop a scab loose, and I’d like, just ass-bleed all over you, and then you’d stop being my friend because you were so disgusted with me — and because you could get with any number of guys who didn’t butt-bleed all over you. Also, any number of guys who could, you know, keep an erection.” He laughs. “Hashtag Grey probz.”

She laughs too, to disguise the pang she feels in her heart. He has never told her any of this before. And he was so fucking tragic and so fucking dumb. She burrows into him and hugs him with her whole body. She wants to reach into the past and smack his past self — tell that guy to fucking just go for it with the girl — he will be handsomely compensated for the smallest act of bravery. She knows. She’s sure. Because she was there. She was a player. She was the girl. And she was so lost in infatuation with him — and then love — that he could’ve fucking bleed his ass blood all over her body and she would’ve cherished the memory forever, banking it in her brain as some sort of beautiful memento.

Neither of them are architects, obviously. Maybe they are annoying clients. Maybe they are not. But Missandei keeps wanting to save money because she’s so guilt-ridden over how much everything costs. Grey would rather they do everything correctly, bearing the cost right now, rather than settle for something not quite perfect. They don’t want a big house — Jhiqui and Nick’s monstrosity is just excessive. But they do have Missandei’s family members. And future children is something they kind of talk about in an abstract way — so they will probably need more than two bedrooms. Maybe even more than three. Maybe even four if they want to give one of those bedrooms to Momo 2.0?

When they get to four, Missandei is cringing and boxing her own ears, telling him it’s too much. She grew up in a house with three tiny bedrooms, and it was fine.

Grey dryly tells her that they need someplace to put her shoes.

“You shut up! My shoes aren’t that bad!” Missandei protests. “They aren’t! Your suits and shoes take up half the closet!”

He tells Missandei that he has very little to do with fashion week, but Tanja has a lot to do with it. He tells Missandei that he’s going to go to the show over the weekend, in solidarity for the team and to support his work-wife. He wants to know if his actual-wife wants to come with — because she’s obviously into women’s clothes and all of that frivolous shit.

She bites her tongue — she refrains from reminding him — yet again — that his fucking suits cost thousands each. Each. She supposes that he differentiates it all in his warped mind. To him, he derives little joy from his suits. To him, they are just his work uniform. To her, clothes are something personal and intimate and fun — a representative of who she is.
And she actually feels shaky and insecure — as she watches hairstyles, cuts, fabric, and swagger walk by. It all veers slightly androgynous. And Missy wonders if she’s *too pretty* — and not in that obnoxious way where she pretends she doesn’t realize how she looks to other people. She’s actually wondering if her look is too conventional, and if she really dresses for other people — men — rather than for herself.

She looks over at Grey — who is focused and sitting stock straight, like a line of steel is forged into his spine. Barristan is on his other side. And Grey looks like perfection — he actually knows a disturbing number of details about women’s clothes and fit — he’s always telling her to size up one. She keeps wanting to punch him in the face.

But he’s probably right.

She also knows how he dresses when he’s off the clock — in some form of athletic wear, in t-shirts and sneakers. She also remembers how he used to dress when he was a poor college student. He truly gives no fucks about what is attractive to other people. That happens to do it for her.

He tells her to just throw a fucking dart on the calendar — that will be when they get married for real and shit. She tells them that the venue in Myr — this cruddy gymnasium posing as a banquet hall, is booked for the next seven months. Maybe they can just put a deposit down and hold a date, eight months or more from now?

He waves her off — she looks stressed out — he says sure. Whatever works.

She asks him if there any of his customs from the Summer Isles — that he remembers or knows of — that he might want integrated into the whole wedding day-of-torture extravaganza.

He tells her that there is nothing. He doesn’t want anything from his supposed culture anymore. He tells her it means nothing to him — it just really makes him mad, above all else. But truth be told — he actually thinks that a lot of the Summer Isles wedding customs are similar to Naathi customs anyway.

Jaime is hanging around, when the exhausted and over-extended contractor asks Grey if he can please speak with Grey’s wife. Because it seems they are getting nowhere presently. Grey can hear Jaime snickering behind him, as Grey tells Connor that he really *doesn’t* want to speak to Grey’s wife.

“Because *I’m* the nice one,” Grey says emphatically. “I’m doing you a favor, by shielding you from her.” Grey pauses. “And she’s also not here right now. She’s on a business trip in Dorne.”
He checks his phone in between meetings, leaning against the door of his office. There’s something cute in the way that they’ve reverted in their texting style — since she’s been working a timezone away. He’s been going to bed alone for the last week — well, with Momo 2.0.

He writes back to her. He’s been bugging her to send him an updated naked pic. She’s been stingy and uptight about it — telling him she feels awkward posing for a naked selfie in her hotel room. She’s been telling him to just close his eyes and use his fucking imagination. Or look at the one he already has. She’s been telling him that she’ll be home in a few days. He’ll be able to see the real thing soon enough.

He writes out a retort. He asks her what she's wearing.

She’s sitting on the couch and messing around with all of their fucking bills, trying to prioritize what to pay first. Her hair is piled on top of her head and she has to take off her reading glasses — a new acquisition. She flipped out a little bit when her doctor suggested she get her eyes checked, citing that it was a natural part of aging.

And she doesn’t expect a fight at all — when she casually tells Grey she’s been thinking about freezing her eggs.

He’s playing with Momo 2.0 on the floor, and he’s immediately tense. She knows him almost as well as she knows herself — so she takes in a fortifying breath, and she says, “Grey, I said it’s just been something I’ve been thinking about. I’m not making a doctor’s appointment yet.”

“You,” he says. “So you’re planning to.”

“No,” she says, getting testy already, too. “I’m talking with you about it. And then I figured the both of us would rationally decide what we want and what we want to do.” She sighs, closing her laptop, taking off her glasses, rubbing her tired eyes. “What is making you so defensive about this?” she says. “Is it penis issues?” She’s known him so long and she knows him so well, that she finds herself just saying this stuff so baldly now.

He doesn’t like it at all. He stiffens. “I don’t think this is something we should be worrying about right now. We are in the middle of all this house shit, the middle of this wedding shit, and you want to pile on more shit?”

“We’re turning thirty this year. I don’t think either of us are anywhere close to feeling like we want to have kids any time soon. And — we have the money to do this, if we want. It’s just — it’s fucking planning ahead, Grey. It’d just potentially be buying ourselves some more fucking time.”

“That’s right!” he says. “More time is what this is about. So why are you rushing it? Why are you pushing for something that is not even high priority right now? You’re fucking turning thirty years old. You’re actually too young to worry about fertility issues.”

“Thanks for informing me about female biology,” Missandei says sarcastically, crossing her arms. “Thank God you’re here to mansplain this shit to my feeble brain.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he says, narrowing his eyes. “And you know it.”

“And I didn’t say I wanted to do this tomorrow! Or, at all. I was just thinking about it! And I was
telling you I was thinking about it, so we could fucking discuss it together. But you’re being an asshole about this. So I don’t want to talk to you about it anymore.”

She realizes she’s getting too angry and upset and is taking some of this personally. And it’s unproductive. She will own this part. But he also likes to push logic and rationality and pretend he’s so cool-headed and even — when he’s actually being emotional and trying to safeguard himself with his logic. And he’s really shitty at planning for anything beyond the next year. He can only handle life in one-year increments. That also irritates her sometimes.

Missandei pushes herself up off the couch. And she goes to fetch one of 2.0’s leashes. Grey is still sitting on the floor, with his hands on 2.0’s back, as Missandei bends down to clip the leash on 2.0’s collar. Their faces are really close together. She’s not looking at him. “I’m gonna go take her for her last walk, before bed,” Missandei says.

There are very few vestiges of sunlight left — she pulls her jacket tighter around her body, blinking against the wind as 2.0 sniffs around bark and bushes, trying to find the perfect spot. Missandei has a green plastic baggy already around her hand, as she cheerfully urges 2.0 go potty.

2.0 is scrunched up in a squat, looking up at her mommy in a mixture of shame and vulnerability, as she starts pooping. Momo 2.0 takes a while to poop — Missandei is sometimes just a little bit late to all things, because she loses a lot of time waiting for 2.0 to poop before she can leave the apartment.

He’s already in bed and reading on his tablet, when she enters their room. She quietly shuffles around, getting ready for bed by wiping off the rest of her makeup, brushing her teeth, and changing out of her clothes. She wonders if they need another blanket layer — if it will be a chilly night — but she’s tired, so she just leaves it. She pulls up the sheets and slides into her spot next to him.

When she leans over to give him a quick kiss goodnight, she accidentally spies what he is reading — an article about in-vitro fertilization.

She has left the bathroom door open — to let out the steam as she showers — and he has been too busy to do much of their laundry — a fact that honestly really bothers him — and she keeps telling him that maybe they should hire a cleaning person to come once a month to help them out. It’s something he’s wholly uncomfortable with. He has shared with her, the many reasons why it’s not economically viable. And she has generally tuned him out — but she also hasn’t hired a cleaning person, either.

He hung up one of his white shirts in the bathroom as she showered, so that the wrinkles can relax. He doesn’t have time to iron out shit.
Her hair is wet, and she’s just stepping out of the shower, rubbing her damp body down with a fluffy white towel when he returns to retrieve his shirt. His mouth goes dry as he blatantly stares at her nakedness, like he doesn’t already look at it every day of his freaking life. His pulse is strong in his throat. And he can feel himself, his own body, responding to it. They have been awkward around each other. They’re not exactly fighting. They’re just not exactly super natural around each other.

He raises his eyes to her face. She looking at him with a mixture of surprise — and this haunted expression on her face. He says, “I’m sorry. For staring.”

“You can stare,” she says quietly. “I want you to.”

He casts his eyes to the imaginary clock on the wall. They don’t keep a clock in the bathroom. But he knows what time it is. He doesn’t even have time to iron his shirt. He definitely doesn’t have time to fucking fully apologize for being an asshat and then fuck the both of them into oblivion as a tribute to how sorry he actually is.

He grunts in frustration, before he rips his shirt off of the towel bar.

The text comes through as she’s in the middle of her salad, which she is eating at her desk — they have an open office, so everyone can see one another’s business. She reads his note, which makes her smile to the screen. It’s really simple. He’s just asking her what she’s doing. But they don’t text each other conversationally much these days. Their texts are mostly perfunctory, task-oriented missives that they pass back and forth.

She writes back and tells him she’s just eating lunch. A boring spinach salad she bought from the coffee shop on the lobby level of her building.

Missandei shows up with cupcakes and two bottles of wine tucked underneath her arms. Jhiqui, who is visibly pregnant, Brienne, Dany, and Doreah are already there — are hovered around Clea, who has red-rimmed eyes. They are talking in hushed voices, as Missandei walks into the kitchen to put the Chardonnay in the fridge.

Clea’s boyfriend broke up with her. Incompatibility issues. Maybe that’s the most and worst adult way to be broken up with. It’s not anything having to do with circumstances or timing issues out of their control. It has nothing to do with distance. It’s just that, he has decided that he doesn’t love her enough. She doesn’t make him happy enough. And Missandei thinks that’s a bullshit way to articulate unhappiness — and that Clea is wonderful — but if the last week has taught her anything, it’s that telling a wonderful woman that she is wonderful and making her believe it — is a difficult endeavor.

Missandei leans forward to refill some glasses, picking off a carrot from a veggie platter.

“I’ll be fine,” says Clea. “I mean, I’ve been through this before. So — I’m getting really good at being broken up with.” She smiles softly, sniffing. “It’s just —” She blinks back her tears. “Wow. It’s just — I thought I’d be farther along by this point in my life. When I was younger, I thought I’d
already be married and having a second child by the time I hit my thirties. And so I’m guess I’m kind of mourning the loss of that, too — not just the guy.” She pauses, straightening up in her seat. “But I will be fine,” she says, forcing some enthusiasm in her tone. She points to herself. “I’ll be depressed for about two months. And then you know . . . it’ll be easier after that.”

“You need to let go of this perfect life hang-up,” Dany breaks in, voice harsh. Jhiqui’s shoulders kind of slump as she gives Dany an incredulous stare. Dany ignores the look and says to Clea, “You can’t have it all. You’ve been sold a lie — just like we all have. You have to really do some self-examination and figure out if you really actually want this asshole to be in your life forever — or if it’s just a matter of you wanting a fucking husband, any fucking husband will do — and wanting the fucking picket fence, the fucking babies. Are these things you actually want — or if they are things that you have been told to want — things that you think will fill that void inside of you?”

“Dany,” Jhiqui says. “Is now really the time for this?”

“I’m not going to sit around aiding and abetting this pity party, acting like she’s lost so much when she hasn’t. She has actually been liberated,” Dany says to Jhiqui. “And you’re being inordinately nice to her because you feel guilty that you’re married and pregnant!” Jhiqui flinches at that — but she doesn’t protest it. Turning back to Clea, Dany softens. And she says, “I’m sorry you’re in pain. But he’s not worth this pain. And your imagined life? Also not worth this pain.”

Brienne audible crunches on a carrot — kind of breaking the tension — her face blushing when they all direct their attention to her. “Oh, oops,” Brienne says. “I didn’t mean to do that so loudly.” Missy lightly laughs at that.

“I got pregnant when I was sixteen, and I thought I was in love,” Dany says. “But he wanted nothing to do with me after he learned about it. I had to leave school to have a baby. And all of my classmates were assholes and called me a whore. I lost all of my friends. I lost my parents’ respect. They were the ones who made me have the baby because they were religious. And they died still feeling such disappointment in me. I gave the baby up. And I carried on.” Dany shrugs. “And I don’t tell people about this aspect of my life because when I do — they feel pity and they feel sorry for me, like I’m a victim who has been damaged. But I tell you — my experiences have made me who I am. And I don’t look back and regret. I didn’t even want to have a baby when I was that young. But I was forced to. And everything I have done since then — is in direct opposition to those feelings of oppression and helplessness.”

It feels and looks very much like a pelvic examination, when he props her hips up on a pillow and slides off her panties. It’s nine in the evening and the day — the week — the month is just running away from them. She’s pulled off his shirt from when they were messing around on the couch, before they transferred to the bedroom. And his gaze is concentrated and singularly focused, as she feels him carefully position himself in between her legs, spreading her with one hand, as he experimentally runs a finger along her exposed, wet walls. He has told her that he just wants to look.

And he tells her that for all of the time he’s spent hanging out in this area of her body, there are still parts of it that are unknown to him — because of the nature of the beast — being an internal thing versus an external thing. He also tells her it’s because he’s a man and she’s a woman and perhaps there are just aspects of her body and her experiences that he will never be able to crack or fully understand.
She tells him that he’s probably actually more familiar with the general lay of the land than she is — because she’s have to get a mirror and orient her body all weird to get a peep at what things look like down there. He tells her he can kind of see the hole where pee comes out of. And then he sucks on his forefinger before he gently slips it inside of her — her breathing hitched when he finds the spot he’s looking for.

He tells her he’s not sure why he became so defensive and uptight, when she brought up freezing her eggs. He tells her he’s been thinking about it over the last few days — trying to sort through the mess in his head. He reminds her of what she already knows — that it’s often hard for him to get to the core of what he’s feeling and what he’s actually thinking and what he believes — because he has so many defense mechanisms cloaking the truth sometimes. He tells her that when she threw his penis back at his face — it really pissed him off.

And when she starts to sheepishly apologize for doing that — he crooks his finger inside of her — halting her words. And he tells her not to worry too much about it. She’s not wrong. She didn’t actually throw his penis back into his face. It was just how it felt, in the moment. Maybe it pissed him off so much because it hit right on the truth. It’s likely penis issues. It’s likely manhood issues — as much as he likes to fool himself into thinking that he’s so far beyond manhood issues. He pauses, and he jokingly asks her if she wants to talk about Black masculinity now. He tells her that it makes him feel so uncomfortable and defensive, the thought that they might have to have kids in such an artificial and impersonal way. He tells her that it makes him so angry — that this continues to touch his life. It is relentless. None of this sex shit or this reproductive shit or this relationship shit comes easy for him — it refuses to ease up. It’s so unfair. He tells her that — for once in his life — he just wants something to feel natural and be easy and organic.

“Why can’t it be like — you get off birth control when we’re ready — we fuck — you get randomly pregnant. Why can’t it be like that?” he asks.

“It might actually end up being like that, sweetie,” she says. “We don’t know. And I didn’t bring this up to make you feel bad —”

“I know —”

“I just — don’t want us to get stuck in a situation where we completely lose the opportunity. Maybe it’ll be an age thing. Or maybe I will get sick —”

“You’re not going to get sick,” he says darkly.

She frowns.

“What if we find out I can’t have kids at all?” he says.

“Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I’m playing my odds.”

“What if I can’t have kids because there’s something up with me? Would that make me less of a woman to you.”

“No. Of course not.” He stares at her. “It’s different for men.”

“Baby — seriously. How do you think other people fuck? How do you think other people do relationships? How do you think other people have babies? Do you honestly think it’s easy for everyone except us?”
He stares at her, kind of helplessly. And he says, “Yeah. Everyone except for me.”

“You are fucking wrong,” she says — too loudly. “You’re an idiot.”

“I’ve talked to Jaime and Drogo —”

“Oh really?” she says sarcastically. “You’ve talked to Drogo, who has never been in a healthy relationship, and Jaime, who screams out that there is no God, whenever the subject of children comes up? They make you think this shit is seamless and easy for other people?”

“Okay, I was mostly talking about sex there,” he says, voice low and a little petulant.

“Well, I have no idea how those morons have sex — because why would I know? But I fucking guarantee you — it is not easy. Great sex is not easy!” She looks at him — sitting at the foot of the bed. And they are having this conversation with his finger inside of her. “Grey! Are listening to me!”

“I’m listening to you,” he mutters. “I’m thinking.”

She exhales in disbelief. And then she gently places her bare foot on his bicep — attached to the arm and the hand that is touching her intimately — and she gently pushes. She gently nudges him out. And then she reaches out for him. He sighs as he crawls forward. He lightly touches his forehead to hers, as she hugs him and pulls his body weight down on top of hers. She bypasses telling him she loves him — that’s so obvious now — instead, she tells him that she wishes he’d love himself, the way that he loves her. His expression flickers — and she thinks that he gets what she means. And he tells her that it’s very, very hard. Because he doesn’t think he can love anyone else as much as he loves her.
Missandei convinced him to say yes. And by that, he means that Missandei bitched him out and nagged at him until he just agreed with her so that she’d finally shut the hell up and give him some peace and quiet.

This is why they are at Tanja’s house. This is why they are sitting on Tanja’s furniture, holding sickly sweet hot buttered rum in their hands after dinner. He had told Missandei that Tanja is his work-wife and only his work-wife. He doesn’t actually want to be her friend outside of work. He doesn’t want to know how she decorates her living space. He doesn’t want to sit around and meet the other people in her life and pretend that he doesn’t hate them because they are boring as fuck and white as fuck. He has told Missandei that he has nothing to say to Tanja that isn’t work-related. And they’ve already been banned from talking about work. He’s already cracked a modest number of tepid jokes — only to have to explain what he means when he refers to Missandei as his ho. It was excruciating, to explain to these people that ho is shorthand for whore. Missandei is his whore. Except she’s not. She’s a classy person whom he respects and generally adores except for when she subjects him to this bullshit. But that’s the irony. That such a great person is being called a ho. That’s why it’s funny. Except it’s not fucking funny at all, when he has to explain this 101-level shit.

He already feels awkward around white people. It has compounded.

And what the fuck is up with Tanja having so many white friends? She’s not even white.

He just has nothing to say to anyone.

They are sitting in Tanja’s living room — which looks like a page out of a Pottery Barn catalog — and Tanja’s husband, Mitch, is passing around these index cards — these ice-breaker questions. The entire night has been composed of various ice-breakers. He’s in fucking hell. Missandei owes him a big one. They’re going to have sex later in a way that vaguely humiliates and degrades her.

“Oh my gosh, dinner was so amazing, Tanja,” says the blond to Missandei’s left. He can’t remember her name. “You have to give me the recipe for that chicken.”

“Oh! I got it from this blog I follow,” Tanja says. “I’ll send you the link. It’s super easy! It takes no time at all.”

“You’re so crafty! I love it!”

“Do you cook, Missy?” Tanja asks.

Missandei is mid-gulp on her buttered rum, so there’s a pause as she swallows and lowers the mug, before she says, “Sort of. Grey actually does most of the cooking at home.”

“Oh my gosh!” Tanja gushes. “I didn’t know you can cook!”

Why would she know? Why would that come up in conversation at work? He stops himself from sighing. He says, “Yeah. I like to make food.”
“Oh my gosh!” the blond gushes to Missandei. “You’re so lucky! A man that cooks? A rarity.”

After they hug Tanja, Mitch, and a whole bunch of strangers goodnight — he mutely follows Missandei as she walks to their car.

The door is barely shut before he grits out, “Never. Again.”

She laughs. “Babe, that wasn’t . . . too horrible. And look how happy you made Tanja!”

“I don’t give a fuck.”

“She’s so nice! And she’s always bragging about you! You should be nice to her back.”

“I’m nice to her!” he says defensively. “I bring her coffee sometimes. I tell her good job when she does something well.”

He mutely pulls her naked body up on the bed so that she’s on her hands and knees. He uses his hands to push her legs apart a little bit. She’s not saying words, just making soft sounds that convey her general confusion. It’s dark, but he can see some light reflecting on the shine, between her legs as he stares at her from behind, assessing and thinking. He’s been ready. His body has been ready for a while now — to get on with it and just fuck her hard and be done with it. But he wants to draw this out until she’s mindlessly begging for it.

And then he pitches forward, roughly bites her, indenting his teeth on the meaty part of her ass — she gasps, low and animalistic, in surprise — right before he follows her smell, before he moves his mouth in between her legs.

Her limbs go jelly, and she just about collapses on the bed. He takes the hands on her thighs and he yanks her back up, pulling her harder against his face.

“Jes-us,” she says, moaning. “I can’t even handle you sometimes.”

“God, I need some fried chicken — and some potatoes. And some gravy. God. Put that in my mouth,” Missandei says into the phone, as she clears out her locker at the gym. She blows a curly strand of her brown hair off of her lashes.

On the other line, Brienne snickers — Brienne is cleaning her toilets and doing laundry — and Brienne asks Missandei what she’s actually having for dinner. Missandei says she’s actually meeting Jhiqui for dinner. And now that Jhiqui is pregnant as hell, she’s gone nuts and doesn’t even give a shit about her body anymore. That woman has been eating like a man. And Missandei is so jealous.
Like — Jhiqui picked a comfort food restaurant. Jhiqui will probably order mac and cheese with bacon on top — as her side. Her main course might be like, a meatball sub or something.

“Wanna come?” Missy asks.

Brienne says she would — but the drive is too far — she’d have to change — and she’s also due to Skype with Jaime in a couple of hours, since he’s been working in the Summer Isles and all.

“Just straight up say no to me, Brie,” Missandei says. “Tell me you're not feeling it. You don’t have to come up with excuses, with me. I don’t care.”

Brienne laughs in her ear and remarks that Missandei has picked up certain quirks, certain traits from her guy. Because that ice-cold statement had Grey written all over it. The observation makes Missandei laugh, too, as she slams her locker shut. She tells Brienne she’s come a long way since the self-sacrificing, self-humiliating people-pleaser version of herself, from her early twenties.

On the other line, Brienne’s voice tilts in a girlish lilt as lightly squeaks — she tells Missandei that she remembers what she wanted to tell her earlier. Brienne tells Missandei that she was having this weird woman’s lunch with a bunch of rich white ladies — that Jaime’s sister had set up because she’s trying to find herself, after divorce. It’s kind of like, a Ya-Ya Sisterhood kind of thing — kind of cool — but also it’s not really Brienne’s kind of people. They talk about private schools way too much, for instance. But in any case, at the last luncheon, one of Cersei’s friends got crazy plastered on mimosas and one of the things they talked about was orgasms!

“Ooh! Interesting!”

Brienne tells Missandei that one of Cersei’s friends is their age — she actually just turned thirty years old — and she’s kind of celebrated her divorce by going on this really weird sex cruise for rich people — but they don’t call it a sex cruise. They call it some form of therapy or something like, life activation.

Brienne tells Missandei that Cersei’s friend just had her very first orgasm — ever. And she was telling them how it blew her mind — while they were all sipping mimosas. Cersei’s friend was married to her ex for six years, too, dating for three.

Missandei just about laughs out loud — when she hears Brienne lower her voice — even though Brie is home alone by herself, cleaning her toilets. Brienne whispers that Cersei’s friend . . . didn’t even know about the clitoris — until recently.

“Oh my God, that sucks,” Missy says. “Wow, I’m so glad she got divorced. What a jerk. How do you not care or notice that your lady’s needs aren’t being met?”

Brienne hums in agreement. And then she tells Missandei that she should tell Grey that story. It’ll make him feel better about his . . . Brienne searches for the word . . . performance in bed.

Missandei groans loudly at that, throwing her face to the high gym ceiling. “Nope! He can only take so much of me shoving this shit at him before he shuts down and is Mr. Cranky Pants. I’ve reached my quota for the month. I just know it.”

Grey thinks it is gross and unnecessary — Jaime’s only gone for two weeks — but Jaime insists on
video-chatting together. Grey told Jaime that he needs to stop being so fucking clingy — and Jaime responded by telling Grey to go fuck himself. The clingy accusation made Jaime pretty sensitive, which was the intended effect.

Jaime told Grey it’s not about being clingy. It’s because Jaime has some interesting shit that he wants to show Grey — fucking footage from Grey's fucking homeland, which he hasn’t fucking seen in years.

“I mean, check out this infrastructure going up in the center of Ebonhead, man,” Jaime says through the connection, pointing his phone at some in-progress ten-plus-story buildings. "And I want you to say hi to Keela.” Jaime dizzyingly turns the camera to a pretty young woman with really smooth, dark skin and chunky hoop earrings. She looks stunned that the camera is pointed at her face, but she recovers and smiles, waving at Grey through the phone. “Keela is director of that re-integration org I was telling you about!” Jaime says, off screen.

“Hello,” Grey says.

“Say something to him in Summer Tongue!” Jaime urges off-screen. “My pal’s an Islander like you,” he says to Keela. “He’s fluent!” Jaime’s the fucking worse.

“Um.” Grey clears his throat. And then in Summer Tongue — and his is mind-numbingly rusty — he tells Keela that he’s not actually fluent. He tells her that he’s sorry this is awkward. Jaime doesn’t know boundaries.

Keela laughs and tells him that his Summer Tongue is not bad. His accent is great. And she tells him that Jaime is great. He brings a lot of passionate energy, and he has an existing relationship with most of the returnees that go through her organization. So he’s been a great help.

Grey thinks it’s weird to talk to someone who doesn’t constantly rag on Jaime for being an asshole — so he doesn’t quite know what to say back to her. He tepidly says that Jaime is cool.

“I understood that one!” Jaime shouts from off-screen. “You just said you love me!”

“Fucking Naathi bullshit. It's like, I'm not even a fucking fussy bridezilla. I just want to fucking know if we can bring our own booze. I think the answer yes because I've been to one of these before, but these punks aren't saying jack about it.”

“Yeah.”

He's mildly startled when she slams the fridge door shut. He turns and sees her glaring at him.
“You're not listening to me at all,” she hisses.

He honestly completely hates wedding shit. Missandei tolerates wedding shit just mildly more. Her grandma is too old and gives too few fucks to actually properly plan a wedding. So . . . Missandei reluctantly takes on the task. And she is punishing about it — sometimes just randomly a jerk to him about it because, she says, she’s only stuck doing this shit because she’s the girl in the relationship.

He has corrected her and told her she’s only stuck doing this shit because he’s not fucking Naathi and he’s not from Myr, so he doesn’t have the knowledge required to make this culturally authentic or whatever.

“And I do?” she says. “I am fucking looking this shit up on Google!” She just about spits at him. “Or I am fucking calling up my grandma, listening to her sigh at me like I’m an idiot for not already knowing this shit — before she reluctantly tells me bullshit that I have to verify — because I do not know if her old ass is just making shit up so I would stop bothering her. And all of this is for her benefit!” She throws the hand towel down on the counter. “Do you think I love doing this!” she shouts at him.

“Why are we getting married then?” he shouts back, his words touched with too much sarcasm probably. Whoops. “If it’s so torturous!”

“Oh my God,” she says, shaking her head. “Don’t even fucking put this on me like I’m the fucking girl in this relationship! You pushed for this, asshole! It was you! So yeah, you’re gonna fucking sit there and smile supportively — as I fucking bitch about this shit for hours to you, okay? You’re gonna listen like you’re gonna take a fucking exam on this shit! That is what you get to do! You think you’re the only one stressed out by your fucking job? I have a job! I have a fucking job, too! My boss is on my ass, too!”

He points his finger at her. “You fucking want to deal with house shit? You want to swap? You fucking want to hunt down subcontractors all day and be like, ‘Yo, where the fuck you at, bro? Get the fuck to my house and put down some fucking floor because the fucking hardwood guy cannot start his fucking shit until you do your fucking job!’ You think I’ve been twiddling my fucking thumbs as you fucking pick out table linens!”

He knew it was a mistake — right away — when he said table linens. Her hands actually form into a chokehold as she slowly advances on him. And then she thinks better of it — she probably thinks he’s not worth her time. And she leaves the kitchen in the middle of making dinner and she says, “You go fuck yourself tonight, man. Have fun.”

“Okay, I will,” he says. “I will have fun!”

He’s already in a shitty mood. And he’s watching Jaime shove food into his face — food that, honestly, kind of makes Grey’s heart throb a little bit in his chest because he kind of . . . misses it a lot. He kind of doesn’t want to talk about his fight with Missandei, so instead, Grey deflects and casually tells Jaime that work has been rough. They expanded a product line and were really high on their fucking horses — only to discover that the shit was really fucked in packaging. Hair serums exploded all over the place. Significant loss of time and revenue. And Grey has spent the last fucking weekend sitting in a fucking warehouse with all of his coworkers, rewrapping shit in plastic bubble wrap. They are the fucking highest paid assembly-line workers in the history of humankind. None of
them have been able to do their actual fucking jobs — and an insane backlog and a world of pain is coming. It’s been fucking ridiculous and stressful.

Jaime has his phone propped up on something — Jaime told him sauce bottles — so Grey can actually see Jaime’s general inattentiveness. Jaime is bored by his story. It makes Grey regret telling Jaime shit about his life. He might as well just say goodnight — or good morning — and cut the fucking connection already.

“Dude, I’m gonna go try to take a shit and then go for a quick run or something.”

“Oh,” Jaime says vaguely. “Sure.”

“What?” Grey says, a little testily. “What’s up?”

“Dude, whatever. I just thought we were chatting and stuff.”

Such. A fucking. Girl. “We were, man. And now we’re done, right?”

“Sure,” Jaime says, shrugging. And Grey can distinctly see Jaime rolling his eyes. “Catch ya later.”

“Bieber, am I doing or saying something to fucking bother you?”

“Dude, I had all this cool shit to show you. And all this stuff to talk to you about. And you don’t even care.”

“Dude,” Grey bites back. “How much fucking affirmation do you fucking need? I’m listening to you. You weren’t listening to me when I was telling you about my shit.”

“Dude, the fuck? Sorry I was distracted and shit during your story, man. But it’s fucking first-world problems. I’m sorry you got paid lots of money to wrap plastic around bottles of hair products so that you can sell them — and make lots more money? I’m over here dealing with people who fucking lost their entire lives. They never got to even live their life because they fucked up when they were young and were subsequently punished for it — before they were actually sentenced. And now they’re struggling in a country they don’t even know because they were deported. And you want me to hang on your every fucking word about hair shit?”

After a long pause in which he stares into space — at his feet braced against the coffee table — Grey flicks his eyes back to Jaime’s face. And then he says, “I really can’t believe you just said what you said to me.”

Jaime refuses to apologize — not that Grey is expecting or asking him to — or even wanting him to. But Jaime pre-emptively and aggressively says that he will not apologize for what he said. He felt it. And he said it. Whatever. Deal.

And then Jaime sighs and he rubs his face with both of his hands. His voices is muffled when he tells Grey that he’s actually having some trouble being in the Summer Isles. He’s been keeping upbeat and shit when he is around people and he has to be ‘on.’ But it’s generally just depressing the fuck out of him. He tells Grey he likes to chat with Brienne or with Grey because it keeps him anchored to home. And he was probably a little overly sensitive about shit. He’s probably a little bit unreasonable and cranky.
It's actually close enough to an apology that Grey is already over it. Because they are similar in this way.

“That’s why I haven’t gone back,” Grey says quietly. “I mean, I want to go back. With Missandei, actually. But I also don’t want to go back at all. It’s so depressing. You know?”

Jaime nods. “Yeah.”

He wakes up — when he feels her quietly crawl into bed. He furtively checks the time on their nightstand and sees that he hasn’t been sleeping for very long. She’s trying her best to avoid waking him up, moderating her movements, moving slow like molasses, and it just makes his insides go to goo. He softly sighs before he risks it — the worst is when he makes an overture that is huge for him and minute to other people, and other people stomp all over it because they don’t recognize it for what it is. He reaches out to touch her shoulder once she’s in bed — a full two feet of space separating their bodies.

She makes a soft noise too, a choked noise, in relief. She whispers his name before she immediately wriggles closer to him, sneaking her hand underneath his shirt, pushing it up skin until it lands over his thudding heart.

“Where did you go eat?” he asks quietly, voice low.

“I grabbed a slice of pizza at Pablo’s,” she says. “And then I went to that hot dog vendor on fifth. And then I just sat by myself and ate it in the park, with my keys in my hands, just daring a rapist or a serial killer to come at me — because tonight was not the night to mess with me.”

He chuckles, as she lifts her head so that he can slip his arm underneath it. He cradles her close to his body. He presses his lips to her forehead.

“Can we just skip the apologies?” she asks. “I think we were equally both jerks to each other.”

He is sorry though. She was being a dick, but he was also an asshole. He hated that he inspired her to leave the house like that. “’mmkay,” he says. “Fair. I packed your dinner up so you can eat it for lunch tomorrow. Don’t forget it in the morning.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you, baby. You’re so sweet.”

“Oh, I was packing leftovers for my lunch anyway,” he admits. “So . . . it was convenient. And when I was still mad at you, I was doing it so I could shove how awesome I am in your face later.”

It makes her crack up. And he loves the sound of her laugh. He can listen to it forever. He holds onto her tightly, and he just basks in her voice.

After he’s back and has beaten jetlag, Jaime bluntly tells Missy that he doesn’t want to hang out with a pregnant lady in the woods — after Missy suggests that they invite Jhiqui and Nick. Brienne
wrinkles up her nose in distaste and shoots Jaime a look. He holds up his hands and says that he has nothing against pregnant women — it’s just they are fucking annoying and they act like the whole world revolves around them. He knows this because his sister has been pregnant three times. And it was horrible, every time.

“Whatever, dude,” Missandei says, sinking deeper in her seat. “What if we just keep it small? I know you wanted to do a whole group thing — but it’s just not shaking out like that, Jaime.”

“Ugh!” Jaime groans. “I freaking hate that Daven, that stupid bitch, is booked up. I told him to cancel his plans and fly over and hang with us instead, but he’s like, wahhh, obligations! Family! Wah! God, I miss him so much.”

They have all been finding that the older they get, the harder it is to coordinate all of their schedules so that everything lines up. That’s why it’s been hard to get this backpacking trip off the ground. That’s why it’s taken years of starts, stutters, and stops — before it has gotten off the ground.

He’s really drunk — which is one of her favorite incarnations of him. He’s also randomly just really drunk. He’s not in a mood. He’s not depressed. He’s not angry. He’s just happily drunk on a Saturday night. And they just had a really nice date of sorts — they grabbed a bite real quick before the concert. And actually, it was probably the concert and the concentration of people around him that led him to become really drunk. He sometimes likes to drink to alleviate some of his social anxiety.

He wavers wildly between being obnoxious and being insanely sexy. He wavers between making fun of her too much over dumb unfunny shit — like how she is relatively hairless? — and looking at her like he wants to eat her. It’s this heady, disorienting mix that is intoxicating. She’s also been drinking — nowhere near as much as he has. But some.

In their apartment, after taking 2.0 out to pee, after the pup is back in her bed next to the couch in the living room, Missandei leans into him, cupping his erection through his jeans as she nips at his mouth. He’s laughing and being cute, kind of dodging her, kind of grabbing her and slyly orienting them toward the bedroom.

They always take the biggest sex risks when she and Grey are really drunk — it’s something they’ve talked about sober — she thinks that alcohol is like liquid bravery in her veins. After all, a lot of the momentous episodes in their relationship — a lot of her overtures — occurred when she was plastered and looked upon him and felt hunger and want — and acted on those feelings. He thinks that alcohol for him is like, liquid earmuffs on the schizophrenic chatter of his brain. It blunts out a lot of his fears and his anxieties.

She’s jacking him off from behind as she nudges him toward their bed, her hand in his loosened pants, just going at it blind, by the awesome feel of him, of the heat of his body, and by the sound of his haggard breathing. She feels powerful — because he is powerful and stoic, and it’s a heady thing, to have some kind of dominion over him, no matter how fleeting. All the power and all the booze has
gone to her head, and it kind of slips out of her mouth before she can even think too hard about it. She’s telling him to bend over the bed.

A lot of this is familiar — and a lot of this is alien. She’s trying really hard to act like she knows what she’s doing — but she really doesn’t because the total highlight reel of her sexual experiences involves him. So she only knows what he has shown her — or what she has figured out in his presence. She feels this inordinate pressure — woman can feel sex pressure, too — in making every new sexual experience for him positive and successful. She thinks that if she can bank enough good will — then they can stand to risk it and sometimes take a hit — without the temporary failure being this depressing setback for him.

The fact of the matter is that they experiment on her body way more than they do on his body. And the limitation of knowing so much about one another is that — if she ventures toward some sort of newness in sex, he wonders about it — he wonders how she gained the knowledge. She generally has to own up to her inexperience — what she knows is often not first-hand. It’s through hearsay or random internet research. And that sort of thing makes him nervous. His nervousness makes her nervous, too. It only compounds her anxiety about her relative inexperience.

When they venture toward some newness in sex — on her body — she just assumes he’s done it before with someone else — and unlike him, it doesn’t really bother her on some visceral level. She thinks to be bothered by it is to be judgemental of him. Also, he has told her that most of the newness in sex is actually just shit he makes up and tries out, on the spot. That has sort of given her a complex — she’s not as creative as he is in bed and it’s this unbelievable thing sometimes, and it fucking sucks.

“What are we doing?” he asks mildly, turning his head to look at her in his peripheral vision, without anything freaked out in his tone.

And it kind of makes her heart sting in her chest a bit — that he said ‘we’ and not ‘you.’

“Yes . . .” She keeps running her hand softly up and down his shaft, careful to not be too rough and friction-y with the skin to skin contact, as she buys time — as she frantically tries to think — what it is exactly — that they are doing.

He catches her hesitation. And he sinks his face into the mattress, and he laughs, throaty and sexy and knowing. “Okay,” he says, voice deep and clear. “It’s all you, baby. Your passion project,” he says, echoing what he said to her right before the first time she successfully gave him head. He laughs again. “You’ve got this, Missandei.” He helps her by proactively pulling off his shirt, by stepping out of his sneakers and nudging off his socks, by pushing his pants down more — all without disturbing her hand on his cock. Because he’s magic and amazing.

And she just wants to give him so much.

She just doesn’t know what.

She feels painfully sober — even though she’s probably not — and she’s just paralyzed with indecision and worries. And she blearily asks him when the last time he pooped was. And he becomes rigid — in surprise — but he still answers her. He tells her that he actually went after he got home from work.
She doesn’t even know what to do with that information! She got the answer to her question, but she doesn’t know what the ramification of his answer is, what it entails.

He can definitely sense that she’s like, losing her mind right now. He clears his throat, and he says, “Babe, we don’t have to do anything different tonight.”

“But I really want to,” she says right away. “I’m just — ugh — so lame.”

At that, he gently rolls over — gently takes her hand off his erection, which has actually gone a little soft while she was holding it. This is actually embarrassing. This is actually the fucking worst.

He silently laughs when he sees the look on her face. He touches her cheek. “Baby,” he whispers fondly. “You are so cute. I love you.”

“I’m a boner killer,” she says through her teeth.

“It’ll come back,” he says dryly.

They just have plain ol’ normal sex from their repertoire — with her on top, taking it slow, and talking at him while he sweetly smiles up at her, laughing at her stupid ramblings. And it is actually really, really nice sex.

Afterward, they are staring up at the ceiling — he’s sobered up significantly. And like a comet — her opportunity has passed. She tells him this.

He props his head up on his hand, looking down at her, running his finger down her sternum, between her bare breasts. “What are you talking about?” he says. “I don’t have to be drunk to have sex with you. It’s actually really, really easy to have sex with you.” His tone is teasing and light.

She’s comparatively more weighed down.

“What did you want to do? What did you want to try? Butt stuff? Prostate gland stimulation? Have you watched another TED Talk?” He laughs again. And she doesn’t know why he’s so fucking amused when she’s kind of mortified. “Missandei!” he says, casting out this line for her attention. “Come on! Talk to me.”

She’s about to answer him — she really is — but his fingers crawl over her stomach and her ribcage and she just loses it in a fit of giggles. She shrieks as she tries to fight off his hands. He tells her that this is so awesome — it’s so awesome — it’s so awesome to watch her have performance anxiety — it’s so amazing.

For old time’s sake, Jaime brings back the series — the actual #GreyProbz series. He’s snapping an obscene number of photos of Grey to post on social media — before he loses internet connection — except now, Grey is not so easily perturbed by his paparazzo.
“Bro, can you lift up your shirt, please?” Jaime asks, jogging up ahead, his pack lightly bouncing, before he flips around and angles his phone toward Grey. “Addam just asked — says he’s very worried about the state of your abs. I told him nothing to worry about, they are still there. But he will not be placated. He says he needs to verify for himself.”

Grey mutely and obediently lifts up his shirt, which makes Jaime release a muffled high-pitch squeal of excitement before he snaps the picture. Then, turning to Brienne, he says, “Your turn, baby.”

“So what’s going on?” Jaime asks, jogging up ahead, his pack lightly bouncing, before he flips around and angles his phone toward Grey. “Addam just asked — says he’s very worried about the state of your abs. I told him nothing to worry about, they are still there. But he will not be placated. He says he needs to verify for himself.”

Grey mutely and obediently lifts up his shirt, which makes Jaime release a muffled high-pitch squeal of excitement before he snaps the picture. Then, turning to Brienne, he says, “Your turn, baby.”

“Fuck you, dude,” Brienne says automatically. “In your dreams.”

“No,” Jaime says, scoffing. “In my bed. Every night.”

She tries to kick dirt at him, laughing.

The four of them are actually working overtime, to keep things really fun and light. It’s actually a little artificial.

Because Drogo and Dany — who are now completely out of the closet — their dysfunctional and weirdass sex-quaintance-ship is now out in the open — are like these two dark matter objects, just sucking up all the joy and humor and fun from the trip. When Drogo admitted that he invited Dany in a panic, because she had asked him what his weekend plans were and he couldn’t think of a lie fast enough — she actually volunteered to come along despite them all being completely positive she’d completely hate backpacking and camping for a weekend — Jaime had groaned and had tried to get Drogo to uninvite her. Because she makes Drogo into such a fucking sullen bitch all the time. And Jaime doesn’t want her presence to ruin his weekend. He has said he’d rather have Jhiqui, the six-months pregnant wonder, on the trip instead.

Dany has no gear. She is carrying very little shit. She has not expressed one bit of contrition, at not carrying any weight. Drogo is carrying most of their shit. He refuses to speak up for himself. Jaime finds it inordinately irritating. Grey has generally washed his hands of the whole matter. And Missandei and Brienne are just stuck in the middle, because they are equally friends with both.

“Oh my God,” Jaime says, shaking his phone like an Etch-a-Sketch. “I’ve lost connection.”

“What?” Missandei says. “No! I was gonna call the dog hotel and check in on little baby. Dammit!”

“She’s fine,” Grey says. “We just dropped her off.”

“You’re heartless,” Missandei says. “We dropped her off hours ago. What if she’s not coping well?”

“Then she’ll learn to cope without us.”

“I feel like I’m getting a sneak-peek into the kind of arguments you two are gonna have, when you eventually have a child,” Brienne says.

“Oh my God,” Jaime cuts in. “Please don’t ruin my life by having babies. It’s bad enough you two are getting married. When Addam had a kid, he dropped off the fucking face of the Earth for years. He’s only started to resurface.”

“You say things that are amazingly self-serving sometimes,” Brienne says.

“Babe,” Jaime says, spreading his arms out wide. “It’s just what I do. It’s just me keeping it real.”

Jaime shoots his eyes heavenward before he smirks. And then he must’ve caught an edge of Drogo’s sullenness, because Jaime’s expression flickers. For a microsecond, his smile breaks and his face flashes pure irritation.
He and Missandei race, to see who can make a fire first from shit they find on the ground, a pocket knife, and a set of matches. The wind is actually a bit rough and he has to crouch over his bundle with his entire body, to block it from snuffing out his flame.

“Ah ha!”

He lifts his head up and sees her carefully transfer her little fire — from her hands to the kindling they have waiting in the firepit. She carefully feeds her fire with dry shaved woods.

“You cheated,” he says.

“What? No I didn’t! You’re a sore loser.”

“I didn’t see you make that.”

“I did,” Brienne says, balancing and towering over them on a round rock. “I saw it. It was legit.”

They were only able to carry a very modest amount of beer — because of weight issues — and it’s something they will have to ration over two nights. They each have two tallboys. And so they are entirely not surprised, when Drogo pulls out a plastic baggie and picks out a joint that he had rolled before they left. He flicks his lighter once, twice before he has a steady flame, before he sucks in the first hit. Dany’s face is imperceptible, in the dark. They are all trying not to look at her, lest she explode.

Drogo holds out the smoldering joint to Brienne — who looks at it like she doesn’t know what it is. She awkwardly picks it from Drogo’s fingers like it’s an explosive — which makes Drogo spontaneously laugh — accidentally blowing smoke into her face.

He waves at the smoke, trying to get it to disperse. He says, “Oh, jeez. I’m sorry, B.”

“S’okay,” Brienne says. She immediately transfers the joint to Jaime, who examines it — mostly the craftsmanship.

He says, “You’re not an artist like Daven, but really, who is?” before he transfers the joint to Grey.

“Seriously?” Drogo says.

“He makes really pretty joints, man.”

“No,” Drogo says, correcting himself. “I mean — you’re not gonna to take — you’re not gonna hit it? It’s just gonna be me getting monstrously high by myself?”
“Oh,” Jaime says quietly, looking really quickly at Brienne. “I mean, I’m okay, dude. I haven’t in years. And I’m not like putting a value on it. You’re cool. And I’m also just cool for now, man.”

Drogo shrugs. “Okay.”

“I used to make really nice ones, too,” Grey says, holding up the joint to the fire light, to examine it.

“Yeah, you did,” Drogo says dreamily, leaning back on his hands. “I started putting in the time to roll filters because of you, man.”

Grey looks at Missandei. “It’s okay?” he asks.

“Baby,” she says softly, smiling at him. “Come on. You don’t have to ask for my permission.”

He smiles back at her. And then he turns his attention back to Drogo. “D, lighter please.”

Drogo’s face breaks into a wide grin — entirely too earnest and too genuine and too full of gratitude — too raw — before he picks up his white lighter and shoots it over to Grey, who catches it in his right hand. Grey places the joint in between his lips, and he flicks the lighter, wafting it over the end as he sucks in.

When he exhales, up to the sky, he says, “Fuck. It’s like riding a bike.”

When Grey makes a move to bypass her and hand the joint back to Drogo, she puts her hand on his wrist. And he looks at her in surprise, as she gently tries to pick out the lighter and the smoldering joint from his hand.

“No,” he says quickly, holding onto the lighter tightly.

And she’s about to frown at him and tell him that she like, gets it now. And she’s totally been on an antidepressant and stuff. While it’s not the same thing at all — it’s mostly to say that she’s not so black and white about this kind of stuff anymore. And she knows she’s way too old to become a crack addict — she thinks — and it’s likely she’s too old and uncool to become a crack addict — so. It’s not that big of a deal. She’s not making some misguided overture here. She’s just curious. She’s never smoked before. Not even cigarettes. And it’s right there in front of her face. And —

“You don’t need this,” he says gently, pulling the lighter away. He hands over the joint. He looks at her nervously.

“Ack,” she says. “So how do I do this? God, I’m so lame and nerfy.”

Brienne chokes on a laugh. “I like how you think you’re a dweeb when I’m sitting right here.”

“Shut uppp,” Missy mumbles, bringing the joint to her lips. “You’re cool.”

As she coughs spastically because it burns — as Grey smacks her on the back to clear out her lungs
— Jaime crawls over and snatches the joint out of her hand. He snickers and says that he has changed his mind.

As Grey rubs her back, as her coughing fit winds down, as she feels no different at all, Jaime tells them all that he stopped smoking in solidarity with Grey. It was all he could do to kind of back up his buddy, when said buddy was withdrawing from morphine.

“But since it’s all gravy now,” Jaime says, before inhaling. “Whatever.”

“Where did that come from?” Grey asks Drogo. “It’s really knocking me on my ass.”

“Oh, shit,” Drogo says, immediately laughing. “Guess!”

“No, I don’t want to guess,” Grey says. “Just fucking tell me.”

“Bieber,” Drogo says, redirecting his focus. “Guess!”


“You’re no fun,” Drogo says. “Jaime’s brother. Tyrion, man! He’s got some sort of hook-up.”

“Of course he does,” Jaime says sarcastically.

“Oh, man!” Missy says. “Why didn’t we invite Tyrion on this trip?”

“Come on,” Jaime says. “Have you seen him?”

“What?” Missy says. “Because he’s a dwarf, he can’t hike?”

“No, man,” Jaime says. “He’s a priss. That’s why I didn’t invite him. He used to make me carry his fucking ass everywhere, when we were little kids. I was his fucking horse. He’s almost still the same size. I didn’t want to fucking bust my ass all weekend carrying his fucking ass around when he bitches about how hard it is to walk.”

Grey laughs. “Dude, he tears it up in racquetball. He’s got great lungs, man. He can walk long distances, man. You’re a fucking asshole.”

“God!” Drogo says in awe. “I hate you!” he says to Jaime. “Tyrion could be here, right now! He’s so funny!”

“Oh my God, he’s fucking hilarious,” Grey says.

Jaime points at them. “Shut up! He’s not that funny!”

“Yeah,” Brienne drawls. “So this is the real reason Tyrion wasn’t invited. Jaime doesn’t like to share the spotlight with his brother.”
firelight flickers over his features, at how cool he is and how beautiful he is and how smart he is — at how kind and thoughtful and considerate he is. And he just knows a bunch of random things about almost everything.

“Missandei,” he says, looking up at her. “Earth to Missandei. Hello?”

“Huh?”

“Do you need to pee?” he asks. “I’m about to go. Wanna come with? Hold the flashlight?”

“Yo, is that code for sex stuff?” Jaime interjects, laughing at his own joke. He turns to Brienne. “Wanna hold my flashlight, baby?”

“Okay, you’re twelve years old,” Brienne throws back.

“Dude, you knew me when I was twelve. I did not have this incisive sense of humor at twelve.”

She ignores Jaime and Brienne’s banter, as she scrambles to her feet, reaching up to grab the hand that Grey is holding out for her. She kind of does need to pee.

When he presses her up against a silvery tree in the dark and starts attacking her face with his lips — she realizes that he had lied. He doesn’t need to pee at all. She grunts and encircles her arms around his neck, pulling herself up to his height, kissing him back — their cold mouths warming up — her body warming up as his tongue delves into her mouth.

She doesn’t understand why he pulls away suddenly, leaving her bereft. She doesn’t understand what he’s muttering against her skin. She must be high. This must be what high feels like.

She opens her eyes — she sees bright stars in the purple sky — as his fingers harshly dig into her ass, smearing her body against his erection. She sees the silhouette of his face. She swallows. “Huh?” she says, feeling his hands already undoing the closure on his pants and her pants. He repeats himself. Into her ear, he tells her that she has to be very, very quiet. She nods vigorously into his shoulder, as he pulls her pants down, leaving it all bunched around her thighs. He turns her around and bends her over. She’s just struggling to mentally keep up. He lifts her hand and places it against a smooth section of the trunk because he realizes that her sense of self-preservation is at an all-time low. He tells her he’s sorry for making this so romantic, but this is just not the time to take off her shoes to extract her from a leg-hole of her pants. He just can’t get in between her legs right now. He promises to make it up to her later.

He gasps, and she has to bite down on her fist, as he smoothly pushes into her from behind, as she mindlessly braces herself against the tree with her head on her other forearm. He tells her he's been wanting to do this all night, mostly ever since they both got stoned though. He tells her he doesn't even fucking care about getting caught. He just fucking needs this.

“Yeah,” she says, grunting softly. “You can have anything you want. Whatever you fucking want, I will give to you. God, baby.”

Before he shushes her, he tells her that he just wants her. And then he tells her to relax her body a little bit. She's too tight and he doesn't want it to end so fast. His hands lightly dig into her hips as he subtly repositions her, a little higher.
She realizes, after a few strokes, that it was for her benefit, the slight change in angle. He’s hitting her G-spot. She’s finally been able to put a name to it. She muffles her groan into her arm. He’s a fucking genius. Her mind is just this fog of throbbing pleasure, as she observes to herself — again — that he’s so good at sex.

Her underwear is a complete fucking mess of body liquids, even after their quick attempts at shoving toilet paper into her pants to dam up her leaking vagina. She quietly remarks to him that fucking in the woods seems like a great and sexy idea in theory, but in practice — well, it was still pretty fucking awesome — but also messy. She has no bathroom to go and clean herself up in. She feels guilty and awkward about having had sex, not too far away from where their friends are hanging out — because her grandparents taught her that sex is shameful and, unfortunately, that’s an opinion that she’s never going to be completely able to shake off her brain.

After getting back to camp, she is sure that what she and Grey have just done is written all over her face. He is stone cold and blank, and she is envious of his poker face. She’s being paranoid — God, is this what they mean when they talk about being high and paranoid? — keeping her knees pressed together uncomfortably, because she is sure that everyone can smell the sex that they did on each other — even over the musky odor of campfire. Like, it’s so obvious that he just fucked her against a tree.

After the group splits apart and retires to their individual tents — at the first moment of privacy, he starts attacking her pants and yanking it off her legs. She’s still stoned, so she thinks that he wants to have some more sex. It is disorienting and surprising, when he carefully pours a bit of drinking water onto toilet paper. She jumps a bit because it’s cold — when he runs the makeshift wet wipe between her legs, down her inner thigh area, in between her folds.

When he’s done, he shoves her soiled panties into a plastic bag before hiding it away in his backpack. He squirrels the wet toilet paper away somewhere, too. He digs in her bag, reaching deep for clean underwear before he slides it on her legs. He’s utter perfection.

Then they are lying down next to each other. He jumps a little bit, when she rolls into his armpit and sniffs it. He smells like such a man. She’s sure she smells like a man, too. But she feels loads cleaner after his ministrations. She stifles a yawn.

And then she asks him about sex. Namely, what spurred him on to push for them to have sex in the dirty woods? He just couldn’t wait until they got home?

He tells her that he could’ve waited. Pretty easily. Only because he’s really good at waiting. But in the moment, he was just sick of his constant self-denial. He tells her that he had an inclination — and he just went for it. Part it was that he’s stoned — so he just didn’t care as much about the things he usually has anxiety about. His voice is a little nervous and tight, when he asks her if it was okay.

“Babe, it was very okay.”

“Oh, okay. You are just so dim-witted on weed. I had no idea if you were even home.”

She giggles. “Baby — I was totally home. It was really nice. You fuck so good.”

She can actually feel his eye-roll. And she roughly slaps his chest for it.
“What the —!”

“You’re just ridiculous! Take a compliment, will you?”

She confesses to him that she thinks he’s actually way better at sex than she is — and that’s
something that surprises him. He thinks she’s joking at first. But then she earnestly asks him how he
feels about their sex life.

He blearily tells her that it’s fine. He has no complaints. He’s trying to end the conversation.

She lets the silence wash over them, as she thinks.

He asks her how she feels about their sex life. He sounds nervous and apprehensive — and it just
kills her, that even after all of these years, he has such a complex about the way they — or
specifically he — has sex. Her pulse is hammering in her throat, as she blindly reaches up to palm his
cheek, so she can find his face, so that she can kiss him.

After she breaks the kiss, she repeats to him that he’s really good at sex. Even when she removes all
the emotion and all of the attachment that runs between them — even if she looks at it like a purely
physical thing — he’s just really good at sex. She tells him that she’s thought about this — which she
knows that he loves. He loves when she overanalyzes this shit. But it’s how she makes sense of it all.
She tells him that she thinks that he’s so good at sex because he takes nothing for granted. He has
worked hard at it. He has practiced. He has thought about it. He really tries. And he’s very brave. He
takes big risks.

He mumbles to her that he doesn’t feel particularly brave. Sometimes he still feels scared, buried
underneath all of the want and desire.

She feels like his confession deserves a match. So she tells him that she knows what men talk about,
when women aren’t around. She tells him that sometimes she thinks she’s kind of mediocre at sex
because she’s a conventionally attractive woman. She tells him that she’s pretty enough that she
doesn’t have to be particularly smart, or funny, or useful, or good at sex. She’s decoration. She tells
him that she remembers what he has said to her — that he’s just happy that she lets him have sex
with her — like, that’s his very, very low expectation of her.

“Baby, that’s not what I meant when I said that.”

“I know,” she says quietly. “But I’ve just been thinking about it. The bar is so low for me. And so
high for you. Why?”

“Women just don’t have to be good at sex,” he mumbles.

She raises herself so that look at his face — kinda — in the dark. She presses the front of her body
into the side of his. And she asks him — really, honestly, seriously — what he might want more of,
from her, when it comes to sex.

“Baby, I’m happy with the way we have sex,” he whispers.

“Maybe I’m not,” she says.
She hears him push out a breath. “Shit,” he says.

“Come on, give me some notes.”

“You seriously want to open this Pandora’s box?” he says challengingly.

“I like it when you say sweet and nice things to me,” she grits out, meeting his challenge. She can be brave, too. “You talk very violently sometimes. And it’s real fucking hot, don’t get me wrong. But moments when you tell me that you like to look into my eyes or other girly shit like that — those moments are really, really great, too. But rare. I like it when you tell me I’m beautiful.”

He lightly scoffs. In disbelief. “You know you’re beautiful. It’s obvious. You want me to tell you stuff that’s obvious? It’s obvious that I like your eyes. It’s obvious that I —”

Tears are kind of stinging the back of her eyes. And she keeps her voice even when she interrupts him by saying, “Okay. You’re right. It’s obvious.”

He can tell that she’s crying. He knows that he has made her cry. His sleeping bag makes a rustling sound as he shifts around, freeing his arms fully. They have lame sleeping bags that keep them apart. He reaches out and pulls her close. His lips fall on her chin, before he moves them to her neck, by feel. Her body starts shaking then — as she starts crying in earnest, not hiding it anymore. He holds onto her tightly — pushing all of the air out of her body, trying to condense down her sadness so that it disappears down to nothing.

He doesn’t even know what his fucking problem is. She’s not wrong. To him, it somehow feels safer to keep the things he actually already feels, the observations he’s already making — to himself. Of course he finds her beautiful. He finds her beautiful all the fucking time. He’s been fucking staring at her nonstop, like an obsessive-compulsive creep, since the first moment he met her.

She whispers to him that she knows she’s needy.

It’s a gut punch, right in the solar plexus. He touches her wet face and he tells her that she’s actually not at all needy. She’s actually really cool and chill and independent. He just constantly has to fuck with her mind all the time because he’s a fucking damaged weirdo.

She whispers to him that he’s not damaged.

These are the moments when he can track her love for him. Because she says delusional shit like this. He knows it’s shit she actually believes. And that’s comforting to him. He thinks it’ll help offset all the crazy shit that he believes to be true about himself.

He tells her — yet again — that his brain is a real mess, and he’s full of these mechanisms that are subconsciously and constantly trying to push her away. Because there’s still a part of him that thinks she’s too good for him, that she deserves better. And when she realizes this truth, she’s going to destroy his heart by walking away. He says that he suspects that his stupid brain thinks it’ll cost him less of his dignity and his soul and his humanity when it happens — if he can preserve some secrets. Like how fucking beautiful he finds her — just all over. He doesn’t just mean in looks. Obviously.

“There’s nothing I can say to that,” she mutters. “What can I possibly say in response to that? Other than what I’ve been saying for years — which is I will fucking love you forever.”
“I know that,” he says. “I know that when I’m awake and paying attention. It’s just my fucking brain when it’s on autopilot. It’s a jerk.”

He tells her that he honestly doesn’t care how they have sex. He’s not picky. He is, and he isn’t. He honestly really just is content and jazzed that she lets him stick his body parts in her. It’s still sometimes just crazy to him, that she lets him do the things that he does to her body. It’s really neat and really awesome. It’s like, something he never thought he’d ever have. When he was younger, he never thought he’d have a partner for life. He never thought she’d be so fucking cool. He never thought, in a million years, he’d ever even have the kind of sex that they do have — with him not freaking out and going mental over it constantly. They have normal people sex fairly regularly — and that’s still just nuts to him. So that’s why he doesn’t particularly seek out specifics on how it can improve — on her end — because it’s already so much more beyond what he had expected. It’s like, let’s not look a gifthorse in the mouth.

On his end — he just likes to be good at things. He likes to learn and figure things out. It doesn’t make sense to him — to do things and not do them well at least. It’s also really fun? It’s like, fun to have sex and to try different things and see how it goes?

“But gun to my head —”

“Ha-ha, I love your gun-to-the-head game —”

He tosses her a look in the dark. “So, gun to my head, if I had to give you notes — which I am wholeheartedly against because you’re great, but you seem really fucking bent on this — if I had to give notes, I’d say . . . you give it up to me too easy. I say take off your clothes, and you say okay. And then you strip. And I’m like, whoa, you’re naked already. And it’s like — come on. Make me work for it sometimes. I want to earn that naked body, sometimes.” He braces himself for her response — whatever it will be — he really hopes it’s not more crying.

“Huh,” she says. “That’s really good feedback. Thank you, baby. I will make you work for it!”

She has a slight headache when she wakes up. She’s waking up too fast and it’s hitting her hard. It’s also that weed hangover that she’s heard about. They had stayed up late talking, too. She’s surprised to see that his side of the tent is empty — maybe still slightly warm from his residual body heat. She can hear chatting outside the tent.

It’s still very, very early. She can see the fog against the mountain pines and her breath is coming out in visual puffs. She nearly trips trying to get out of the tent, her movements sluggish and imprecise.

She hears him chuckle. She looks up and sees him watching her struggle getting out. She grins back at him sheepishly, as she gingerly stands all the way up and walks over to where he is hanging out around a stove with Brienne and Jaime.

It smells like coffee — beautiful life-giving coffee — and he hands her his hot cup, which she immediately takes a sip of. They all smell like campfire. She runs her sensitive lips over the stubble
on his chin before giving him a quick kiss good morning.

“Dude,” Jaime says, voice low. “Did you guys hear Drogo and Dany last night?”

“No,” Missy says, grimacing. “Were they having sex loudly or something?”

“No, dude,” Jaime says. “They were arguing. All night. About what — I don’t even fucking know
or care.” He sighs. “This is why I didn’t want her to come.”

As they wait for Dany and Drogo to wake up — because none of them have the balls to shake their
tent and tell them to get their fucking asses in gear — Brienne rehydrates some potato flakes, dumps
in some cooked kielbasa, divides it all into cups, and she calls it breakfast. And it hits the spot. For
the most part, they’ve already packed up their gear — ready to begin the day’s hike. They are falling
behind Jaime’s imposed schedule — and he’s becoming more and more livid about it.

That’s why Grey took Jaime on a quick jog — some quick trail running so that he can burn off some
of that angry energy.

“How’s the house coming along?” Brienne asks, as she adjusts the height of her hiking poles.

“Oh, man,” Missy says. “Stressful. We’re behind schedule, and he’s kind of freaking out about it.
For really arbitrary reasons, too. We’re not exactly losing money yet. He just likes for things to be on
time and stuff.”

Brienne laughs. “They are so similar sometimes! Him and Jaime. That’s why they’re good friends,
huh?”

“Maybe.” Missandei shrugs. “You and I are good friends, too. And we’re pretty different. So it’s not
a necessary formula.”

“I remember when we first moved into our place,” Brienne muses. “I constantly wanted to kill his ass
— over paint color. Over towels. Over the pattern of our bed sheets.”

“Oh, dude! We’re about to embark on that. It’s about time to order finishes. And he’s a psycho that
likes everything to be very minimalist. So he wants everything to be like, the same color. And that
color is white. And I’ve already told him that I don’t want to freaking live in an insane asylum.”

They both spin around when they hear rustling and a grunt — and then the sound of a zipper. When
Drogo pops his head out and sleepily looks around at the cleared space, Brienne waves
you coffee and breakfast. Jaime will chill out a little more if he sees everything is packed up by the
time he gets back.”

“Fuck Jaime,” Drogo grumbles, getting to his feet, stretching. “Fucking anal nutball. I don’t get why
we constantly cater to his insanity.”

“Drogo,” Brienne says patiently. “We all have our quirks. I’m a peacemaker. You’re really bossy.
But we’re not constantly bitching you out about it, are we?”

“Aw shit!” Missandei says. “You just got told.”
He has a lot of nice memories involving water — some of them feature Jaime and Drogo, and most of them feature Missandei. He has one awful memory of water — one really awful one. It’s was after the first time he proposed to her, and they sat with their feet in Addam’s swimming pool and she was just . . . laying everything about them down. She was being so honest about how he had hurt her. And he was so sure — in that moment — that he was losing her forever.

Luckily, she is a forgiving person.

He watches as she unabashedly starts pulling off her sweaty clothes, draping them on a big rock where her pack is situated. She goes down to her sports bra and her panties. The lake is tucked in between these jagged mountain peaks — the water is glacial run off — but warm. The ground is swampy and soft — it’s different from the sandy beaches where he comes from — and where she comes from — but water is water. Water is generally beautiful everywhere.

He hurriedly strips, too, throwing his clothes haphazardly on the rock next to hers, before he runs to catch up to her, his arms already reaching out.

He pulls himself and her — both of them — underneath when his arms make contact with her body, her stomach and then her hips.

She kicks him off and, when he resurfaces, she’s already panting hard and yelling at him, demanding to know if he actually wants her to drown. He’ll be really sorry then, when he goes to jail for accidentally murdering her. He hears the other guys laughing behind them. He laughs, too, and then he apologizes. He swims up to her — and she narrows her eyes at him distrustfully, not sure if he’s gonna mess with her again. He says it too much, maybe, but he tells her that he loves her.

Jaime snorts as he treads water, casting his eyes over to where Drogo and Dany are having some intense conversation — still on semi-dry land. He flips on his back, closing his eyes from the brightness of the sun, and he mutters that it’s become the fucking Drogo and Dany show. Brienne tells him that he’s actually the only one preventing himself from having fun. He weakly protests that he’s having fun — but she’s already swimming away — not in anger — but because she likes to swim. She’s excellent at swimming.

“You’re so fucking annoying,” Jaime hisses to Drogo, after Missandei and Dany disappear into the woods somewhere, to go pee.

“Baby — Jaime,” Brienne says, putting a hand on his arm, trying to pull him back from advancing on Drogo. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” Jaime says. “We’ve been looking forward to this for like, years. And —”
“Well, I’m sorry it’s not meeting your expectations,” Drogo says sarcastically. “Definitely be a child about it.”

“What the fuck, dude,” Jaime says. “Who are you? I don’t even fucking know you anymore.”

“Hey,” Grey says — breaking in — it’s getting too personal. He pushes his body in between Jaime and Drogo, putting his hands on Jaime’s shoulders. “Let’s go take a walk, man,” he says, pushing Jaime back, forcing him to take a couple steps. “Come on, J. Let’s walk and talk.”
Jaime and Drogo fight while camping

Jaime paces back in forth in front of him — this is an image Grey has witnessed countless number of times before. He has memories of an incensed Jaime turning as red as his hats in college. He has memories of an incensed Jaime waving his arms around in the middle of their living room. He has memories of Jaime getting pissed when someone takes too long to tell a story, and he just starts snapping his fingers in people’s faces.

This is just something that Grey accounts for and folds into the list of shit he has to put up with — when it comes to having Jaime in his life. Jaime has a rage issue — Missandei has taught him not to call these things ‘problems.’ She likes to remind him that these are just idiosyncratic things about people that are both good and bad.

Jaime says that he feels like he’s in fucking high school again. He says that Drogo is so fucking emotionally retarded that Drogo’s only fucking arrived at high school-level shit when it comes to fucking relationships and women. It’s not something Grey can nor does he want to disagree with. He just doesn’t see the point in yelling about it. What is the fucking point?

Jaime says doesn’t even have the time to wait for Drogo to catch up and get a clue and be a fucking adult. Drogo is so fucking weird now. He’s so fucking weak and so fucking un-Drogo-like. Jaime says that Drogo doesn’t have to fucking indulge in every fucking emotional whim that some chick has. Drogo doesn’t have to be some gutless bitch that always has to check in with another person before he makes even the most minute decision. Drogo doesn’t have to fucking do that insane swing between happy and depressed because that shit is giving Jaime some serious whiplash. He fucking hates dealing with Drogo when he’s happy because Drogo fucking acts like he’s the only person that has ever been happy before. And he fucking hates dealing with Drogo when he’s in some fucking dour-ass mood because he’s on his fucking period or because he had some sort of argument with a fucking woman. It’s like — learn to stay in the fucking middle area and stop burdening your fucking friends with your high school bullshit. It’s like — if she’s such a fucking asshole and a fucking emotionally abusive shrew — then get the fuck out of that relationship and move the fuck on. Break up with that bitch, a la Brienne Tarth.

“And I hate how I am always the only one that gives a shit about this kind of shit,” Jaime says accusingly, orienting his gaze at Grey. “When fucking Addam got some random woman pregnant — you and Dav didn’t even give a shit — and when you were on fucking drugs — Drogo knew and just let that shit slide for years —”

“I care. He cares,” Grey says plainly. “We just . . . handle this shit differently than you do. What did you think would happen, if you knew I was on drugs, and you blasted into my room and just banned me from them? Like I’m an idiot? You think we’d still friends right now, if you did that to me? That’s shit your dad did to you, man.”

“Oh my God, you did not just bring up my father. Fuck you,” Jaime says dully. “I wouldn’t have blasted into your room, man. I’m not an idiot.”

“You are always itching to fight, man,” Grey says, ignoring what Jaime just said. “I get that it makes
you good at your job, but do you think it’s fucking productive all the time?"

“If I don’t say something — then no one says anything,” Jaime says testily. “Because everyone’s a fucking coward.”

“You did not just fucking call me a coward, man,” he throws back at Jaime. “You think it’s hard to raise a fuss? You think it’s hard to stomp around as a rich white guy talking about how shit isn’t fair? People indulge you in that shit. I can’t fucking do that. First — no one gives a shit when I talk about what’s unfair. Second — I’m just not in the fucking mode of just bitching about shit that is outside of my control. I fucking spent my life just keeping my shit locked down. That kept me busy. We are different, Jaime.”

Dany is looming over her, while Missy’s in mid-stream. The shock of it kind of makes her pee a little on her shoe before she adjusts. It’s a good thing that she’s not very shy or modest. And she already expected to get at least a little bit of pee on her hiking boots at some point. Missandei looks up and smiles weakly at Dany before she finishes, wipes herself with a wet nap, and deposits it into the plastic baggie that she’s been carting around for this. She pulls up her pants as she stands up. “Sup?” she says to Dany carefully. Dany clearly has something to say to her.

“Hey,” Dany says. “So I’m sorry I’m ruining the weekend.”

“It’s okay,” Missandei says, voice a little girly and too high. She figures there’s no point in denying it. Missandei shoves her waste baggie into the pocket of her jacket, intending on just mutely heading back to their camp.

But Dany says, “I like him.”

Oh shit. Crap. They’re about to have a conversation about this. Crap. Missandei slowly turns around to face Dany.

“I think?” Dany shrugs. “Um, we get along well when we’re not talking. Um, when he talks, he just makes me so angry. Because of the things he says about various things sometimes. And so I get a little nuts. Because I don’t even know . . . what I am doing with this guy. He’s not typically the type I go for. He’s like . . . a waiter.”

Missandei puts her hand up to stop Dany’s flow of words. “Dude, don’t even talk about my friend like that.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant . . . I usually go for guys who are conventionally successful.”

Missandei raises her face up, softly laughing in a way that is completely devoid of humor. “I understand now. Why you guys are fighting constantly. Jesus.”

“You get to fucking play the race card, and you get to fucking win all the fucking arguments,” Jaime
“Oh, I’m so sorry I win arguments with the race card,” Grey says, his tone uncharacteristically dripping with mockery — he sounds like Jaime, actually. “Life is just so hard for little Jaime Lannister, isn’t it? It sucks when his fucking supreme lifeview gets challenged, doesn’t it?”

“You’re so fucking mean right now,” Jaime says. “You know what I’m all about, man.”

“And you know what I’m all about, dude,” Grey says right away.

Jaime crosses his arms over his chest and he starts walking, his dusty shoes skimming audibly against the bumpy ground.

“Just — cut Drogo some slack, dude,” Grey says, sighing, his steps hopping a bit as he lightly jogs to keep up with Jaime. “We’ve all been there. We’ve all been really fucking annoying because of a girl. And we’ve all lost our shit at the altar of some girl. And you and I are still with the women who made us lose our fucking minds.” He sighs. “Jaime, you can’t expect him to have all the knowledge and all the wisdom without the experience. You and I have earned what we know. You can’t make him cut ahead to the top. He will go through what he will go through. You bitching at him like you know so much better than he does — just stresses him out and makes him resent you.”

Jaime melodramatically lets out a strangled scream as he punches the air. Like a child who is in the middle of a temper tantrum. Grey is rubbing his face blearily, because of all the emotions in this guy. It is overwhelming sometimes. Jaime is an even bigger girl than Missandei — who is actually a woman. Jaime loudly sighs, and he grits out, “So fucking annoying!”

“Jaime. I don’t know if you remember — so let me remind you. In our darkest moments — you remember who was there for us? Always?”

“Shut up!” Jaime says viciously.

“Drogo was there, man. When Brienne dumped you. When you dropped out of school. When I was coming down off of morphine. When . . . Missandei and I weren’t together. Drogo didn’t stand there and lecture us about how we fucked up. He was just a fucking disloyal bitch and played all sides without discrimination. He supported everyone without discrimination. That’s who he is.”

“Goddamit,” Jaime says, coming to a sudden stop. “Now I feel bad. I hate it! I feel guilty! Fuck! I’m in wrong here! Fuck!”

Grey laughs suddenly — he kind of sees the sun breaking through the clouds — literally and metaphorically. He blinks against the light. He reaches out to grab at Jaime’s blond head. He clunks their heads together a little too roughly, making the both of them reach up to rub the pain from their foreheads. Jaime frowns and says, “Ow.”

“He’s a really sweet guy,” Missy says, testily.

“I know that,” Dany says blankly.

“He’s really smart.”
“I know that too,” Dany says, shrugging. “What was it, about what I said — that bothered you?”

Missy crosses her arms. “You think you’re smarter than he is. You think you’re more capable than he is. You just think you’re better than he is.”

Dany stiffens. She’s silent for a while, looking around at the trees — the ground — the leaves — the dampness of the forest.

In that time, Missandei is just painting all sorts of pictures in her head, about what this woman’s deal is. And she knows that she’s projecting here. She’s completely taking this super personally, because she’s a dumbass. And Dany doesn’t know that. And Terri has said that it’s important to be cognizant of what’s really at work, in these moments of conflict.

“To be frank,” Dany says, “I think I’m better than nearly everyone I meet.” She stands up just a little bit straighter. “I have to. To do what I do.”

Missy flinches a little at that. Because Dany just basically told her that she also believes she’s better than Missandei, who comparatively is not some fucking genius, is not as professionally accomplished, is not as unequivocally respected. Missandei’s just a fucking ordinary, mediocre, normal person.

She uncrosses her arms and shoves them in her jacket pockets — her knuckles hitting her waste bag. And she’s so done with this conversation. She can tell it’s just gonna end up going nowhere if they draw it out. Dany’s a tiny white lady. Who happens to think she’s better than some guy who wholly represents otherness. It’s totally fucked up. Missandei understands the how and the why and the logic of it. And it’s this fucked up intersection between being female and being a person of color where one has to lose. Sometimes Missandei cannot believe she’s still stupid enough — sometimes she just catches herself still believing, like a fucking child, that there are clear wrongs, and there are clear rights, that there is a fucking method to this madness instead of it all just being random happenstance. Horrible shit happens to good people all the time — and Dany’s fucking face is just constantly reminding her of this.

It’s really, really odd sight, but Brienne is kind of huddled up next to Drogo, shoulder to shoulder, on the ground when they all arrive back at camp. Dany is sitting cross-legged on the ground, reading a paperback quietly. And Missandei is across the way . . . playing in the dirt? She’s moving rocks around on the ground.

There’s a modest, smoldering fire at Brienne and Drogo’s feet. They’re talking and laughing quietly together.

Jaime looks like someone slapped him in the face — just stunned.

Grey immediately curves an arm up and over Jaime’s chest, bodily stopping him from doing what he does — going over there, cracking jokes, making it all about him. “They’re doing their own thing. It’s nice. Leave them be for a bit, Jaime.”

Jaime sighs. “I wasn’t going to go over there and ruin it. God, give me a little credit. Do you honestly think I’m like, a little kid that can’t control his impulses?”

“Sometimes,” Grey says, pulling Jaime backward a little into a hug. He grins. “Sorry, man. I don’t
mean to treat you like a little kid sometimes.”

He nudges her with his shoe, standing over her. He asks her if he even wants to know why things are awkward as hell. He grins down at her and he asks her what she has done now. And he’s kind of surprised when her face tilts up and he sees her eyes well up.

Grey asks her if she wants to be left alone or if she wants him around. She thinks about it for a second — they’ve talked about this — they’ve talked about what to do when she gets into one of her funks, which tend to be a little more intense and more frequent, now that she’s off sertraline. She has told him not to indulge her too much in it — she says it freaks her out when people fuss over her too much. It makes her feel really helpless and stupid. So the game plan is to generally just treat it casually.

“I want you around,” she says, sniffling.

They end up hiding out in their tent under the guise of taking a nap. It’s warm during the daytime so they don’t need to huddle up in their sleeping bags. Her hand digs into the elastic waistband of his sweats — fingers lightly cupping his damp, slightly tacky balls — just for comfort — and this is also something he never, in a million years, thought he’d be engaging in with a girl. He never thought he’d just be hanging out with a girl, talking to her, and she’d have her hand down his pants really, really casually — and almost in a non-sexual way.

He pulls back a little bit — fingers quietly unzip her jacket, before they unzip the fleece underneath. His hand is cold, as it dips into her shirt, into her sports bra. It makes her gasp. And he ducks his face down and gently kisses her.

“Do you think I’m unambitious?” she asks when he pulls away.

“Uh, you work like a slave. So no?” he says. “What brought this on?”

“Oh dude, Dany.”

He lightly laughs. “Dude, she fucked with your brain, too?”

“No,” she says airily. “Honestly, she’s just being herself — and she’s like, you know, cool and accomplished and stuff. Her other friends are not like us. They’re like, director-level at some cool tech company that makes robots or whatever.”

“Psh,” he says. “Director-level. Give me three years.”
“Oh my God, we’re not talking about you and your potential,” she whispers, smiling widely at him because she likes it when he talks about being around for the next three years. She likes it when he forgets who he is and ends up subtly bragging about himself. “So cool it. We’re talking about me. And my meager professional accomplishments.”

“Dude, your job is cool.”

“But I’m not like Jaime, you know? I’m not — I didn’t give up a shit ton of money just because of pure conviction. I still work for money.”


She sighs. “I mean, do you ever think about it? I mean, you’re not really passionate about women’s fashion.”

He shrugs. “It’s fine for now.”

“You really never wonder what else you could be doing?”

He leans forward and kisses her cheek. And then he says, “Not really. I don’t really fixate on that sort of stuff. You know I’m not good at long-term planning. I just like to focus on what I’m doing at the moment and just do the shit out of it. And it seems to be working out.”

She gently pulls her hand from his pants — he winces as the sensitive skin of his balls gets dragged along the pads of her fingers for a bit. She raises her hand and encircles her arm around his neck. She presses her forehead against his. She tells him that what sucks about people like them — is that they start so far behind other people. Within her family — she has wildly exceeded all expectations professionally. Her brothers struggled to get through high school. One never graduated. He was killed and no one gave a shit because, well, what’s one less junkie on the streets?

She tells Grey she’s no longer friends with any of the kids she grew up with — because they are all stay-at-home moms to at least three kids by this point, the eldest being 13-years-old. And the very, very low bar for her used to be — for her not to become pregnant before she was married, which was going to be at 17 years old. She was a success story, by not getting pregnant at 16 years old. And she was a superstar — by going to college. And it’s unfathomable that she actually graduated from college and has a fucking white collar job.

“I’m never going to catch up to people like Dany,” she tells him.

He casually asks her if she really needs for him to recap his life for her.

Sex trafficked at a really young age — the effects of which still linger and touches his day-to-day life all the time — a fact that makes him so fucking angry whenever he dares to allow himself to think about it deeply. He essentially has and had no parents. He has no family. He will never claim them. Fuck them all — all the liars that told him he was going to be okay when he wasn’t.

He tells her he knows what it feels like — to start way behind others — to feel like it’s impossible to catch up. He tells her he really, really knows how this feels. He used to feel it most acutely, whenever she was orbiting around him. He used to look at her beautiful face and just wish so fiercely that he could be normal so that he could feel semi-qualified enough to burden her with his presence
— his love — that he could catch up enough to be with her — all the while knowing that it was so fucking impossible. He was so remedial and so broken.

“I was wrong about that,” he says, thumbing away the tears coming out her eyes. “And you were right about it. Thank you for pushing. I love you.”

“I love you,” she whispers back.

“Fuck them all,” he says quietly — intensely. “Fuck their standards. Fuck their way of life. Fuck what is normal and ordinary. Fuck the way they make us feel deficient. We are not deficient. We are not lacking. We will not be participants in a rat race we are destined to lose. I will not allow it.”

He doesn’t even realize he has been crying until she whimpers and holds back a sob, as she stares back at him, as she reaches up and wipes his face. He can count on — now — two fingers, the two times in adulthood he has cried. Both times in her presence.

Jesus Christ, after the super intense conversation with Missandei — which actually tuckered her out so she’s actually sleeping — Grey kind of feels . . . all soft on Drogo. He feels . . . empathetic toward D. So he kinda jokes with his bud as they loom over the tiny stove, heating up water for dinner. Drogo is grumbling about how white food — and he means starches this time around — is just so fucking bad for his fat ass. Grey kind of has to bite down his laugh, and he tells Drogo that it can’t be easy being Drogo.


“You are, you are,” Grey says, pressing his palm into Drogo’s shoulder. “Don’t forget you are also shitty at taking criticism.”

Drogo tosses Grey a lackluster glare — before he sighs heavily. “She offered to bankroll the food cart,” he says, really reluctantly.

“What? No, she didn’t.”

“Technically, she offered to invest in it after seeing my business plan.”

“That’s what you’ve been fighting about?” Grey says.

“Yeah.” Drogo drops his voice to a whisper. “I am a fucking for-real prostitute.”

“Holy shit.” Grey shakes his head. His brain is clicking together all of the pieces — all of Drogo’s overwrought masculine defensiveness, all of Drogo’s mental and emotional deficiencies when anything comes close to even touching his apparently lack of self-sufficiency. Drogo cannot possibly be cool with letting his girl pay for his shit. It’s just not how Drogo was made.

And it’s something Grey doesn’t really relate to. As Missandei likes to say, he has very few man hang-ups. He cooks. He cleans. He sews. He irons. He washes dishes like a mofo. He has actually menstruated out his butt. And he would honestly love it if Missandei was a gazillionaire and just paid
for all of his shit. He attributes his lack of man hang-ups to his penis issues. She likes to giddily say it’s not penis issues. It’s just something innate and awesome about him.

“D — you know I have no patience for this,” Grey says. “I think you should make money decisions with your head, not your gut.” Grey rubs Drogo on the shoulder. “But you know who’d be really good for you to talk to about this? Missandei. She went through a lot of this torturous shit with me and her pride and money, not that long ago.”

“Man, Missandei doesn’t get it. I mean, she might understand a sliver of it. But she’s a woman. They don’t feel the kind of pressure that we do to, you know, be the head of household.”

Okay, so now Grey completely sees why Dany and Drogo have been fighting.

The hike out is not as fun as the hike in. The hike out feels longer, too — because they’re going ten miles straight back to the car. They smell bad. They’re dirtier and grimier. They have the weight of experience on their backs. Jaime and Drogo aren’t really saying much to each other — Jaime apologized — but it really didn’t bring back the fun — the jokes.

“You know what white people like?” Brienne suddenly says — somewhere in mile five. “Backpacking through the woods and pretending they are poor and don’t have homes or hot food — just for a weekend though.”

Jaime jaw drops and his laugh is low and insane and evil-sounding. “Oh my God,” he says. “I fucking love you. That’s so accurate that it like, hurts me.”

Missandei is giggling, reaching forward to squeeze Brienne’s hand. “Good one, babe! It’s funny because it’s true! That’s why Black people typically don’t camp.”

“What else ya got?” Jaime asks.

“Guys,” Brienne says. “It took me like, the better part of the hour to come up with that one. That’s it. I’m tapped out.”

“You know what white people like?” Drogo says, before pausing for effect. “Over-analyzing relationships.”

“Hey, is that directed at me?” Dany says.

Drogo sighs. “No, man. It’s a joke. It’s directed at all of us. And the joke is that half of us here aren’t white, but we still fixate on relationships. It builds off Brienne’s joke. We’re all backpacking. Even though we’re not white. That’s why it’s funny.”

“I don’t get it at all,” Dany says.

Drogo shrugs. “Okay. I guess I’m just not funny. So I will never talk ever again.”
“Oh my God!” Grey says. “Shut up, you guys! Your bickering is so fucking annoying!”

“I didn’t understand Brienne’s joke, either,” Dany adds. “I’m not a very funny person. So I don’t understand a lot of jokes in general.”

Drogo’s face breaks out into a smile at that. He lightly laughs because she’s so serious. He reaches out and pats Dany on the back. “Well, it’s good to know your weaknesses, along with your strengths,” he says.

Jaime groans. “Oh my God, I have internet connection again. Bye, fuckers. I’m tapping back into the Matrix now.”

Missandei squeals, bouncing on her feet. “I can check in on Momo 2.0!”

“Missandei!” Grey snaps. “Get off the bed! You’re gonna stink it up!”

Missandei giggles nonstop, thrashing around on the mattress with an over-excited Momo 2.0 who is hopping around back and forth on the bed, occasionally nipping at Missandei with kisses on the face, occasionally lunging at Missandei, 2.0’s butt raised in the air, tail wagging like a fan. Missandei covers her head from the onslaught, laughing and snorting. “Oh my gosh, you’re so cute. My baby girl. You’re so happy to be home with us. I’m so sorry I left you alone. Baby, were you scared without Mommy? I wanted to call you every night, but I had no cell service. My baby. So cute. I love you so much, boo boo bear. Did you make new friends?” Missandei holds Momo 2.0’s body still. “Tell me about them.”

Grey slowly shakes his head. “Babe. She’s not going to talk back to you. You know she never will, right?”

Missandei ignores him. She peppers 2.0’s face with kisses and she says, “Daddy, of all people, should know there are ways of communicating that don’t involve talking. Right, boo boo? He’s such a little bitch sometimes.”
When Brienne smoothly ducks into the passenger seat of Missandei’s car, she casually says, “Yeah, so you and I have something new in common.”

Missandei grins, putting the car in reverse. They are heading to Jhiqui’s to set up for the baby shower. “What’s that, Brie?”

“We’ve both been proposed to in the most spectacularly inappropriate fashion, by idiots who think it’s romantic when they call their significant others bitch and ho.”

“Whoa,” Missandei says in awe. “What did you say to him? Are you guys engaged!”

“No!” Brienne says incredulously. “I told him he was being stupid. And then we finished having sex. And then I ordered a pizza for dinner because I was hungry.”

Jhiqui is about to burst. Her feet are swollen, her cankles are swollen, her face is swollen — her stomach is definitely swollen. And Missandei finds that she’s actually not really into baby showers. That’s probably why she never made a baby-shower-party mix, one that probably would’ve included too much Pitbull.

A bunch of Jhiqui’s former coworkers are in attendance. There are so many cupcakes. Missy’s sure she’s gonna get fat just being around all of this buttercream. Jhiqui’s having a little boy, so all of the stuff is blue — which kind of bugs Missandei on some level. Mostly because Jhiqui used to be such a feminazi and would’ve sent out an email telling everyone to stop pigeonholing her unborn baby into a traditional gender role.

And now Jhiqui’s all begrudgingly a Stepford wife, in a huge mansion, with a lot of white lady friends that she made through Nick’s bank job. They talk about stuff like which sports quarterback is hot, when neighbors don’t mow their lawns or weed their garden regularly, how annoying it is when the Starbucks barista misspells their name, and how long Jhiqui should breastfeed.

That last one inspired a twenty-minute debate. And Missy wanted to go buy a vat of acid and just melt her fucking head in it forever.
Early-20s Jhiqui would not be down with this. Early-30s Jhiqui is very tolerant of this pointless bullshit.

Sometimes — listening to herself, Missy finds that she sounds *so much* like Grey. It actually scares her. She’s afraid they are conjoining into one offensive mega-hot, latte-colored blob-person.

And perhaps the unease Missandei feels is actually related to the distance she feels from her really good friend. Maybe that’s why she hasn’t been gung ho about this baby — it’s just another thing that will exacerbate the distance.

God, she’s so immature. But baby shit is so boring. And she doesn’t care what color or pattern the gazillions of baby blankets are. The gift pile in the middle of the living room is so totally first world, white people shit. Naathi don’t have baby showers. She doesn’t really know what they do because she was always away or too young, when her brothers and sisters-in-law had their babies — but she’s sure that Naathi do not color-coordinate the shit out of table settings and buy devices exclusively made to dispose diapers. Can’t Jhiqui just bundle up diapers and throw them in the fucking garbage can? Is that not how it works? Naathi women do cloth diapers anyway. Not because it’s eco-friendly. Naathi don’t really have a strong concept of the mechanics of revering nature — just the romanticism. It’s just that cloth diapers are cheap as fuck because they are reuseable. Naathi also women strap their newborns to their backs as they work the fields for a gajillion hours a day because they’re poverty-stricken and they need to grow vegetables in order to survive.

“It’s a wiper warmer!” Jhiqui says, eyes wide as she shows everyone the latest package she has opened.

What is this shit?

She giggles and tries to orient her body away from him as he paws at her bare legs, trying to get his hands underneath her shirt. She laughingly tells him that she’s trying to feed them. What is he going to eat if their food burns on the stove?

He tells her he’s going to eat her. Which generally makes her lose her footing a little bit — she has to hold onto the fridge handle to keep from sinking to the ground. He stalks up to her, and he tells her that she looks really, really pretty today.

It makes her release out a loud laugh — a body-shaking laugh at his transparent nod to that conversation they had about sex during camping. He takes advantage and pulls her butt back — rubbing it it against the front of his pants, as his hands dip in and starts pulling the tail of her shirt out of her shorts.

She indulges in this a little bit, spinning around and slanting her mouth over his, kissing him all wet as vegetables sizzle in a pan — dangerously — beside them.

“God, you are so, so beautiful,” he says slyly, pulling away. He bites down on his bottom lip and smiles at her. He runs his thumb over her cheekbones. “I love looking into your eyes.”

“You bastard.” She laughs and swats at him. “Shall I play hard-to-get then?”

“Oh, God no,” he says. “Not right now. Right now, I actually want it badly. And right away. So... go take off all your clothes and meet me in the bedroom.”
She leans into him, standing on her tiptoes as she sucks face with him for long minutes, until the smoke detector goes off.

Even though she’s the size of a fucking whale — her words, not Missy’s — Jhiqui insistently invites them over for one of her and Nick’s famous dinner parties. It’s the ol’ regular crew — Doreah and her boyfriend Tank — a big Black guy who’s dark as night — whose real name is actually Timothy. There’s Jaime and Brienne. And Clea, who is going stag because Jhiqui banned any potential Match.com date that Clea might bring. Jhiqui says she’s too uncomfortable and cranky to try to integrate a new couple this go-round. Usually she likes to match-make friends, but she has no patience for that sort of shit at the moment. So tonight, it’s good old familiarity.

“Which breeds contempt,” Jaime lightly says, picking up the glass of wine that Nick slides to him.

Jhiqui rolls her eyes.

“Do you want to touch it?”

He’s kind of startled — more at the words than her sudden presence. He saw her waddling up to him very slowly — so it’s not like she surprised him with a sneak-attack. Grey turns to Jhiqui.

“I saw you eyeing it like my guts are gonna get ripped out by an alien monster.”

He gives her a look, sipping from his own wine glass. “You’re projecting there.”

She grins at him. And then she spontaneously reaches out and grabs his hand, lightly squeezing, lightly tugging him closer. She lays his hand on her round belly. It feels tight like a drum, or a blown up balloon. That’s it. It’s weird. “It feels . . . weird,” he says.


He stiffens.

And then she swats him lightly in the arm. “I’m kidding! God, it’s totally weird. Just wait ‘til you guys go through this yourselves. A lot of stuff is going to be way fucking weird.” Then, she goes back to his arm, rubbing her hand up and down his sleeve. “Dude, so you’re still working out and stuff, huh? Nice. Missy's a lucky lady. Nick doesn't work out. He'd rather spend his evenings catching up on his shows. I bet you don't watch much TV, do you? Unless you're watching TV at the gym.” She laughs — at herself. “God, pregnancy brain.”

“I don’t watch a lot of TV,” he says, clearing his throat. “And I like how you alternate between yelling at me and kind of hitting on me,” he deadpans. “It’s really disorienting and scary.”
Clea tells them that she’s swearing off men for a while. She’s gonna work on herself. She might travel. She might go to a foreign country. Do some eating, praying, and loving. She might pick up a new hobby. Who knows? Maybe she will learn that she’s actually really talented at something.

It all sounds a little desperate — which is something Clea is aware of. She’s laughing nervously into her wine glass.

Nick smiles kindly, reaching over to put his hand on Clea’s. He says, “That sounds like a really good plan. And when you’re ready, I might have some friends I can introduce you to.”

“Oh, who are they?” Clea says automatically. “Tell me about them.”

Perhaps made braver by all the hormones swirling in her body, or perhaps because she’s not currently hot-bodied and sexually desired by heterosexual men — there’s something that has been liberated inside of Jhiqui.

She holds her stomach as Nick, Grey, and Tank fiddle around with dessert in the kitchen. And she’s telling the rest of them that she’s been strangely super horny, as her due date looms. She says that she’s been told, by friends and by her own mother, that the vagina dries up to a desert and essentially closes up for business — if not physically, then metaphorically — the closer it gets to go time. But Jhiqui’s actually been experiencing a bit of an uptick, in terms of sexual desire. She’s uncomfortable as fuck — that’s for sure. But she’s also really down to get some.

Jaime is like, sitting there, listening to this with interest — leaning forward on his elbows, saying, “Oh, really? Tell us more,” to spur Jhiqui on.

“Yeah,” Jhiqui says. “But Nicolas is really not into it. He says he doesn’t want to hurt the baby by boinking it on the head with his peen. And I’m like, honey, your dick is really nowhere near that big. Don’t worry. And then he says stuff like he doesn’t want to disturb me and the baby, with me in my ‘condition.’” Jhiqui does air quotes. “That’s like totally sexist, right?”

“Totally,” Jaime says. “If he were a feminist, he’d obviously mount you and stick it in.” Jaime is obviously trolling her. “It’s like, why doesn’t he just lock you in a room and bed-bound you until it’s time to give birth?”

“Right?” Jhiqui says, slapping her hand down on the table. “Seriously! So you get it, Jaime.” Jhiqui obviously is not picking up on Jaime’s assholery. Pregnancy brain.

“For the record, if I were your husband, I’d have sex with you no matter how pregnant you are,” Jaime says. “Because I want to support your needs, physically and emotionally. That’s what being a good partner is all about.”

“Thank you, Jaime!”
She smiles up at him as he sets a plate of cake and a cup of coffee down. It’s a gluten-free chocolate mousse cake that Nick just went all out on — in terms of sourcing the chocolate and lovingly hand-grinding cacao nibs and all that. And she and Grey are sharing. Because they always share dessert. Because if she has a fucking plate to herself, she will scarf it down like the inner fatty that she really is.

She lightly tugs on his sleeve to get him to sit down — so they can inhale this shit already. Her hand automatically goes up to cup his cheek for a second, when it’s within reach.

“God, you guys are so into each other,” Jhiqui mutters from across the table. “It’s so fucking disgusting.”

“It really is,” Clea says. “It reminds me that I’m all alone.”

Jhiqui ignores Clea, looks to Nick. “Remember when we were in love?” she says to him.

He tosses her back a perturbed look. “Very funny,” he says sarcastically.

“We’ll see how much you love each other once there’s a parasite growing in between your love,” Jhiqui says to Grey and Missy, around a mouthful of mousse.

“Honey, can you eat slower?” Nick says. “Savor it.”

Jhiqui gives him the hand. “Chill, nerd.” Then she shovels another big forkful into her mouth.

Jaime leans over and lightly taps the table in front of Missy. His face is smiling and his eyes are bright — and he whispers, “You are looking into your future!” And then he says, “Ow,” when Brienne shoves him into the table.

“I’m so excited for the wedding!” Doreah says.

Missandei clears her throat. She’s kind of drunk. Because Jhiqui keeps refilling her glass. Pregnant ladies who are former drunks — Missy has found — still love being around alcohol. So her friend has been living vicariously through everyone else.

They must have plowed through like, ten bottles of really nice wine already. That’s more than one bottle per person. They are on their way to being frat-drunk. And Missy has been urging Nick to start pulling out the cheap supermarket bottles, so he doesn’t waste so much great wine on their deadened palates. Nick’s been scandalized. He says he doesn’t buy cheap wine.

Missy lightly taps her wine glass with her dessert fork — like how they do at weddings in the movies. Grey is beside her, really, really amused, his thumb brushing against the back of her neck. They are definitely having sex when they get home. Foregone conclusion.

But first — “I have an announcement to make. And it’s a really important one.”

All the eyes at the table turn to Missy.

“Because the person that this announcement concerns really loves public spectacles and loves to have all the attention focused on him. So I wanted to make this announcement special for him.”
“Oh my God!” Brienne says, slurring in awe, staring at her. “You’re pregnant!”

“What?” Missy says quizzically. “No way! I am not! How irresponsible do you think I am? I have been drinking like Drogo. I’ve been drinking like my dad doesn’t love me.” She snickers. “Can we make that joke yet? Is it still too soon?”


“Jaime,” Missy says — focusing on the actual man in question. “Grey and I have been talking about it. And we don’t want to pay someone to do this. So will you officiate our wedding?”

Jaime shoots up to his feet, nearly knocking his chair over. “Oh my God! ARE YOU SERIOUS!”

“Real talk, Nick,” Jaime says. “Why won’t you have sex with your lovely wife?”

Brienne hits him again. He turns to her — annoyed — and he pointedly says, “If you have something to say, use your words.”

She glares back at him, a flush lightly blooming on her cheeks.

Nick — with his face also flushed — still manages to convey general awkwardness and discomfort at the question, even though he is completely plastered. He turns to Jhiqui, and he says, “Can you not talk about our sex life during dinner parties?”

“Sweetie, you knew when you married me — what a loudmouth I am. I can’t keep these things to myself.”

Nick frowns, then rubs his face tiredly. “Sorry, guys. I don’t mean to be a downer.”


Missandei’s hand is squeezing his bicep — her short, blunt nails are pinching into his skin — as she urgently stares at him all wide-eyed, as she uses those eyes to force him to look.

At the fucking carnage.

When cornered about it, Nick confesses that he is reluctant to have sex with his wife — not because he’s actually afraid he’d boink the baby on the head — but honestly because sex is so different now. Her body is different. It feels different.

And he’s been grappling with this internally — he feels like a horrible person — but he’s not currently very attracted to her. He doesn’t find pregnancy to be a sexy thing.

Doreah and Clea gasp at that.

Nick uncomfortably says he knows. He feels like a jackass. Obviously pregnancy is a beautiful
thing. And obviously it’s a minor miracle that his wife is creating another human being in her body. Obviously he loves his wife so much. And he already loves their child.

He has had a hard time feeling sexually attracted to her. She looks like someone’s mom, just like really maternal. And it’s not like they don’t bang. They do. Just not as often as she’d like. She’d like to do it every day. Sometimes multiple times a day. It’s a bit much for him. And he already knows he’s scum of the Earth. He’s a horrible human being. He knows. But that’s why.

Jhiqui is sobbing noisily at the table, even though she’s the only sober one. She tells them that it’s all due to fucking hormones, as Doreah awkwardly tries to hug her from the side. Nick alternates between being completely silent and tortured — and profusely apologizing to his wife. Jhiqui keeps wiping at her eyes and telling her husband that he was just being honest — and she knows that she pushed him into this. So she kind of deserves it. And then her face crumples up, and she just starts sobbing again. And she screams, “I’m not hot anymore! I’m a cow!”

Which makes them all flinch. And Grey and Missandei are nowhere near sober enough to drive home. God. He’s stuck here. Was this Nick and Jhiqui’s fucking master plan all along? To lure him with the promise of good food, get him drunk, and then hold him hostage as they hash out their personal shit in front of an audience?

Brienne shoves Jaime, who shoots her another red-hot glare before he slowly and reluctantly says to Jhiqui, “You’re not a disgusting cow.”

“I didn’t say I was disgusting!” Jhiqui cries. “I said I was just a cow. Do you really think I’m disgusting? Oh my God.”

“Jaime,” Brienne hisses through her teeth.

“I’m not here to give people validation!” he says, stressed out. “Why does she need validation on her looks from me anyway? I’m a fucking dude.”

“Because it doesn’t mean much coming from me,” Brienne says.

“Babe —”

“No, asshole. That was not a sad thing about my looks. That was in reference to the fact that she and I are friends, and I say nice shit to her all the time so it’s white noise by now, asshole.”

“Oh, great,” Missandei says in a daze, loosening her nails from Grey’s arm. “Everyone’s fighting now.”

“I mean, we’re still good,” Doreah says cheerfully, smiling over at Tank.

“I’m still single!” Clea says, waving her hand. “I wish I had someone to say really mean things to.” Her face is steady for a moment — before she cracks into a smile.

They stayed at Jhiqui and Nick’s for way too long because they had to wait for Grey to feel comfortable enough to drive home.
And by the time Missandei mindlessly strips down, by the time he blankly strips down, after they take 2.0 out for a quick walk and a potty, after they brush their teeth and she takes off her face with a makeup wipe, after a distinct lack of foreplay because he feels so lazy — he pushes himself into her. It’s a little bit of a rough go, getting him in. He pauses — as she admits to him that she’s slightly more sleepy than she is horny. But she’s also softly encouraging him to keep going, don’t stop. She tells him she’s banking on the sex waking her up a little.

And it does. After a few strokes — it’s easy and smooth and so, so nice. She’s stretching out languidly, naked in their bed as her hands start roaming over his bare body. They are having slow missionary sex with their bodies close together. Every stroke results his chest rubbing against hers, and that is nice. She can hug him and she does — and that is nice, too. “I hope you learned a valuable lesson today,” she tells him softly, before kissing his stubbly cheek.

“Yeah. Jaime is right,” he mutters, his face close to hers. “Pregnant women are fucking bananas.” They both moan in unison, when he takes one of her legs and hikes it up higher, getting himself deeper inside of her. The skin on his face tingles a little bit. He wants to shiver. “Babe, spoiler alert — I’m exhausted,” he says. “We’re not doing anything fancy. You’re gonna come. Then I’m gonna come. Then we’re passing out. And you’re in charge of your own fucking orgasm because I just can’t right now.”

She grins. He tells her he’s been drinking a lot — so she probably has a good amount of time to figure her shit out. He can feel that he’s a ways off from finishing.

“So, what’s the lesson I was supposed to learn?” he says, prompting her.

“Oh.” She runs her hands down his back before she grabs his ass — she’s messing with him by holding him to her body, throw his pacing off. He rolls his eyes and he just full-on stops. He stops having sex with her and just holds himself still inside of her. Her smile widens. She kisses his neck before she kisses his mouth. She smells amazing. She tastes amazing. She smells like boozy sweat. And she tastes salty and boozy. “You were supposed to learn that everyone has some hidden issue with sex.”

He chuckles — quietly. “Good God. Your point has been made. Repeatedly. And not at all subtly. Shit. I get it.”

She laughs, before she tilts her hips and generally uses her lower body to fuck him, to get him to continue the sex, before she moans, before she buries her moan against his mouth.

And then she whispers to him that she doesn’t really have to come. He touches her face. She tells him she’s pretty tired. She just wants to feel him fuck her. That’s nice, too. She just wants to feel his hot, thick, sexy dick going in and out of her. And she wants to hold his fucking insane body and touch all the sweaty, damp bits of it — she lightly skims her fingers down his ass, cupping it before she swipes four of her fingers through his crack quickly like it’s a credit card reader. It lightly startles him. His eyes widen a little in the dark. And he sees her grin maliciously as her voice pitches lower, as she says she really likes how his balls lightly slap her ass every time he thrusts into her. The words actually hit straight at the things in question — his swallows the dryness in his throat as his balls seize up and tighten. He’s trying to think of something to say back to her — but she’s always been better at this than he is — at propelling the sex forward with just words. Words are not really his thing.

She reaches down and tries to touch his balls — but the angle is awkward and her hand is a total barrier to smooth and even fucking. And she tells him that she wants to feel him explode like a geyser inside of her. He can see that she tries not to laugh at that because she’s such a dork. He’s so fucking in love with her. She tells him he’s gonna come inside of her, and then she’s gonna pass out, satiated. Those are her goals for the night.
His expression must be one of awe and disbelief — as he listens her dirty talk. He deliberately starts
to slow down his pace, his strokes becoming long, slow, and torturous.

He gradually comes to a complete stop.


He laughs as he pulls out of her. “Nope. You didn’t miss it.” And then he smoothly lowers himself
on the bed, right next to her. He taps her on her sternum, before his hand and his fingers dig into her
skin, clawing their way down down her chest. He rubs her stomach.

And then he gently rolls her over and pulls her into his body, spooning her. His erection is slowly
softening against her ass. He pulls the blanket up higher. He kisses her shoulder. He lightly cups a
breast — in what she likes to call a comfort hold. He tells her he loves her so much. And Jesus
fucking Christ, they are both psychotic. “Go to sleep, baby,” he says.


“Oh, I know,” he says dryly. “I love your tight body, too.”

“What if it gets really, really fat?”

He buries his audible laugh into the base of her neck. “Well, I assume that after you have our
hypothetical baby, you’d get this body tight again — within a month of giving birth, yes?”

“Oh my God, shut up.”
Someone has babies on the brain.

Missandei makes him write and send out the note because — as she has said — he’s not pulling his weight with the wedding shit.

So he emails their guest list to remind them all to not buy him and Missandei any gifts because frankly, they already have all the shit they want and need — and also, he’s really picky about stuff, and he doesn’t trust their taste.

He and Missandei have to send out these occasional reminders because people like Tanja pull him aside right before lunch to ask him — seriously — where are he and Missandei registered?

He also reminds their guests that kids aren’t invited, so leave them at home. This — coupled with the fact that this is a destination wedding, and they’re asking people to fly all the way to the ghetto of Myr — Missandei’s words, not his — makes this a very unappetizing endeavor for many of their closest colleagues. Missandei has already been gradually whittling down the guest list over the last half-year or so. It’s getting to be the final push — maybe they can really pull this down to like, only thirty guests or so.

Missandei had the balls to not invite her parents. Because it’d make her grandma and brothers really uncomfortable and potentially angry. She has said that her wedding is a no-drama zone. Adara and Kamil were invited though — but unsurprisingly, their parents were pissed that they aren’t being honored as parents of the bride, so Adara and Kamil cannot come to the wedding.

It was something that Missandei apparently just shrugged off. She said this all would matter more to her if they were having this wedding for them. But as it stands, they are having this wedding for her grandma. And what are her parents going to do? Suddenly start rejecting the money that she sends them every month out of pride? She’d love to see them do that.

Grey copies and pastes the list that Missandei had already written out previously — a list of budget motels, higher-end hotels, and some rental houses that their guests might consider staying at. There is nothing even three-star in the area of Myr that she lived in. She told him that people can do their own goddamn research, if they want to stay forty minutes away at some Hyatt.

After he hits send — just a few minutes later, an email comes in from Addam. And Addam is emotional — conveying such emotion in just a few short sentences. He says he thought that Pippa was allowed to come.

And Grey rolls his eyes and shakes his head on his end. And he writes back to tell Addam he’s a fucking idiot. Of course Pippa can come.
There’s a light knock on his office door, which is always either wide open or ajar, unless he’s having a one-on-one with someone. Barristan pokes his head in. His boss is grinning, hands casually pushed into his trouser pockets. Selmy says, “How serious are you about no gifts? Because I’ve gotten you something already.”

Grey groans.

“Relax. After eight years of working together, I know how that mind works,” Barristan says. “I got you five days — five extra days of paid time off.”

“But —”

“Brian will take care of your accounts for those five days. Christ, it’s just a week. So go early. Spend time with the family. Or stay later — spend time with the family.”

“You fucking filthy bitch,” he says in awe. And then when his ears catch up with his mouth, he laughs in reflex — God, he doesn’t even realize what he’s saying to her during sex half of the time. He’s been extra cognizant of it lately, and he constantly shocks himself — when he actually listens to himself say these really horrible things to her.

And he thinks about how compatible they are — sexually and otherwise — that her eyes will darken and her body will start throbbing in response to whatever horrible thing he has said to her.

And he grinds down his teeth and bites back a groan as she sinks her hot mouth back down over his dick and points her ass back at his face. “I love you,” he grunts out, trying — with effort — to keep it clean and sweet. “I love having sex with you. This feels so great. Thank you for letting me have sex with you.”

He can hear and feel the vibrations of her ensuing laugh. He feels veins popping — cords stretching — sweat breaking his skin. And his eyes drift back to her body, at one of his favorite parts of her body, exposed and propped up in front of his fucking face. She recently got waxed. He has told her he doesn’t care. He has told her that the hair keeps most of her smell locked in, which is nice. She had stared at him at that and had said, “Whoa.”

But he also likes this — this insane, lurid, unobstructed view of everything.

He thrusts up into her mouth — a little too roughly — choking her on purpose — making her body, her ass, bounce on top of him. She squeaks and then lifts off his dick, coughing, reclining back slightly.

He takes the opening. He pushes his head forward, propping himself up on an elbow, all teeth — she’s so fucking swollen and so ready for it — and he bites down on whatever he can get to — on whatever bit of skin and sex that he can get to — and she shouts in pain. His arm around her lap, wrapped around her thighs, keeps her in place, as he dips his tongue into her body.

“Oh my God,” she mumbles in a daze. She makes him grin when she indulgently grinds her body backwards into his mouth, before she yanks herself away. Before she lightly kicks him in the chest, knocking him back down into lying position.

She turns around so she’s facing him. Their headboard rattles as she grabs ahold of it. It’s on their list
of shit to buy — a new bed — they just can’t decide on what they both want because he is psychotic and she is opinionated. He knows this. Her knees are on either side of his hips. And he smiles up at her, knowingly. Ever since their talk, in which he just grasped at straws — honestly, it was just some random minute shit because he doesn’t even have any standards when it comes to getting fucked by her — she’s been really enthusiastically taking his critique to heart. Sex has become some sort of game. And he has fucking stumbled across the one fucking game in the whole fucking universe that he actually likes.

A lot of the things they do are a little twisted, a deviation from their original intention. She reminds him that he’s not supposed to touch her, as she touches herself — as her hand runs over her own chest, down her body, toward the apex of her legs, dipping in.

And then she smears her arousal — her fingers — messily on his body, over his stomach. She laughs as she sort of fingerpaints on him.

He says, “God, you’re so pretty.” It’s an ongoing joke — but it’s also deeply true. And more honestly, he earnestly says, “Babe, you’re so awesome. Seriously. You are so cute and so beautiful and so funny. You’re a fucking lunatic. And I love it.”

She smiles back at him — just touched with a little bit of bashfulness — and that just fucking kills him. She sits comfortably on his stomach, straddling it. Her wet, warmth just leaks onto him. She’s bending her face down so her lips touch his. The kiss is deep, slow, thorough. Her fingers stutter down his face, tacky from touching sweat and herself. He can smell her strongly — it’s a heady and familiar scent.

“Can we?” he asks, being sure to keep his tone polite and kind. “Please?”

“Please what?”

He grins. “Can we please make love? With each other?”

The face she makes in response makes him laugh. She scrunches up her nose — her pursed lips pink, shiny, and puffy — skimming his cheek as she gets back to her knees. She grabs onto their headboard — they are both jarred into laughing when it tilts off the wall and throws her off balance, her chin lightly bonking against the top of his head. And his hands come to grab her hips, as he helps maneuver her over his hard-on. He tries to get her to sit down, but she resists.

“Remember why that’s broken in the first place?” she asks him, coyly.


She reaches in between her legs, finding him, stroking him. He groans and kind of lightly thrusts up into her hand. His face feels like it wants to explode into a sweaty mess, as she lines them up, as she lowers herself just about an inch, over the head of his dick. She’s warm and lovely and, God, he just wants to get fully in there. And she’s using her own hand as a stop. And it is just not enough.

He groans out his general displeasure as his hands try to shove her hips down again. “Come on,” he says. “Please.”

She palms the back of his head with her free hand — pressing her breasts into his face, into his mouth. He just shuts his eyes and bites down because she fucking sucks — and this is so fucking good.

She lifts up, completely off him. His dick is immediately cold from all of the air around it.
And he lifts his face from her chest and says, “What the fuck! Come on! Missandei! Jesus Christ, this is not what I fucking meant when I said play hard to get!”

Her hand is still on his throbbing dick, squeezing it, holding it stationary. She’s smirking at him — her voice soft and girly and low, when she asks, “Do you remember back in the day, when I couldn’t even get you to stick your cock in my cunt?”

“Baby,” he says, squeezing his eyes shut again. “Please don’t call it that. It’s so harsh.”

“Babe, that’s not the point,” she says primly. “I was asking you a question. Do you remember?”

“Of course I remember!” he shoves out, frowning. “It fucking sucked. I was stupid. What do you want me to say about it? I’m sorry. Obviously we should’ve been fucking each other blind from the moment we met.”

“Yes,” she says, trying not to laugh. “On the table. In the language center.”

“In the language center,” he repeats miserably.

“As we conjugated verbs.”

“I want to conjugate your verb,” he mumbles.

The sound she makes as she sinks down on him is desperate, keening, high-pitched, and her throat is exposed. He presses his mouth against the column of her neck and he says, “Yes, more of this, please,” as he thrusts up into her. He shifts her — changing the angle — it’s shallower — just too eager to get his mouth on her mouth again. He wraps her legs around his back. He’s just seated inside of her. She’s seated in his lap. And he kisses her — he just can’t stop kissing her today — he can really, really, really make a baby with this one. He’d be very, very okay with that.

She asks him if he wants to do something special for his thirtieth. She reminds him that he has actually never celebrated his nameday before — at least, not anyone outside of mostly Jaime and the weirdass dinners that they do. She asks him if he might want to combine their namedays — because his fake one happens to coincide with her real one. They’re just a month apart. Maybe they can do a cutesy, obnoxious couple thing.

He grumbles and tells her that they’re already doing that wedding thing and that marriage thing — how many fucking things must he celebrate in a fucking year?

And again — she reminds him that he was the one who fucking repeatedly proposed to her and bullied her into getting married. She tells him she gets really sick of him playing the part of the exasperated man in their relationship, like she’s his nagging wife who prevents him from having fun and from being adorably irresponsible. She gets enough of that shit from everyday life — with people assuming things about her just because of the way she looks and dresses — but then she gets to come home and deal with him making her feel like she’s fucking crazy pants.

“Baby. Baby baby baby,” he says really quickly, laying a calming hand on her arm. “So you are saying that you’re really going to force me to celebrate two things in a fucking year? Uncool! You are such an uptight shrew.”
Her eyes go wide, and she screeches at him — her fist automatically raises up as his eyes reflect glee. And he’s always so much faster than she is — so she’s already annoyed when he runs away from her fist. She feels herself tipping over from the jarring weight transfer — because she’s wearing heels. When she realizes she’s actually falling — it’s too late. She’s already hit the ground.

“Fucking shit,” he whispers to himself, as he carefully repositions the ice-pack over her ankle. “Fuck,” he says, after he lifts the pack and sees how swollen her foot has become.

“It’s definitely sprained,” Missandei mutters, shaking her head against her hand.

“God. I am so sorry, baby. I was . . . just trying to piss you off. Because you’re so cute when you’re mad. I just didn’t expect that you’d fall down. And I told you those heels are dangerous. I’ve been telling you for years that you’re gonna trip and break your ankle. You never listen. And now look! Look what happened!”

“This is your fucking apology to me!” she screams at him. “Your fucking apology is an I-told-you-so? You want to see me mad? I’m fucking mad!” She points to her own face. “Is this cute! Is this fucking cute, asshole! I have to give a fucking half-hour presentation at a fucking podium in front of hundreds of people tomorrow, you fucking jackass! This hurts!”

She is honestly like — so fucking adorable. He fucking loves her like crazy. Even when she’s all pissed at him like this — for good reason, too. He knows that. But he is stopping himself from narrating this out loud because now is not the time.

Drogo is busy doing whatever — a sore spot for Jaime — so there’s only three of them for racquetball. And they half-heartedly alternate and just play for about half an hour before Tyrion says, “Fuck this shit. Let’s just go grab a bite.”

Jaime’s in a mood because his proposal was brutally rejected by an asshole bitch, apparently. Grey has no sympathy — he tells Jaime to get back to him, once his proposals have been rejected about ten million times. Then they can talk.

They order a bunch of tapas — Tyrion’s pick. They have plates stacked on top of plates. Jaime mutters that it’s all so decadent, and he remembers having to pad his stomach with slices of bread back in college, before they went out to eat. Now they are so fancy with their disposable incomes.

“Never forget where you come from though, big bro,” Tyrion says. “Never forget that you rose up to middle class from the dregs of a gated community, with a personal driver, a cook, a nanny, several maids, and a trust fund that you threw back in Dad’s face. Never forget.”

“Hard to forget,” Jaime says, his smile not reaching his eyes. “That was the highlight of my life, throwing it back into Dad’s face.”
When Grey brings up the subject of babies, Tyrion whistles lowly. Tyrion’s not married either. He’s just perma-shacked-up forever with Tysha. The Lannister men have some genetic issue with marriage and kids. Tyrion says that he and Tysha aren’t planning on having kids.

It’s apparently the very first time Jaime has heard of this — Grey gathers that Jaime and his brother don’t talk about this sort of stuff often — and so Jaime curiously asks why not.

Tyrion shrugs. “I don’t know. Because Dad was an awful father and that shit is hereditary?”

Jaime frowns. “Lil man —”

Tyrion rolls his eyes. “And you see Cersei’s kids — and it’s like — holy shit, shoot me in the face with a crossbow, am I right? Is it even normal, that I hate my nephew so much?”

“Dude, I hate that kid too,” Jaime says, pointing at Tyrion with a piece of bread, before he swipes it through olive oil. “He’s a piece of shit psychopath.”

“Right!” Tyrion says. “And that’s another thing! We have the psychopathy gene or whatever in this family. Do I want to make a baby, grow a kid, only to have that little shit kill our pets and murder me in my sleep?”

Jaime turns to Grey. “Dude, what would you even do if some kid messed with Momo 2.0 like that?”

“Oh shit,” Grey says, stiffening. “I’d murder the kid.” He shoves some beets into his face. “I love that dog.”

She clenches everything around him tight — her legs, her arms, her inner walls around his dick — as he continues grinding against her — as she mindlessly sinks her teeth into his neck, biting down as she moans out the waves of her release — as her moans become cries and loud whimpers in between the in-and-out glide of fucking — as her fingernails sink into his back harshly as he jams himself back into her body — as she just wants to kill him for making this shit feel so fucking good.

She releases his neck, smears her lips up his cheek as her body spasms and shakes — as she’s torn between fighting the orgasm and just letting it melt her fucking mind. And she can hear herself crying out his name. She can hear herself saying, “Oh God,” over and over again. Her heart is hammering underneath him — his body is sweaty and so delicious on top of hers. She can hear him tell her that he’s close and he’s about to come. She hisses, “Yes,” as he buries himself in her to the hilt and lightly grunts out a shudder. Then it’s quiet. She pulling in deep breaths and feeling their heartbeats sync up.

And then she makes a sound of appreciation, as she hikes her leg — the good one — up high on his hip, skimming her calf against his sweaty ass. God, she loves that ass.

“Mmm, baby,” she says, voice rough and a little scratchy. “That was nice.” Her palms start digging into his skin, massaging his shoulders and back — smoothing away all of the dents she pinched into his flesh. She sees teeth marks on his neck — and she kisses him there, too. “My baby,” she whispers into him. “You’re my baby.” She feels such overwhelming love for him. Probably because
of all the serotonin and endorphins shortcircuiting her brain right now.

“Heeey,” he says. “Speaking of babies . . .”

“I’m not ready to have a baby right now,” she tells him. Straight up. “And this isn’t gonna be like how you tricked me into getting a dog.”

“I didn’t trick you into getting a dog!” he says. “You wanted to get a dog, too!”

“Oh, you tricked me!” she hisses. “You tricked with that hot wounded mess you call a personality.”

It surprises him into laughing. And he transitions his laugh into a light cough. Because he wants to keep this discussion relatively classy, relatively respectful, and relatively serious. “When might you be ready?”

“I don’t know!” she says. “I keep waiting for this biological clock thing to nut-punch my ovaries. It hasn’t happened yet. I dig kids. But liking them and having them are like — two different things.”

“Okay,” he says, raising his hand to rub the back of his head. “Okay. Let’s just keep talking about this. We’ll just keep figuring things out as we go. We have time.”
Someone isn’t getting laid. And he’s also turning 30!

Missandei says that her reading glasses make her look like a dowdy nerd, but he’s pretty sure her glasses make her look like he wants to fuck her until she passes out. She wrinkles her nose at that, like she’s afraid that he’s going to swap out her birth control with some bogus Flintstones vitamins any day now.

Ever since he told her that he’s been thinking about procreating, she has mostly been shut down for business. She’s been subtle and sly about it, so there hasn’t been a moment where she’s had to shove him off of her. She’s been fairly businesslike with him. She kisses him with a closed mouth. She makes her intention to just sleep when they are in bed together clear with just body language.

And he gets it. He thinks. It’s actually unnerving, but he’s trying to deal with it elegantly. As someone who used to constantly reject sex overtures from the object of his affection, it would be a real dick move for him to raise a stink over this.

Drogo has succinctly told Grey about the difference between men and women when it comes to sex. Drogo had said, “I can fuck her when I hate her, no problem. But she seems to have a real issue with that.”

In a way, Drogo’s words were comforting to Grey. Because they meant that Grey is still very much a dude in certain ways.

Missandei tells him that between the crutches and the glasses . . . it’s like she’s wearing some sort of hotness Kryptonite. The catcalls have gone significantly down.

He tells her he really, really likes it. She should wear her reading glasses — and use crutches — all the time.

“Yo, if you wanted to piss all over me to mark what’s yours, why don’t you just get me a ring?” Missandei flashes her empty ring finger at him.

He tips his head into her shoulder, watching as she types on her laptop screen. They’re in bed, and she has wedding on her brain because she’s actually clarifying more wedding details — no dress code, wear whatever — and updating their evite page. When Barristan asked Grey how much he had to do with their wedding evite — Grey had to disavow. He had to tell Barristan that like, for real, it was Missandei’s call. Barristan told Grey that he is the luckiest man on earth.

“Do you want a ring? You want me to get you some bling?”
“Shut up,” she mutters, loudly punching keys.

He snickers. It’s been something largely unspoken — because it’s been pretty easy to get on the same page. Missandei doesn’t really wear jewelry as it is. She says that she’s too scared that someone will come up with a sword and chop her hand off — for a rock. It’s that immigrant mindset. They also both agree that wedding bands and engagement rings are like — pretty white. Missandei tells him it’s bad enough that they are engaging in all the batty traditions of her people — they don’t need to be partaking in the batty traditions that aren’t their own.

“My grandma didn’t wear a ring,” she says to him. “She doesn’t wear a ring.”

“I know,” he says.

Missandei tells Terri that Grey has like, baby fever. Which is a very, very weird sentence she just uttered out loud. She never ever in her wildest dreams ever thought that this would be one of her issues in life.

Terri enigmatically smiles and asks Missandei how she feels about Grey’s baby fever.

“Freaked out!” Missandei says. “I honestly thought how this would go down is that I’d feel ready for it at some point, and then I’d just harass the hell out of him as he throws up a bunch of excuses and arguments about why it isn’t the right time to have a baby. I never thought it’d be reversed. And I never thought I’d be 30 years old and still feel woefully too young and under-experienced to be a mother. I just don’t feel ready. I thought I’d have more time. But I’m getting old. It’s like, time to shit or get off the pot.”

“It’s not. And you’re not old,” Terri says dryly. “I had my daughter when I was 37. One of my colleagues is pregnant right now — she’s 35.”

Missandei feels her face get a little hot — she feels sheepish for unintentionally being kinda ageist. And she clarifies and says, “I was sort of talking from the context of being Naathi. I’m pretty ancient in that context. I might be a great aunt before I have my own kid. Ack!” Missy leans forward and raps her knuckles on the table. “My oldest nephew is 17 years old. He doesn’t need to be getting anyone pregnant right now.”

During a lull in his day, he does some reading. When he finds an article or a piece that he likes, he forwards it onto Missandei, jotting a few notes down. It’s actually a habit that he picked up from her. She likes to read — and she’s always in the habit of trying to force him to read books she likes or trying to get him involved in some overly intricate discussion about this or that. And he used to begrudgingly engage in it just because he knew it was important to her. The greatest spurt of effort in this respect came on the heels of his first proposal, when he was desperately trying to prove to her that he was serious about making changes.

Now, it’s sort of become a habit. And now, he understands — the kind of uneasy frustration she must have waded in, back in the days of his non-engagement. God, he used to just be too fucking
cool to even hazard looking like he even gave one microscopic shit. God, that must’ve been really joyful to be around.

And lately, he has increased the amount of emails he sends to her exponentially. Like, he gets a little antsy and nervous, when he sends her the fifth article to read in the course of a workday — and he hears no peep out of her. There’s a part of him, deep down, that wants to lightly rattle her cage — jar her out of whatever fire she’s trying to put out at work — to ask her if she got his emails, if she’s ignoring him on purpose or by accident.

He’s a fucking girl. He’s the fucking girl in this relationship.

Based on what he’s read, it makes more sense to freeze embryos, than it does to freeze eggs.

“Hey!” Missy says, ducking down to look at him through the window. She awkwardly maneuvers her crutches around — her foot has been slow to heal because she has the barest of fractures — trying to free a hand so she can open the passenger-side door.

“Hey, knock it off,” he grumbles, hitting the hazard lights on the car before pushing his door open just enough to squeeze his body out.

“You can’t park here,” she says.

“I’m not,” he says sensibly, as a car honks behind them in irritation. He flips off the driver before he gestures to Missy, to her gimp leg — and she really wish he wouldn’t. She doesn’t want to be an accessory to his light law-breaking. He really can’t park here. It’s not even a loading zone. He literally has stopped the car on a street corner at the edge of an intersection. This is another one of Grey’s personality quirks that read very much like he’s from another country. From a country of lawlessness.

He yanks open her door before he takes the crutches from her, leaving her to balance with her hand on the car, as he throws the crutches in the backseat. And then he smoothly picks her up in his arms and sets her down in the passenger seat.

She swats his hands away. “I can put on my own seatbelt! Jeez.”

He lightly chuckles, before he shuts her door and jogs back around to his side of the car.

She has to nudge him with the cold beer bottle to get enough of his attention. He absently grabs the bottle from her, sips from it, mumbles a flat thanks, and continues watching the game like an unblinking psycho. Little 2.0 is sprawled on his chest, her head tucked underneath his heavy hand, her eyes kind of darting back and forth, mostly oriented at the TV screen. Grey has sworn to Missy before, that the dog actually watches TV. But Missy doesn’t think so. The dog is just kind of eager to please.

Grey occasionally runs his thumb or his mouth over 2.0’s small scalp. He does most of the kissing during commercial breaks. Sometimes he makes her alert when he starts yelling at the screen.
Sometimes she’ll be drifting off to sleep, but some jerk of his body tensing up will jar her awake. And Missy is ridic. Because she thinks this shit is the most adorable shit.

Sometimes she wonders, why it can’t just be them and their adorable dog forever? And other times, she thinks that this would be adorable, too, with a kid. And then she thinks that having a kid just to be entertained by adorableness is really dumb.

He’s actually surprised when Drogo asks to pick his brain — when it comes to the financials of running a business — albeit a very small one. Missandei is already out with friends — and he doesn’t want to leave Momo 2.0 home alone for the night after she’s already been home alone during the day while they were at work, so he has Drogo come over to the apartment.

He makes them dinner, too. It feels — very strange and intimate. It’s something that wouldn’t even register with him, had it been Jaime. But it’s really weird to lay out plates and silverware and put ice in water glasses for Drogo. When he thinks of meals with D, he thinks of group hangs — like they all go out somewhere — or if they are a duo, Grey thinks about the two of them trying to score free food.

To roast a chicken and throw together a salad in anticipation of a visit from Drogo is like — something new in their friendship.

“Hey,” Drogo says at the door, holding up a bottle of sparkling juice and sparkling mineral water. “I brought bubbles.”

She hates this. She’s at the nameday party of a twenty-four-year-old and she just wants to go home, shower, and cuddle up in bed with a book, maybe her man, definitely her fur-baby. It’s Clea’s little sister’s nameday. Clea’s been trying to find herself, post-Mike. It involves a lot of adventures, trying new things, mostly partying.

And Missy is one of those really annoying married friends. She’s not yet married, but close enough. She keeps checking the clock on her phone. She keeps looking at her phone screen. She keeps biding her time until it’s okay and not too rude to leave and go home. And she’s already heard Clea bitch out Jhiqui, Doreah, even sweet, sweet Brienne at times — for being boring old women.

Some child tries to flirt with her. He’s a nurse. And he thinks he’s beating her to the punchline when he tells her that, yes, he’s a nurse. He’s acting like it’s something he hears a lot.

And it honestly never occurred to her to think of him as a male nurse. So he is a nurse. Who cares?

And then said child asks her how old she is — all gallantly sensitive about how women be shrews about their ages — so he tells her that it’s cool if she doesn’t want to share the info. She doesn’t give a fuck, so she tells him she’s about thirty.

He looks stunned. And he says, “Oh, sorry for bringing it up.”
And now she’s annoyed. “I like being my age.”

“If it makes you feel better, you don’t actually look thirty. I actually thought you were younger than I am.”

“Oh God, I am not twenty-three,” she says. “I remember twenty-three. I was insecure. I didn’t know what the fuck my life was going to be about. I was depressed. I was an idiot. And I was delusional and lacked self-confidence.” She says it all to prove some sort of point. The point is that he’s a child, and he’s dumb. But it’s okay. He’s dumb because he’s a child.

He holds up his hands like she’s getting antagonistic with him and he’s conceding to appease her. He’s putting up his hands with the air of someone who’s wise enough to leave women be when they get crazy.

A text comes through when Grey is talking about tax write-offs. He automatically flips his phone over out of courtesy, a gesture that Drogo notices and says, “It’s cool. You can check it. It might be Missy needing something.” Drogo knows that Missandei currently has a crap leg and is braving the streets of King’s Landing with a bunch of drunk women on crutches. Missandei actually might be one of those drunk women — and on crutches. Grey kind of winces when he thinks about all the holes she can accidentally fall into.

Drogo lifts up Momo 2.0 higher, pulling the dog to his chest in a hug that kind of makes her eyes bulge out. She looks to Grey helplessly. And he tries to silently convey to little baby to just put up with it. Her discomfort is fleeting — and it’ll make her uncle D happy. Grey’s noticed that Drogo really likes dogs, too.


“Oh.”

Grey quirks a brow. “You guys alright?”

“We’re fine, man,” Drogo says. “He’s just . . . sometimes no fucking fun to be around. Because he’s always nagging at me about Dany.”

“Oh.”

Missy decides to leave the bar without saying goodbye when the nameday girl gets too fucking drunk and starts belligerently picking a fight with her boyfriend over a coffee cup that was a gift. She had misplaced it for a bit and started getting hysterical. And her boyfriend was trying to help her find it, and he made her explode when he told her it wasn’t a huge deal, losing a coffee mug. She started crying and spitting out a lot of mean shit to him.

And Missandei is like, nope. Nope. Nope.
He and Drogo are chilling on the couch and watching an action flick when the door to the apartment rattles, before Missandei awkwardly hobbles in on her crutches as Momo 2.0 barks at her in greeting, wagging her tail so violently that her butt is wiggling behind her. Missandei throws her purse at the kitchen table.

Grey swivels his head around to look at her. “Don’t worry,” he says sarcastically. “I’ll pick that up later and will put it back in the closet, no problem.”

“Oh, thanks, babe,” Missandei says casually, swinging herself to the living room, carefully avoiding Momo 2.0’s interfering body.

Drogo chuckles. “Good night?”

“Oh God,” Missandei says, sighing. “I’m just so glad to be home. How far into the movie are you? Will you start it from the beginning so I know what’s going on?”


“Oh, okay,” she says breezily, gingerly lowering herself into the armchair. “I’ll just read the wiki page to catch up, then.”

“Man, we’re half an hour into the movie max,” Drogo says to Grey, swatting at Grey’s chest with the back of his hand. To Missandei he says, “We can start it over, Missy. No prob.”

In the dark, in bed, she whispers to him that sometimes it’s crazy to her — that they have managed to grow up together. Her voice is light and fluttery — like she’s on the verge of sleep — as she tells him that the way some people change in the span of some very short years is huge. How can anyone even be sure that they will grow at the same rate as their partner? And in the same direction too?

She leans into his chest heavier. He feels her lips through the fabric of his shirt. He feels her hand seeking out his under the covers, before she finds him and weaves her fingers in between his. He hears and feels her yawn.

She yawns as she slumps down against a blank wall in their new house. They are exhausted from the long day. The house is still very dusty — she smears a handprint on her jeans — and she asks him if the stuff is supposed to get cleaned up before they move in.

“Who’s gonna clean it?” Grey asks, petting Momo 2.0, smiling at Missandei a little bit.

“I dunno,” she says. “The crew’s designated cleaning guy?”
He leans forward, grabs ahold of the cuff of her pants — and slowly starts to pull. “That’s not really how it works,” he says.

“Hon, you’re giving me a reverse-wedgie,” she says, holding onto her belt loops, trying to keep her pants from getting pulled off her butt. She knows his intent is to slide her across their new hardwood floors, not to take off the pants. The whole house is either hardwood or tile. Because to describe Grey as a clean freak doesn’t really even scratch the surface of his compulsion. Smooth surfaces are much easier to clean than carpet, which traps dust, dirt, moisture, smells, and hides them away until the most inopportune moments. Grey thinks carpet is disgusting. This is the first time in his life in which he gets to choose not to have it in his life.

When she’s close enough, he grabs her shin and pulls her the rest of the way onto his lap. Momo 2.0 squirms out of the way — she can only put up with hugs only for so long — trotting onto the floor, her nails clicking against the smooth gloss.

“Oh man, she’s eventually gonna scratch all of this niceness up,” Missandei says. “But you must know this already.” She grabs his face and looks into his eyes gravely. “Are you prepared?”

“Yes,” he whispers, before he kisses her on the mouth.

When she pulls away, she ducks her head and presses her forehead into his shoulder. She tells him she’s so tired. He lightly runs his hand up and down her back, lingering on her neck, lightly massaging before he tells her that he knows. And to answer her original question — he will. He’s going to clean the house before they move their shit in.

“Oh, baby,” she mumbles, swiveling her head so that she can burrow into his neck. “I really want to offer to help. But you know that it’d just be an empty offer.”

Pia is Jaime’s friend. That was the assumption he’s always operated under. So he is completely thrown off balance when she corners him at the bar as he’s grabbing another beer — and she emotes all over him. She tells him that it’s taking her a lot of courage to bring this up — and Jaime told her to bring it up to Grey instead of just trying to get over it silently and letting it fester. So this is why she’s bringing it up.

“Huh?” Grey says.

“It really hurt my feelings,” she says. “That you didn’t invite me to your wedding.”

“What?”

She frowns. “I mean, we’ve been friends since college! I was there since the beginning of your guys’ relationship and stuff.” She kind of trails off, her eyes searching around the room awkwardly.

His first instinct is to incredulously ask her why she even thinks they are friends. But he knows people enough to know that he should not ask that out loud.

“O-kay,” he says, tripping a little over the syllables. “You can come.” He clears his throat. “You should come,” he amends. “Sorry. It was an oversight. Sorry.”

“Oh, man — now I have to figure out my schedule and look at some flights. How expensive do you
“Think stuff is right now?”

“I dunno,” he says.

“No problem!” she says cheerfully. This one has bipolar inclinations. She’s not actually bipolar, but she’s good at swinging wildly between disparate moods. “I’ll look after I get home tonight. Yay! I’m so glad!” And then she spontaneously squeals and hugs him tightly, squeezing his arms against his body. “Jaime was right! I do feel better after talking to you about this!”

Her elbow is hooked with Jhiqui’s and Brienne’s, as they lie face up on Jhiqui’s huge bed. Brienne is talking about marriage-gate, which is what she has started calling Jaime’s botched proposal. She’s telling them that she goes back and forth on it a lot — and it’s confusing. She admits that sometimes she doesn’t know where Jaime ends and where she begins. He’s so loud and opinionated that sometimes she worries that her thoughts aren’t even her own — that her beliefs aren’t even her own.

And it’s something that — as an outsider — Missy does not worry about. Missy distinctly remembers instances in the past when Jaime wanted one thing and Brienne wanted the polar opposite — a job in Yin, for instance, to actually not be with Jaime, for instance — and Brienne stuck to her guns — admirably and with considerable ease.

Missandei tells Brienne so. And Brienne laughs. “What if I actually really want to get married?”

“So get married,” Jhiqui says.

“But what if I actually don’t?”

“So don’t,” Missy cracks, her body jiggly from holding in a laugh. “We are so helpful.”

“He doesn’t actually want to get married. It was a pity-ask.”

“Remove him from the equation for a second,” Jhiqui says. “If it wasn’t Jaime, would you want to get married?”

“Honestly? Probably.”

“You can’t remove the guy from the equation,” Missandei says softly.

“Why did you get married?” Brienne asks Jhiqui. Then she addresses Missy. “And why are you getting married?”

“Because my parents wanted us to,” Jhiqui remarks. “For real. It’s as romantic as all of that. And I love him. There are worse things than being married to someone who is great most of the time.”

“Because he wants to,” Missy says. “And my grandma really wants us to. And she’s old and will die soonish. Also very romantic.” Missandei reaches down further to hold Brienne’s hand. “Honestly, I already feel married to him. So it doesn’t matter. That’s why none of it matters — the ceremony, the dress, the party — whatever. It doesn’t change how I already feel about him.”

“I feel married to Jaime already, too,” Brienne admits. “But the outcome of that feeling is different from your outcome.”
Missy shrugs. “The insurance break is nice, too, I hear. And so are the tax benefits.”

He’s lightly rubbing the top of his head as this tension between Drogo and Jaime continues to fucking get in the way of his life. He’s already played a few rounds of darts with Pia out of guilt — and she sucks at darts so it was boring.

Missy reaches over and places her hand on Jhiqui’s humongo tummy. She has already asked what it feels like — Jhiqui said it varies for all women, but for her in particular, it’s very, very uncomfortable. She can’t do any of her favorite hobbies — she can’t drink, she can’t work out, she can barely make it an hour without peeing. She is sleep-deprived because she’s always needing to pee or she’s deeply uncomfortable. All of her organs are getting squished to accommodate the baby. Even breathing is difficult sometimes. She keeps leaking urine. She leaked urine when she was talking to her and Nick’s lawyer about their will. That was a really, really awesome experience — what she did to a chair in his office.

Jhiqui’s pretty ready for this kid to come the fuck out.

“How did you guys know it was the right time to have a baby?” Missandei asks.

Jhiqui laughs. “This was an accident. We didn’t plan for it. So, I’m sorry, babe. I don’t have answer for you there. Some days, I’m still like, ahh, what the hell have I done! Some days, I still don’t feel ready at all.”

“Are you thinking about it?” Brienne asks.

“Sort of,” Missy says reluctantly. “Actually, it’s him. He’s been spearheading this.”

“No way!” Jhiqui says. “Fifty Shades wants a little rugrat, huh? No way!”

“Way,” Missy says.

“You know, I really, really wish men can get pregnant,” Jhiqui says. “Then we’ll see how fucking excited they are to have babies. Nick’s already talking about number two, before number one has even been ripped from my guts. And it makes me want to punch him in the dick.”

When she hops into their home — their real, honest-to-God home — she calls out his name. She can no longer easily spot him with her eyes. They’ve gone from an 800-square-foot apartment to a 2,000-square-foot house. He can be hiding in any of the rooms, in any of the corners.

She hears him holler back to her, telling her he’s in the bathroom.
And she realizes why 2.0 didn’t trot up to her, when she sees Grey sitting on the marble floor of their new bathroom, barefooted and hunched over 2.0’s genitals. The dog is lying belly up on the floor, tightly wedged between Grey’s legs. Momo 2.0 swivels her head to look at Missandei, her brown eyes huge and beseeching, trying to get Missy to save her from Daddy.

Grey carefully snips off some of the hair from 2.0’s sensitive undercarriage. If they don’t from time to time, it gets matted and starts trapping urine. Which is gross. And this is a job that Grey exclusively does.

Momo 2.0 starts squirming, trying to roll back over onto her feet.

Grey makes a loud hissing sound through his teeth, as he lightly taps her chest and grabs her arm to roll her on her back again. “Stay!” he snaps loudly, scarily.

And she thinks that he can do all the things that she cannot bring herself to do. She has sat on the floor and struggled with that dog, murmuring sweet coaxing asks — which get nowhere. He always does these sort of tasks faster with his brusque, no-nonsense approach.

“He's stay still,” he mutters, maneuvering the scissors over Momo 2.0’s sensitive skin. “You want me to accidentally cut you? That would fucking suck, dumbass. For both of us. But mostly you. Stay still! God!” He sighs. “Missandei, you gotta get outta here, babe. You’re distracting her with your presence.”

In bed, out of nowhere, she quietly apologizes to him, for all of the sex they are not having. And he quickly tells her that it’s okay — he’s always so quick to say it’s okay, so bogged down by guilt that he is. She asks him if he wants to talk about it — and he is comically quiet in response. He then tells her that he thinks he gets it. She’s currently irrationally scared that he’ll secretly put a baby in her. He tells her that, obviously, he wouldn’t do that. He doesn’t even know how to even go about doing that, actually.

She laughs softly, reaching up to run the back of her knuckles against his cheek. He catches her hand and presses it against his mouth. She feels him smile. She tells him, “You can poke a bunch of holes into a condom with a pin?”

“We don’t use condoms anymore, though.”

She gets on her elbow before she rolls herself half on top of him. She presses a soft kiss on his mouth, in the dark. And it’s largely unspoken — but he knows. His hand lightly go to her hip, ducking underneath the hem of her shirt. She tells him that she doesn’t want to get all the way naked.

And they both know this is more for him than anything else. She’s still a little emotionally and physically numb to this — but overriding that is just how much she loves this person. She loves him more than anything. And that’s what she’s thinking about, as she helps him slide his boxers down, as she efficiently shimmies out of her underwear.

It drags when he pushes into her. She’s not quite ready — and they’re both trying to be efficient about this. She can feel all of his guilt just washing over her — and it makes her tear up. She holds onto him tightly, squeezes her legs around him, tells him that she loves him.

The sex is one-sided — purposely so — and her favorite part is the part that comes after. His body is
a little damp, very warm, and relaxed. He smells nice, and she likes to just listen as he talks aimlessly about all the things he’s recently been thinking about — stuff that spans the distant past to the near future, wedding stuff that’s been aggravating him, and his general fears about parenthood, actually. He tells her it’s not that he wants to have a kid right now. It’s more that he’s as open to it as he’s ever been.

The party is already in full swing when Missandei hobbles into their new house on crutches. Work ran late for her — and some idiot wanted to have a party on a Friday night because he didn’t want to be hungover for his Sunday run. Because it’s all about him.

Their new house has very little to no furniture in it, which, she supposes, is very much Grey’s psychotic style. But in this case, it’s because the space is so much bigger than the apartment. Their things don’t take up much space. She had to have Brienne and Jaime bring over some folding chairs.

The party is a combo of house-warming, his nameday, her nameday, and perhaps even their bachelor and bachelorette parties, all rolled up into one. It’s something that every single one of their friends — every single one of them — was perturbed by for their own special reason. Most of them wanted to have the bachelor or bachelorette party experience. She has put the blame on Grey and told everyone that he is a freaking antisocial punk — one party is his capacity. And when they point out why she doesn’t just do her own thing and have a wedding shower or a bachelorette party — she has to grit her teeth to stop herself from screaming that it’s all so white.

And she is so over this fucking wedding shit.

“Hellooo, beautiful girl,” Addam says, literally sweeping her off her feet, making her yelp a little bit as her crutches awkwardly crash to the ground. He’s staying over at Jaime and Brienne’s for the weekend. Pippa is with her mom. Addam laughs as he carries her into the kitchen. What is with him and carrying women? He says, “I heard about how you sprained your ankle.”

“He’s lying,” she says automatically.

“So you didn’t get so mad at him that you fell over?”


Jaime palms Grey’s head and leans over to plant a kiss on his temple. Jaime is drunk. But the physical affection isn’t out of the ordinary either. Jaime leans forward, maneuvering his butt onto a kitchen stool. “Dude,” he says. “You guys — are so fucking adult. You’re so fucking adult! Look at this place!” Jaime gestures to the kitchen and all of the appliances that he and Missandei bitched each other out over. “You guys are so grown-up! It’s crazy!”

Grey chuckles. “Yeah, it’s kinda nuts.”

“What does thirty feel like?”
“Dude, you are already thirty,” Grey says, laughing quietly. “You know what it feels like.”

“Nah, man. I mean for you. What does it feel like for you.” Jaime smiles into the shiny countertop, before he picks up his beer to take a swig. After he lowers it, he says, “There was a time when you couldn’t even imagine being alive at this point. So — it must be eerie and weird, to stand in this gorgeous house with your gorgeous wife-person —”

“— and a gorgeous dog.”

“Yes,” Jaime supplies. “I haven’t forgotten about your baby.”

“It’s really weird, man,” Grey says. “It’s really, really bizarre. Sometimes I don’t even think this is my life. Sometimes I think I’m going to wake up — and I’m going to be a little kid still, terrified and tied up in a dark room. You know? And I find out that this was all some crazy made up thing — like a really long hallucin — OW!” Grey tosses Jaime a glare. “The fuck! Did you just fucking try to burn with me a candle?”

Jaime snickers, raising his beer back up to his mouth. “You’re not dreaming, man.”
In this chapter, Grey and Missandei party like boring adults and bicker about how she should step up her wife game. Also, there's finally some discussion about this Black masculinity stuff we've been hearing so much about. <3

“Ah, it’s the merging of worlds,” Nick blurts awkwardly, garnering these indecipherable looks from Addam, Daven, and Drogo. “You’re the other friends,” he continues, unable to dam up the nervous verbal diarrhea as he eyes them up — as he presumably looks at their faces, their builds, their heights, their clothes — and psychs himself out over it all. “You’re the cool friends,” Nick supplies totally needlessly. Nick gives them all a shy little wave. “I’m the guy Grey and Jaime sometimes hangs out with out of pity because our wives are buddies.”

Grey silently swings his eyes over to Jaime — who casually shrugs. Honestly, they both like Nick a fair bit. They just aren’t in the business of giving people reassurances.

“You guys have a lot of Dothraki friends. And a lot of white friends.” Tank slowly lowers himself down onto a dining chair, grabbing a coaster before he puts his cold beer down on the table. He shows his super white, straight teeth as he grins away any potential offense. “Where are all the brothers and sisters, man?”

Grey shrugs. He tilts his head over to Jaime. “He tells me, all the time, that he’s my Blackest friend.”

And immediately — he can feel Daven’s discomfort. And Addam blessedly stays quiet — for the time being.

Jaime chuckles against the mouth of his beer bottle. “I feel like that’s more a comment on Grey’s lack of Black friends than it is on my apparent Blackness.”

“Ah shit,” Drogo breaks in, nudging Jaime with his knuckles. “Look at you, backtracking. On all that smack. From all these years.”


Tank smiles — and to Grey, it’s clear that Jaime is uneasy and unclear on whether or not Tank actually wants to beat his ass for the commentary. But that’s only because he can read Jaime like a book. His nervousness is not obvious at all. Grey also knows that Tank is vaguely amused, a little
inattentive, mostly emotionally apathetic to Jaime’s commentary.

“Seriously,” Tank says to Grey. “What’s the deal, man? Just curious ‘cause you don’t seem at all like the type to hang exclusively with this granola crowd. No offense Nicky.”


Tank lightly laughs before he reaches out and clinks beer bottles with Nick.

“I dunno,” Grey mutters, answering Tank’s question. “There aren’t that many Black people in King’s Landing?” He’s thinking back to college and all of the Black friends he could’ve made — but instead, he got stuck with a bunch of tall white dudes who liked to row boats. And now he works in women’s clothing and fashion and retail. There are no fucking Black men in this field. There are a smattering of Black women, but their numbers are still low. The chances of him stumbling on a person that he actually likes is already low — the chances of that person being Black is microscopic. He’s also just really not good at making new friends? “Tanja is kinda Black,” Grey says. He uses the neck of his beer bottle to point to Tanja, who is hanging out in the living room. He refrains from admitting to Tank that Tanja is a total Oreo.

“Man, Black folks are around,” Tank says. “If you know where to look.”

“And while he’s not usually the type to share such details about his life to a total stranger — this stranger happens to be digging at something, happens to vaguely be calling him out on something.

And so Grey tells Tank that he actually doesn’t always identify strongly with Blackness. He does and he doesn’t. First off, he was born in another country, so he is an immigrant, and that almost negates a lot of the Blackness that people speak to when they speak of Blackness. He’s not Western. Blackness is very West. He was born speaking another language. In that respect — he has a certain affinity with Dothraki people — Drogo snickers at that statement.

And he’s also fairly light-skinned — for an Islander, in respect to Blackness. He gets a certain leeway because of it among white people. And he gets a little bit shut out because of it among Black people, as they already don’t identify with his immigrant status.

And to put school and childhood in perspective, he was fostered at a young age — by a bunch of religious white people who lived in the middle of nowhere. He grew up very isolated, ostracized among a lot of whiteness. But being not-white doesn’t make one automatically Black, obviously.

At the core of it — he culturally isn’t that Black. He doesn’t talk the talk. He doesn’t walk the walk. He doesn’t have the swagger. He didn’t grow up in the community. He had no parents to imbue him with knowledge of Blackness. And it’s not exactly something he has rejected, so much as it’s been something that has not been offered to him, or it’s been something out of his scope. He’s been very busy worrying about other life shit, in any case. But then, of course he’s still Black. He’s Black because his skin color makes him Black. He’s Black because white people and law enforcement have treated him as Black.

“What’s so bad about having a lot of Dothraki friends, anyway?” Drogo grumbles, reaching out to palm Grey’s head.

“What’s so bad about having a lot of white friends, anyway?” Jaime says, immediately grinning.
Tank ignores Jaime. He seems impressed by Grey’s response. So he says, “Hey, if you’re ever interested, I can introduce you to some people. Good, solid people.”

This party is more slanted toward Grey than it is her. She doesn’t mind. She gets it. She’s been celebrating her namedays since inception. They are all used to showing up once a year in honor of her. This is the very first time Grey has allowed them to do this . . . so she understands why it’s being viewed as his party.

Her legs — both the bum one and the normal one — are propped on Doreah’s lap. Jhiqui’s never too far from the bathroom, so that’s why she’s sitting in one of the dining chairs that they pulled into the living room. They’re all doing that maudlin thing where they reminisce about the good ol’ days, fully aware that the good ol’ days weren’t actually that golden. But they tell the same stories about the one time Brienne puked in the snow and was so mortified over it. They tell stories about how Jhiqui boned Drogo and got burnt — well, drunk Doreah tells that story, completely unaware that Dany and Drogo currently have a weird sex thing. Dany seems uncaring.

And for the first time in nearly ten years, the man in question is actually present. It’s the very first time Drogo and Jhiqui have been in the same place at the same time in forever. It was very anticlimactic. Drogo just gave her a head nod and said, “Hey,” before asking her how far along she was. She answered him and they had a cordial conversation about it and everything.

Drogo lifts her up and carries her the short distance to the middle of the room. She is getting really sick of her bum leg because it gives every dude in this place license to just pick her up and physically move her around like she’s a rag doll. Drogo sets her down on a chair that he deliberately placed down, next to Grey, who is already sitting down — his face incredibly judgemental and suspicious of everything that’s happening around them.

It’s the first time she’s actually seen him up close all day — ever since she kissed him goodbye in the morning. She reaches over and grabs his hand — to get his attention. “Hey, baby,” she says softly, intertwining their fingers together. Her mouth drifts into a smile automatically, when she looks at him. “I’ve missed you.”

“What the fuck is happening right now?” he says, voice low and tight, his hand squeezing hers, his eyes shifting around the room like he’s afraid a stripper is going to jump out of a fake cake at any moment.

It makes her laugh.

“Yeah,” Drogo says loudly, getting everyone’s attention in the room. “So this housewarming, nameday, marriage party is really fucking odd and badly planned — and it’s confusing. But it’s still cool.” Drogo gestures to Grey. “He never celebrates himself, you know? He never allows it. So this is a really special occasion. So we wanted to do something to really embarrass Dovoeddi — that’s Grey to all you other fuckers who ain’t me — because it’s like, impossible to embarrass him. So we made a slideshow.”
“Are you serious?” Missy says, straightening in her chair. “What kind of slideshow?”

“Dude!” Jaime says, breaking in. “It’s the fucking cutest! It’s all old pictures of you guys and us.”

“Oh my gosh!” she says, drawing out every syllable. She squeezes Grey’s hand and jiggles his arm to get his attention. “That’s so sweet! Oh my gosh! I am just imagining you guys sitting down and making a slideshow! It’s so cute!”

“Dude,” Daven says. “It was so fun. We are actually bummed that Grey couldn’t be there. Because we were just sifting through old photos and just cracking up and reminiscing. Jaime has so many pictures of him. So many pictures.”

“Oh my God,” Drogo says, struggling to not laugh. “Jaime has pictures of Grey sleeping.”

He has his hands clasped behind his neck — as Clea eagerly dims the lights. His problem has never been with facts about himself — it’s always in the value applied to the facts. And he’s still particularly sensitive about . . . appearing like someone to be pitied or someone to empathize with. He hates the concept of pity because no one is allowed to pity him. And no one is allowed to empathize with him because what he has known is so far beyond the realm of anyone’s experience that it’s really disgusting and off-putting, for someone to think that they can even empathize with him. He’s probably always going to be touchy about these things.

But it’s a fucking PowerPoint presentation. And he is making shit way fucking weird by acting way fucking weird.

The slideshow isn’t bad. It’s actually funny. The captions are funny. The captions are making people laugh. And the slideshow is purposely girly. There are a lot of heart filters — he assumes that was Jaime’s doing. It’s a cute slideshow. It’s a lot pictures of them all hanging out — pictures of him, Jaime, and Drogo looking young as hell, hanging out in the Summer Isles. And pictures of him and Daven sitting on a kayak in the middle of a lake — it’s where they used to go get baked. And pictures of him and Addam sitting on couches at random parties. And then just a lot of sneaky photos of him with Missandei — even before there really was a him-and-Missandei. The guys must have had to mine really deeply — really look into their photo back-ups, really bugged the shit out of their mutual friends to gather all of this shit.

There’s a picture of him and Missandei at her 21st nameday, for instance, standing outside and talking, on a patio. That picture was from the purgatory of their just-friendship. He remembers lying to Missandei and telling her that he just happened to have the night off of work, when he really had to sell his soul to some uppity white girl, so that he could get his shift covered. He also remembers sneaking looks at her the whole night. He remembers repressing the fact that it really sucked, that it couldn’t be sex. This picture must have come from Clea or Doreah.

He finds her — or he follows her — when she hops upstairs to grab something out of the bedroom.
There’s a paperback in her hand when she runs into him in their doorway. She looks stunned and mutters that she’s letting Clea borrow a book. He touches her face with the tips of his fingers before he wraps his arms around her and pulls her into a hug.

Her arms come around him softly, too. “What’s up, babe?” she says.

“Just feel like it,” he says.

He clicks his front teeth against his beer bottle, smiling, right before he tells everyone that Missandei is so messy and so disgusting that one time, when he went to go pee in the middle of the night, sitting down-style because duh, middle of the night — he was stunned to come away with blood on the tip of his dick. He thought he was bleeding, for one frightening moment — before he realized it was period blood. It was her period blood. And she had somehow gotten a glob of it on the underside of the toilet seat. He says, “How the fuck does that even happen?”

“Oh my God,” Missandei mutters, rolling her eyes. “This again? You need to chill, bro. It happens. Like you don’t miss the toilet every now and then.”

“Dude, when I make a mess, I clean it,” he says.

“Dude, why would I ever lift up the toilet seat and look at what’s underneath there?”

“To clean it!”

The room titters in collective laughter.

“Oh my God!” she says, throwing her face to the ceiling. “I’m actually not that dirty or messy anymore. I just want to make it clear I’ve worked hard to not be horrible. But your standards are just impossible.” She flips her face down and glares at him. “I am so sorry you got period blood on your beloved penis. I’m so sorry you had to deal with a smidgen of what I have to deal every month.”

“Dude,” he says. “This isn’t about your female shit. Don’t make it about that. I don’t care if it’s period blood or if it’s poop. I’m just saying that it doesn’t need to be on the toilet seat.”

“Dude, it is always about female shit!”

“Um, yeah it is!” Jhiqui suddenly shouts. “Stop oppressing her with your patriarchy!”

It’s a joke. He gets it. But he still releases an ever-suffering, loud groan. “Dude, I’m just asking you to clean more thoroughly — and you’re treating it like I’m trying to force you into being a housewife. I’m actually just saying — clean your shit, Missandei.”

“Do you know that I actually try?” she throws back at him. “I actually try really hard to clean things. I cleaned the fucking oven the other day! I don’t give a shit about the oven, but you do. So I cleaned it even though it’s a fucking brand new oven. And then I showed you I cleaned it. And you were like, ‘Oh, you didn’t do a very good job.’ And I was like, what the fuck? I spent an hour cleaning it!”

“Maybe you’re just not good at cleaning?” Jaime says, the corners of his mouth just digging dimples into his face.
“Screw you, Jaime,” Missandei says. “You lived with him. You know exactly what I’m talking about. Don’t even play.”

“Yo, still down for brunch tomorrow at Jaime’s?” Addam asks on his way out the door, slapping Grey’s butt. Addam is one of the last guests to leave. “You gonna be done being mad at us about the slideshow by then?”

Grey grins tiredly, as his body pitches forward from behind, as Jaime hugs him. “Yeah, brunch,” Grey says. “See you guys tomorrow.”

“Bye!” Jaime calls out, running to the car with his keys in his hand.

Brienne casts her eyes heavenward. She mutters that she’s sure Addam and Jaime are going to go back to their place and continue drinking until they pass out. She’s in for a really irritatingly loud night.

And once she steps foot out the door, she shouts, “Jaime! You can’t freaking drive! I’m driving!”

Missandei hops back into the room, balancing by keeping her hand on a wall. She’s positive that it’s not very sexy at all — the way she’s struggling to unbutton her blouse, teetering dangerously on her good leg. But he won’t be picky. They haven’t had good, real sex in weeks — just perfunctory sex with a lot of clothes on. Moving into the new house has been exhausting. Tonight, though, she’s been really feeling him. Tonight, they are going to bang all legit.

Her lacy black bra is exposed and she’s hollering out his name. She’s telling him that she has a present for him. Spoiler alert: That present is birth-controlled sex.

When he walks into the hallway, following the sound of her voice, she immediately spies the blue bucket, the mop, the fucking yellow sponge.

Fuck.

He looks torn, his eyes staring down her breasts. “Babe,” he says, already negotiating. “God. Baby. Just give me twenty minutes. I promise. I just cannot handle the dishes hanging out all over the house.”

She deflates. It’s not going to take just twenty minutes. That’s the lie he feeds her so that she won’t freak out.

When he finally crawls into bed — after the house is clean again — Missandei is snoring. She’s
naked under the covers because she had been waiting for him — and she’s also completely dead to the world. He feels like a real stupid motherfucker.

He hurriedly takes off his clothes, too. It’ll just feel right, to match her. He crawls into bed, his sore muscles relaxing into the mattress.

She feels disoriented at first — when she wakes up — staring at an unfamiliar ceiling, in an unfamiliar room. And it takes a moment for her to realize that she’s in their house now. They both live in this house now — one that still smells like paint.

She feels him stirring beside her. They are skin to skin — sweaty and sticking a little to each other uncomfortably. He runs so hot when he sleeps. And there’s an erection pressing lightly against her hip.

“Hi,” he says breathily.

“Hey,” she says, reaching up to rub her eyes, feeling grains of salt on the pads of her fingers.

“You’re not wearing anything,” he says, hand reaching to grab onto her hips.

“You’re not wearing anything either,” she says.

“I’m sorry I took so long last night.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t wait up.”

“Do you want to fuck now?”

“Sure.”

She lets out a squeak, because he suddenly flips them so that she's on her back and he's nestled in between her legs. “It’s been a while,” he says darkly, sneaking a hand between the two of them, sweeping his fingers through her folds. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” she says.

He glances at the clock on their nightstand. Then he groans. “Fuck,” he says quietly. “Brunch.”

His grunt turns into a laugh, as she lightly nips his chin, as she closes her hand around his erection, as she maneuvers him into the right spot, at the right angle — and roughly snaps her hips down, pulling him into the addictive wet heat of her body.

He closes his eyes, because he has to. Because she just feels too fucking good. He's leaning his weight heavily on one arm. He opens his eyes again, as his free hand lightly palms a breast. And then the other. Before he ducks his head down and runs the flat of his tongue over a nipple.
She grasps the back of his neck and tries to lift his head up. “Ah, babe. Forget it. We don’t have the time. Just be quick about it.”

Great.

He pulls in a long inhale before he sighs it out. He raises his head to look her in the eyes. “That actually sounds real fucking lame and cold and emotionless,” he bites out. “And I'm not into it.”

She tenses beneath him. And he is rapidly losing his erection. And she is completely noticing. He can tell by the flickering expression on her face. And he already feels shitty about it — burdened by his own insecurities. His overly emotional dick is the gift that keeps on giving sometimes.

He pulls out of her. “Missandei — I'm sorry. That was a bitchy thing to say.”

“Don't be sorry,” she says, furrowing her brows, sitting up, too, pulling the sheet so it covers her legs and chest. “I shouldn’t have told you to be quick.”

They silently get dressed because neither of them want to have this conversation naked. Grey gets up to go let Momo 2.0 out, also to start a pot of coffee. She carefully makes the bed, ever-mindful of the tension between the two of them. Maybe she figures that she can make some amends for what’s going on — if she can get the bed looking close to how he likes it.

He looks tired and ragged — when she meets him in the kitchen, which looks very bright and stark in the morning light. There are some wine glasses neatly arranged on a drying pad — from the other night. Everything looks really, really spotless. She thinks about the fights they are constantly having — sort of about aesthetics, sort of about being organized and neat — but really, these fights are really about their different personalities and outlooks on life. Sometimes she resists the furniture he wants to pick out because it’s all honestly just so sterile and cold to her. She kind of likes carpet. She would like a rug here and there sometimes. She likes more knick knacks and extraneous stuff than he does. She likes certain things that only have sentimental value. She doesn’t want to sell or get rid of all her books and put everything on a Kindle. She likes color — she actually loves color. She would actually really dig if it the walls in some room were painted a riotous red. But she knows he would go insane over that.

She crawls onto a stool and reaches for the cup of coffee he’s handing to her.

And then he says, “Is it still about babies? Or is it about me, now?” He pauses, kind of nudging little Momo 2.0 toward her water bowl with his toes. “It’s okay if it’s about me,” he says calmly.

She immediately starts to cry.

He doesn’t know what he’s emotionally preparing for. But he sees her crying, and he immediately feels like his entire world is just about to crash in onto itself — again. And he is steeling himself for the worst. But he’s not even letting himself imagine the worst. Because — he keeps telling himself — that they’ve come so far, and they’ve been doing so well. He’s been doing so well. And he just
cannot allow himself to think that even his very, very best is not going to be enough.

His heart is just hurting in his chest. And he feels himself getting really emotional, too — as Missandei fights to collect herself, to pull herself together enough to tell him what she’s thinking. And in the space — he wonders to himself that maybe he has hit the nail right on the head. It is him. They’ve finally hit the point where it’s actually about him, no longer about circumstances. Her patience has run out.

“Have I been doing something to . . .” God. He hates this. He clears his throat. “Have I been doing something to turn you off?” This time, they don’t even have the excuse of her anti-depressants.

She doesn’t answer him right away. And when she does, she says, “I want to be honest with you.”

She tells him she honestly doesn’t know what the hell it is. If she did know, then she would fix it. But her brain is messed up, and she doesn’t know how to make sense of it sometimes. She feels really rotten about this — really guilty.

He says, “Maybe you should think about getting back on your meds.”

She feels new tears bloom in her eyes. “I can’t do that,” she says quietly. “Not when we’re talking about having a baby.”

“We’re not having a baby right now,” he says flatly. “Not when it’s fucking stressing you out like this.”

And she starts crying again in earnest. And she tells him that she really, really, really wants to give him a baby.

“But?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t know if I actually want to have a baby. Not just right now. But ever.” Her face crumples up, before she pushes it into her hands. “I’m so sorry.”

She tells him they are going to be late — again — to another one of Jaime’s things. He tells her, seriously, to fucking forget about it. And then she brings the discussion back around. She wipes her eyes and she mutters to him that people get divorced over this kind of stuff — over this kind of stalemate. He responds with surprise — with a kind of shock. And he firmly tells her they are not getting divorced. Also — they aren’t even married yet?

“Don’t make it a joke, please,” she says. “Don’t point out I’m being irrational. I know I am.” And then she tells him that they’re 30 now. And five or seven or another ten years will probably fly by — the way that the last ten have. What if the way she feels about all of this stuff never changes? Or what if the way she feels does change, but when it does, it’s already too late and the ship has sailed because the female body just fucking sucks. It sucks being a woman. And she reflexively says, “Well, it doesn’t actually suck. It’s probably good women can’t have babies when they are old.
Because having a baby was kinda really dangerous back in the day.”

She tells him she’s been hyper-aware lately, that the purpose of sex is to make babies. That’s been really messing with her mind. He gently tells her that they — human beings — have sort of moved beyond that, though. Sex serves many other purposes, too.

He tells her he knows he’s being self-centered here, but he wants to know — “How have you been feeling about me lately?”

She’s just an emotional wreck. She hates this. She hates that she can’t be like him and dam up the feelings until it’s a more convenient time to deal with them. Her words come out in stutters and stops, as she tells him that lately, she’s been just wanting a lot of comfort from him. She loves him. She wants to just be with him and be around him. And it’s warm and it’s fond. It’s not really burning hot and desperate and needy. She hasn’t felt very strongly about sex. She tells him sex feels nice, still. But she can take it or leave it. But she aligns this deficiency more toward herself — more than she does him. She tells him that he’s still like, really hot and stuff. She’s just stupid and dead inside.

“Shut up,” he says. “Don’t say that about yourself.”

“You say that sort of stuff all the time, about yourself,” she points out.

“It’s actually true when we talk about me.”

“No,” she says, frowning. “I still disagree strongly with that.”

And she tells him she hates the idea of getting divorced from him. She knows he’s refraining from applying his cold, hard logic and pragmatism at her, stopping himself from telling her that she’s insane for worrying about something that isn’t even happening, something that is not really even a realistic possibility. Instead, he says, “Honestly. I really feel like you stand a greater chance of losing me through death — than divorce. I would never leave you. No one — not even you — can even make me.”

She knows that he’s trying to be comforting.

And God. She is losing her mind. Because he said the word death. And now she is freaking out.
He reaches out to brush away the tears from her swollen eyes with his thumbs as she swats his hands away so she can dab her own face with tissues. She keeps silently crying her eyeliner off. She tells him she keeps thinking about him dying unexpectedly — and it also reminds her of her grandfather dying unexpectedly — and her brother dying unexpectedly — and it's really fucking bumming her out. Her grandma is also way fucking old now. Death is just around the corner with that one, too. It’s going to be so horrible.

Missandei tells him she has this irrational fear that the people she loves the most invariably get taken away from her. It was probably a fear born the moment it registered in her child mind that her parents really weren’t coming to get her.

She says sometimes she can’t turn off these thoughts. She's sheepishly tells him that she's trying hard not to suppress her feelings so much these days, but it is sometimes a very inconvenient endeavor. They're going to be late for brunch because of her stupid brain.

He tells her they should just really skip fucking brunch and stay home and have a long and serious talk about some stuff — and the look she throws him makes him almost burst out laughing.

Instead, he tells her to take her time getting ready. He will go take care of 2.0.

In the car, wearing sunglasses after she has completely given up on makeup, she asks him if he thinks or worries about her dying.

He truthfully says, “All the time.”

“And it bums you out?”

He scoffs, hitting the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. “Fuck, Missandei. Obviously it is devastating.”

“How do you manage that worry?” she asks, curiously.

“I just tell myself we're dying together. Like in a car crash or something. That would be most
convenient.”

“And that comforts you,” she says slowly.

He shrugs. “Yeah. Kinda. I mean, I’d prefer it if neither of us died unexpectedly. But that’s best case scenario if we had to. And it’s likely, considering how often we drive together. Like, we’re driving right now.” He reaches out and fiddles with the volume dial, turning the music up a little higher. Then he says, “And if you die before me . . . I dunno, I’ve thought about that, too. I don’t know what I’d do,” he says vaguely.

She takes his right hand and stuffs it in between the meaty part between her legs — up high and close to her heat, but not quite in the porno area — keeping him close and warm. “You’d remarry, of course,” she says blithely, purposely ignoring the heaviness in his tone.

He yanks his hand out from between her legs, so he can loudly slap her thigh. “If I die young, I want you to jump into my casket at my funeral,” he says. “And just get buried alive with my corpse, okay?”

She’s taken off her shoes and her feet are on the dashboard. He actually hates that because he’s always paranoid that they’re going to get into a fender bender and the airbags will deploy and just crush her knees back into her face. He supposes that for all of his complaints of her always shoving her mind at illogical worries that probably won’t happen — he supposes that he does the very fucking same thing, with his tendency to think about worst-case scenarios. And the difference is that she’s not constantly shoving his face in it and telling him to just stop thinking the way that he does. The difference is that she’s a nicer person than he is.

“Baby, can you please take your feet off the dash?”

“Oh,” she says absently. “Sorry.”

Before they get to Jaime and Brienne’s, she starts to unload onto him, telling him that she’s still trying to work out the mess of her thoughts, but she thinks that that maybe the issue at hand here is that she’s crumbling under the pressure of other people’s expectations. She doesn’t really want to get married — but it’s so important culturally and it’s so important to her grandmother. And he wants to, so she figures, no big deal. She can concede on this. She doesn’t feel all strongly and bitter about it like Jaime does, so it’s not really a big deal to just agree to legally spend the rest of her life with someone she loves.

And she keeps telling herself this. She’s been telling herself this — that such-and-such isn’t a big deal. It matters to other people, so just do it. She’s been doing this her whole life, being the youngest kid. And then being the kid who was left in the house after a bunch of death. And maybe she’s just at the point or the age where she’s cracking and she’s like, enough. When will it end? When will she get to do what she wants to do?

Maybe she’s finally drawing the line at babies. And she hates that the line is here, but she cannot be a
bad mother. She absolutely will not allow herself to be any less than a really, really involved and caring mother. But if her fucking heart is not in it to begin with — she cannot do that to another human being.

She’s crying again.

He says to her, “Missandei — seriously — let’s backburner this. There’s no urgency. We don’t have to resolve anything today, or next week, or a month from now. Or a year from now even. Just — I really don’t want for you to be so upset. I don’t want to have a kid at all — if it means you feel this way. Obviously.”

“I feel like I’m taking away from you,” she mutters at the window. “You deserve everything you want.”

“You’re not taking away from me.” He sighs. “And you’re not responsible for my happiness.”

“Dude, you guys are late,” Jaime says wearily, when he opens the door. He’s totally hungover.

“Were you having sex or something?”

“Nope,” Grey says.

“Everything okay?” Jaime asks, frowning, as he scans over Missandei’s face.

“Oh my God,” she says, hobbling into Jaime's hug with her crutches. She is such a pathetic creature right now. “You don’t have to be all freaked out just because I’m not cute right now.”

“You are always cute, Missandei,” Grey says reasonably, behind them.

“Shit,” Jaime says, letting go of Missandei to reach for Grey. “How do you not constantly swoon with this dude? I’m serious.” To Grey, Jaime says, “Bro, your game is so odd but so strong. Ten out of ten. I've always thought so.”

“Man, your game is not as good,” Grey says, wrapping his arms around Jaime. “It only works on Brienne.”

Jaime chuckles tiredly. “Yeah, I know.”

“And me.”

Jaime’s laugh is more genuine. He goes boneless in Grey’s arm as he snickers, forcing Grey to stumble forward, to carry their weight.

She’s super clingy right now, for reasons that she thinks are pretty valid actually. And he’s indulging in it. She keeps reaching out to hold his hand. She keeps hovering close by. She just about sits on him, but it’s really her sense of decorum that wins out on that one. Her mood — and probably her swollen face and red eyes — are things the entire room picks up on — so their friends are being . . .
extra cheerful.

Even Addam has had the good judgement to not point out the elephant in the room — that she and Grey are unforgivably fucking late like a couple of assholes, and she looks like a fucking mess. She knows that they have all assumed that she and Grey were fighting — and they are all very confused by the complete lack of tension between her Grey. And they are so sweet for not talking about it.

Missy sees the amazing spread that Brienne is completely, completely downplaying the shit out of. Brie has busted her ass over making it nice. Missandei tells Brienne that she’s really sorry she fucking sucks and is tardy. Brienne flushes pink and firmly tells Missy that Drogo is the one who actually fucking sucks. He totally cancelled on them for a really bogus reason — something about feeling sick. The real reason he’s not coming is probably Dany-related. Brienne reaches out and rubs her hand up and down Missy’s arm comfortably — which kind of makes Missy a little misty. It’s something Brienne carefully pretends to not see.

Jaime shakes his head — he has clearly been vocally pissed off about this already, before they showed up. He tells them all that he can’t fucking wait for that shit to blow up in Drogo’s face so that shit can just go back to normal already. He suddenly finds that he misses the days when Drogo was just a huge fucking whore.

“Don’t blame Dany for Drogo’s lameness,” Missandei says quietly, leaning her crutches against the kitchen island as she gingerly maneuvers herself onto a stool. When she’s on it, Grey steadily lifts her up a little bit by the stool and drags her across the floor, so she’s hip to hip with him. “Drogo’s his own person,” Missy adds. “It’s not Dany’s fault that he’s not always down to bro out with you guys.”

“That’s not what this is about,” Jaime says. “I’m not jealous or possessive.”

“Jaime,” Missy says. “It totally is what this is all about.”


“Dude, I wholeheartedly disagree with this,” Jaime says, shaking his head and crossing his arms defensively. “I didn’t go nuts when Missy started boning Grey, did I?”

Grey clears his throat. “I, uh, actually didn’t have her come over to our apartment for the longest time — partly because I was worried about . . . your judgement influencing my head while I was still trying to figure shit out.”

“Shut up!” Jaime snaps, straightening up just a little bit. “No, you did not do that! I was in support of your chickenshit bullshit from the get. I vouched for both of you — to each other! I am actually the hero of your relationship.”

“You’re really not, Jaime,” Missandei says plainly.

“Buddy,” Addam cuts in. “You hated all of our college girlfriends.”

“Yeah,” Daven says. “You were really mean to them.”

“That’s because they were honestly horrible human beings,” Jaime says. “I’m nice to your wife,” Jaime says to Daven. “I like Kara.” To Addam, Jaime says, “Your daughter is great. I’m not jealous of her.” To the rest of them, he says, “You guys are making me sound like a fucking lunatic, instead of like, an amazing judge of character.”
She’s comfort-eating, so she takes her own waffle instead of stealing bites from Grey’s plate. She drowns it in syrup and whipped cream and all of it. And she grabs a fist full of bacon. She tells Brienne that, for someone who eats raw fish and pickles for breakfast, Brienne sure know how to make a proper gut-bomb. It is all so yummy.


His hand wraps around her head, as he pulls it against his mouth, kissing her firmly on her cheekbone. And maybe she’s got this all backwards. Maybe he’s not putting up with her clinginess. Maybe they are mutually feeling this, mutually indulging in this. She loves their friends, but honestly, she just wants to hide out in bed all day alone. With him. She should’ve agreed with him, when he told her that they should just cancel on brunch. She was being herself — that is, always worried about making other people feel upset or uncomfortable or awkward. Terri has been talking to her for years about basically knocking that off.

She just doesn’t want Jaime to bitch her out like he bitches Drogo out, behind her back. She doesn’t know why she worries about that. So what if he bitches her out? It’s what he does. Does it mean that he loves Drogo any less? Obviously not. She doesn’t know what her problem is — why other people’s opinions matter so much to her.

“Sorry again, for being late,” she says to the room. “It was my fault. It wasn’t Grey’s.”

“Shit, I honestly don’t even give a fuck,” Jaime says. “Stop apologizing. It’s totally okay, Missandei.”

She blinks rapidly, her eyes hot. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to apologize again.” She kind of quickly smiles, in self-awareness. “Sorry, for saying sorry just now.” She shrugs. “I just brought it up because I wanted to explain why we were late —”

“You don’t have to,” Daven says quickly.

“I want to, though,” she says. “Not to make excuses for myself or to ask for more forgiveness, but I guess I just want to talk about it. If you don’t mind?”

Addam tells them it’s just a pain that he manages, like any other pain in life. He also tries not to let himself think about it — beyond all of the legal and financial preparations he can make.

He just has to man up and grit his teeth and just deal. He has mapped out a timeline in his head, the milestones he has to get to, to avoid burdening Pippa with certain kinds of daddy issues. She already has a bunch of shit stacked against her. A fucking crazy mother. Loving, but really conservative grandparents who say really horrible shit sometimes. And him. As her dad. He’s probably already messing her up in a bunch of intricate ways he cannot even fathom or yet understand.

But if he can hold on and stay alive until she’s 16, she’ll probably just start looking to marry someone exactly like him. And he’s probably fine with that.
It's the whole dying before that, that can mess her up really good. He's trying to survive for another eleven years at least. Then after, he'll see what else he can squeeze out of life. He wants to have the luxury of getting to the part where she just resents him for the adult she invariably ends up becoming.

“But Jesus,” Addam says to Grey and Missandei. “Nothing's gonna happen to any of us. You guys are so fucking morbid. Why the hell are you talking about dying all the time?”

“I feel like you guys, especially, have had all the shitty stuff stacked at the beginning of life,” says Daven. “The rest should be gravy, honestly.”

“Life isn’t fair,” Grey says.

She tells him she just wants to watch a movie and do nothing for the rest of the day. He knows that he tends to be very productive and very busy — and it’s probably sometimes a huge bummer to her when she wants to just chill and relax. Or it’s often a huge bummer. So he lays her on the couch and flips a blanket over her, as Momo 2.0 repeatedly knocks her front paws against the back of his knees.

It’s nice that they have a backyard now. He can just open the door and let 2.0 run and go poop back there whenever she wants. Missandei suggested installing a doggy door, but he vetoed that, because he was afraid that someone will use that door to break into their house and murder them. He was also wary about the weather sealing — and just how much energy efficiency they will lose.

Sometimes, he hears himself talking to her — he hears himself saying these things to himself — and he thinks that Missandei is like, a fucking saint. He reminds himself to be way sweeter to her. Like, he had forgotten that he told her that she did a bad job at cleaning the oven. He actually did say that. And it was really unnecessary to say that.

He picks up Momo 2.0 when she runs back into the house, after doing a long pee. This dog is amazing, too. She rarely ever has accidents in the house anymore. And it’s like she’s been cognizant of what the new house represents. She’s been amazing about settling in and staying out places she’s not supposed to be. Grey washes down her feet at the kitchen sink, drying them off before he places her back on the floor.

When he plops down on the couch, crawling over to Missandei before lying down next to her, he says, “Hey, thanks for being awesome. I know I am hard to live with sometimes.”

“Meh,” she says, flipping through Netflix, trying to find something to watch. “You do a lot. You do most of the cleaning, which is pretty awesome. So it’s no big deal if you’re a bitch about it sometimes.” She lightly snickers, her eyes trained on the TV.

“Hello,” Grey says. “Nice to meet you.”

“Hi,” Terri says. “Great to meet you, too. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

It’s a joke. And it’s one that immediately makes a shit-ton of stress-sweat break out on Missy’s skin.
She laughs nervously — a tittering fake-sounding laugh with machine-gun punctuation. “Only good things of course!” she says.

Terri ignores Missy’s anxiety. Instead, Terri calmly folds her hands together in front of her lap and says, “How was your guys’ week?”

“Good,” Grey says. “We’ve been talking about babies and death a lot.”

Ah, nice. Of course he’d cut right to the chase.

It makes Terri smile quietly. “Oh? Tell me about what you’ve been discussing.”

This isn’t going to be a regular thing. Grey is probably never going to be the kind of person that feels good about therapy. But he is the kind of person who will apply considerable effort toward something if he’s properly incentivized.

The timing ends up being kind of convenient. At first they thought that they’d have to find a dogsitter for 2.0 because her business trip was going to overlap a few days of his stupidass leadership retreat thing, but then her client ended up needing to reschedule.

She holds his hand and lightly digs her thumb into his palm as they stand in the front doorway of their house. He reminds her that it’s just three weekdays — though he suppose that the reminder is more to console himself — that it’s only three weekdays. He tells her he’ll call her later. And she lightly laughs and tells him that he likes camping and being out in the wilderness and stuff.

Their CEO hired a facilitator and an outside consultant to run the retreat. This is the very first time he’s has had to participate in this sort of thing. He didn’t even ask Barristan it was mandatory. The tone was set from the beginning — when he took his most current promotion. The promotion came on the heels of a performance review in which he was told that he is generally great — all of the words just this white noise to him — because far superseding the positives was the bit of criticism he got. Barriston told him that he continues to be far too tactical and needs to become a better strategic partner to his peers — this is feedback that his peers have actually explicitly stated.

The feedback actually made him mope a little bit. He was cranky for a few days, which Missandei noticed. He spent extra time at the gym and extra time running, trying to burn off the thoughts and trying to blank out his mind. And then when the next Monday rolled around, he made the unfortunate mistake of going up to Maya and Greg and asking him how he can better be a strategic partner to them. They were stunned. They had nothing helpful to say back to him.

Barristan told him that sometimes the career path isn’t always up. Sometimes it involves a side-shift. Sometimes people are better suited to be individual contributors forever, rather managers. It’s a different kind of skillset, requiring different expertise. More often than not, individual contributors can make more money as such anyway.

Sometimes, he doesn’t even know what the fuck he is doing in his career anymore.
He and Jaime have been joking about all the trust falls that he’s going to do over the course of the retreat, but once the agenda is set — once he’s clued in, he finds that there are no trust falls. And he wants to just fucking off himself for good.

The leadership of the company is mostly men — mostly white men — beyond him and Maya, who heads up their philanthropy and corporate social responsibility arm. In a moment where he’s stuck with Maya getting food, he freaks out because they are so awkward around each other and the crazy silence between them is really shitty. So he blurs to her that his girlfriend — uh, his wife — actually oversees media production for corporate social responsibility initiatives. Funny coincidence, right?

Maya’s really polite and socially adept. So she grins at him and kindly starts asking him a bunch of questions about Missandei’s work, casually saying that she actually might be interested in a sit-down with Missandei. Questions are things that he can respond to, so he faithfully fills in all of the blanks. All the while, he is pretty painfully aware that he is missing a certain quality that would make this interaction far smoother. It’s a quality that Missandei and all of his friends have.

He spots Maya’s wedding ring — probably for the very first time in the six or so years they have been working together. And then he says, “You are married?”

She nods, her eyes lighting up. “Five years now,” she says. “He’s a detective on the police force.”

“Oh, that’s cool,” he says. And then he pushes himself to think of a follow-up. “That line of work must be stressful?”

“Very stressful,” she says. “But Aaron handles it well. He’s been a detective for . . . eight years now?”

Missy thinks she has reached her limit, in terms of how good of a friend she can be. Clea has dominated the dinner conversation with a lot of overly detailed rambles about her relationship status. Clea is in a bad mood, so Clea is sick of being single today. Being single sucks and all of her dates have just been weird and a waste of time. Clea keeps complaining about the lack of viable men out there. And it’s only going to get worse and worse as they get older. She might as well resign herself to spinsterhood already.

Clea wants a guy who is taller than her. He can’t be divorced. He can’t have kids. Call her old-fashioned, but she wants to do these things with her future husband where it’s the very first time for the both of them. She wants him to have a good job so that he can be in a good position to take care of her and their family. He can’t be one of those childish men-children who are still “finding themselves” in their 30s. He has to be college-educated. He can’t already be losing his hair. He has to be somewhat fit. She’s really sick of swiping left and right. Maybe she should just swear off men for good and just work on herself.

Clea is always swearing off men ever few months. She is also always falling off the wagon on that.

“God, you’re so lucky,” Clea mutters, spearing a grape tomato with her fork. “Grey just fell into your
lap when we were in college.”

“I’m not lucky,” Missandei says automatically. And then she corrects herself. “I mean, I am. I’m very lucky. But I mean, he didn’t just fall into my lap. It’s been a lot of hard work and a lot of ups and downs and stuff. I’ve had to manage my expectations a lot and so did he.” Missy pauses, kind of looking down at her plate and shoving the vegetables around on it. “Maybe your dream guy is actually a short older divorcee with kids already? Maybe that guy is out there and really awesome, and you’re not really even giving him a chance because of like, these unrealistic standards you have.”

He is sweating in nervousness. He doesn’t know at all why there’s any point in talking about his childhood just so he and the rest of the leadership can collectively get better at slinging clothes to women with disposable incomes. It is fucking insane. He finds himself earnestly wishing that there really were trust falls. He would fucking kill for a trust fall.

“Who wants to be the brave soul to volunteer first?”

“I will,” Maya says.

It kind of really bugs her — which she acknowledges is kind of small and petty — that Clea is really not fully understanding what she’s trying to convey.

Missandei generally tries not to talk too much about Grey’s past — because that’s something really personal to him, more personal than their sex life, which she feels okay about, discussing with friends. But she doesn’t really think it’s at all necessary for her friends to know his life story.

But to illustrate a point, she lightly tells Clea that he has had a really violent and scary childhood and that has really messed with him. So sometimes it’s challenging to know what to say to him, or to know how to be there for him. Sometimes she feels lame that all she can do is listen to him. And when she was younger, she thought that her dream guy was like . . . well, Neal. Like, he’d be friends with all her friends. He’d be super romantic. They’d have a little routine where, the worst things they’d bicker about was maybe who would take out the garbage. And they’d have a cute little family and all of that.

But as it is, she knows that sometimes her friends don’t actually even like Grey, and they’re like, uh, why is someone so bubbly and cheerful with such a stink-face? And he’s not very romantic. He’s super pragmatic. Their fights are sometimes about how he thinks she should stop giving her mom and dad money — and sometimes she cries over it because he doesn’t have parents and she feels bad telling him to fuck off and keep his opinions about the money thing to himself. And the kids thing is still touch-and-go and all fraught and stuff.

“So it’s like, hard sometimes —”

“I know,” Clea says, cutting Missy off. “But I wish I could get to the part where I am able to actually work on a relationship. I want to work on one so badly. But I can’t even have the chance.”
“Dude,” Missy says flatly. “It starts with you not looking for some guy based on really superficial details.”

Clea, she knows, is not great with confrontation — not that Missandei thinks the conversation they are having is confrontational. But she knows that Clea thinks it is.

They awkwardly tell their waiter they do not want dessert. They want to get the check so they can settle it and go the fuck home and give each other some space for a while.

Clea has told her she doesn’t want to talk about this anymore. And Missandei is finding hard to respect those wishes. The only way she can do so is to just not say anything anymore. So it’s been silent for a while. But what she really wants to ask Clea — is just exactly what Clea wants from her? What is this friendship supposed to be now? Is it always supposed to be how it was like in college? Is Missy just meant to always tell Clea that she is amazing and perfect and that it’s the rest of the world that is conspiring against her?

That does Clea no favors. And once again — Missy is just struck by the way in which Grey has influenced her personality. Classic story. Boy meets girl. Boy and girl hook up. Boy and girl fall in love. Boy teaches girl how to assert her opinions, thereby alienating all of her friends and family because they are just so fucking weak and fragile.

No. They are not weak and fragile. Just different.

“You smell great,” Missandei says, as she holds her arms out to him. He drops his bag on the ground and walks into the hug, squeezing so tightly that her back cracks. He tells her that he knows he smells not so great.

“No, I’m serious,” she says. “I like it when you smell funky. You smell like such a man. It’s sexy.”

He tiredly laughs, as he drags the both of them to the laundry room. He needs to take care of his dirty clothes right away because — he is fucking nuts. And this sort of thing soothes him. She also soothes him, so that’s why she gets to watch and not help, because he’s incredibly picky about how this stuff is done. Little 2.0 is also vying for his attention, but it’s good for the little girl to not be the fucking center of the universe all the time. So he ignores her for the time being.

“How did it go?” Missandei asks, hopping on the dryer. “Are you like, a better leader now?”

“It actually was really, really cool,” he admits. “I think it’s really going to change how we all work together for the better.”

She swings her head back a little. “Seriously? You were all shitting on it before you left. What happened?”

He tells her that shit got so real. And it got so real for everyone. People have these inner lives that other people are wholly unaware of sometimes. And stuff that happened to them early on affect who
they are adults. And also when people are huge assholes or dicks, it usually betrays some sort of insecurity that they have about themselves. And that affects how they work with each other. And the assumptions they make about each other affect how they work together. And they all had to be really gracious on the second day, when they all went around telling each other stuff that they really appreciate about one another. And stuff that really prevents them from working optimally together.

“Like, we admitted to Dave that we think he talks behind people’s backs too much, and it degrades trust among his peers and also with the people he manages. And when Dave heard that, he nodded and said, ‘I hear you. I understand.’ Can you imagine what it feels like to be Dave and to hear that?”

She’s frowning. “What did they say about you?” She reaches out and tries to grab his shirt, at the same time he starts pulling it over his head to throw it into the wash. He feels her course-correct, brushing her hand against his stomach instead.

He smiles at her worried face when he can see her again. “Stuff I already know,” he says. “They said I come off very cold and very standoffish. Sometimes it reads as snobbery and aggressive. It makes people wary to approach me. Sometimes they have to work around me because they’d rather not ‘bother’ me.” He pauses. “But then, by that point, I think it already made sense to all of us, why we had to go around sharing stuff about our childhood on the first night.” He rubs his neck. “I feel nervous,” he says. “In my job.”

“What? Why?”

“What if I fail? What if I don’t get better at it? What if I try really hard — and it’s just not good enough?”

“Then you get a new job,” she says softly.

He’s the one who takes it upon himself to bring it up. Part of it is that he wants to make a gesture — he wants to convey to her his general seriousness about the things he says to her. The other part of him is proving something to himself — he needs to just get the fuck over his own hang-ups and do the smart thing for the both of them. He has to get better at thinking about them as a unit — not just as two individuals who like to hang out with each other.

Missandei comically straightens in her seat on the couch, pushing her reading glasses up to her nose when he tells her he’s been thinking that they might want to discuss potentially getting a consult on freezing her eggs and whatnot. Which, in all honestly, is probably going to actually be a consult about her freezing her eggs and him freezing his sperm. Actually, it’s probably gonna be about them freezing embryos. And he understands that there will be shit about himself and his body that will be discussed. And as much as he really, really hates putting himself out there — it just seems like . . . the smartest thing to do. Because she was really right about this — she was right from the beginning. He should’ve done a better job of listening to her.

This buys them a fair bit of time. And it’ll lessen the pressure somewhat, giving both of them the space to think things out — to discuss — and then to eventually come to a decision on just whatever they ultimately decide is best for them. And since they have a disposal income and can afford this kind shit like white people — it just makes sense. Thirty is a good age to do it.

“I feel like you’ve thought about this a lot,” Missandei says mildly.
“I have,” he says.

She softens, raising her arms to reach out for him. “Baby. Come here.”
At various points in his life, sometimes he thinks about how certain endeavors would be far easier if he was just high as fuck. He supposes that he will always feel this way from time to time. Because he knows how amazingly easy it is to disengage in that way. It’s hard to be sober and to pay attention and to actively participate.

He tries to not be a total asshole during their initial consult. He has to work to not be overly quiet and tense with the medical consultant. He kind of forces his body to appear relaxed, and he forces himself to follow the thread of Missandei’s small talk with the consultant, chiming in here and there when he thinks it’s appropriate. He mostly does what she has suggested he do when he asked her for advice on this — which is make uh huh noises of agreement and nod along whenever she says true shit. She has suggested that he try and smile a little bit, because his neutral face is pretty intense and angry-looking.

Missandei has to take off her clothes for an ultrasound. He is tasked with unzipping his pants and jacking off into a cup in a sterile room with a modest amount of porn.

He’s initially offered Missandei. Like, he’s told that she can go into the room with him, if it helps. And the clinical sterility of that statement really threw him for a loop, so he short-sightedly and stiffly says no thanks. He can handle masturbating by himself. That’s the nature of the beast, after all.

So after ten minutes of fucking a whole lot of nothing going on — he just utterly hates himself. Because nothing helps. His imagination is completely clouded over with just these bleak thoughts and the overriding awkwardness of it all. He’s trying to tell himself to fucking beat off into the cup already — for the good of his marriage, for his woman, for his hypothetical future child. And that is not at all inspiring him to get it up. Thinking about his hypothetical child is actually a real boner killer. He supposes that’s a good thing. He can be fairly confident he’s not a pedophile.

Fuck.

He zips up his pants and cracks the door open. He feels really defeated and just like a fucking lame asshole, when he looks into the expectant faces of Missandei and their consultant. And he says, “Yeah, so, I might actually need help after all.”

“Oh!” Missandei says, looking almost startled. “Oh, okay. You’re talking to me. Oh, okay.” She shuts the magazine in her lap before she deposits it back onto a side table. And then she looks around her chair as she gathers up her stuff — her phone and her purse and her keys.
“Perfectly normal,” their consultant, a woman named Annie, says, laughing lightly. “Happens all the time. A lot of men report that it’s very weird and very difficult to do it on command.” She laughs again. She’s so nice. And she seems good at her job.

Missandei is holding her large purse against her stomach as she tells Annie that they will be “right back.”

“Take your time.”

She runs her hand up his chest, to rest it on his shoulder. And then she laughs in his face. She just about doubles over laughing. And when she catches his really pissed-off expression, she snorts and buries her laugh into his skin, into his neck. And she apologizes through the giggles — but she tells him that he has to admit, this is really fucking funny.

“I thought you were here to help a brother out? I didn’t realize you were here to mock and to laugh at my shitty plumbing.”

She immediately quiets at that, her eyes wide and open, searching his face. “Baby,” she says softly. “Dude, I don’t even have the time to have a whole pep talk where you spend hours telling me my plumbing isn’t shitty. Whatever. How do you want to do this?”

“Um, well, we don’t want to mess with the sample,” she says. “So maybe we’ll just do a classic. A handjob?”

He shrugs. He knows he’s being a petulant bitch about this — which does not help whatsoever. But whatever. He’s starting to feel fatalistic about this. He’s starting to think about how jacked his dick is. And how — if Missandei had never met him — she probably wouldn’t even be in this position at all. She’d probably be carefree and happy and intensely satisfied from all the amazing and fulfilling sex she’d be having with some fucking asshole who isn’t him.

She slaps him in the face — lightly enough not to maim — but still hard enough to shock. He stares at her with his mouth open.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she says, yanking at his pants, unbuttoning it, making his body lightly bounce with her no-nonsense motions. His zipper goes down. “And you need to shut the fuck up because you’re wrong.” And then her hand pushes down his underwear, before she extracts him.

A lot of nothing happens. He’s really soft still. He’s really, really not feeling this.

She presses her body against his, all soft and encased in expensive workout clothes, the kind he sometimes picks on just to mess with her. He likes to tell her how much her clothes cost wholesale. He likes to tell her about the markups and how she’s essentially throwing money into a hole. And she likes to remind him — again — again again again — that his suits are fucking ridiculous and some underpaid child in a developing country probably sewed it together with bleeding fingers.
She tells him that he must be a little bit excited. They haven’t been allowed to fuck in three days. It must be nice to be touched again like this. He swallows the lump in his throat, and he tells her that it’s kind of nice, though he really wishes this was taking place in the privacy of their home. He tells her that they actually haven’t fucked in longer than three days. Three days ago, they just had a quickie when they woke up in the morning — one that lasted all of ten minutes. He reminds her that they’ve been going through quite the dry spell.

At that, she grabs his hand and places it on her tank top, her shirt. He pulls down a little bit, exposing the swells of her breasts. And her voice has a sultry, slutty quality when she asks him if he misses her body.

“God, yeah,” he says. And this is working. This is starting to work. He feels himself getting hard in her hand.

“I’ve missed you, too,” she says softly, before her teeth pinch down on his cheek. “I’ve missed your body — inside mine — a lot.”

“Yeah?” He grunts, running his thumb over her soft skin.

Her mood does a complete one-eighty after his body seizes up and he comes into a plastic cup. She’s immediately in a rush, holding the sample, putting it on the counter, muttering that it has to stay at body temperature — so can he like, pull up his pants and make himself presentable so that they can open the door and let the professionals do their job?

He kind of feels betrayed. And he kind of wants to punch her in the face even though he knew what she was doing the whole time.

When she comes home late from work, she sees a really pretty bouquet of mixed flowers on their table, and she does a kind of shocked double-take. She follows the smell of garlic into the kitchen, as she stoops down to pick up little Momo 2.0. Grey hates it when she greets their dog right away when she comes home. He says it teaches 2.0 bad habits. Like, it’s okay to jump on them to get cuddles. But today, he watches her smooch and hug 2.0, and he doesn’t say anything about it.

“I made you dinner,” he announces, turning back to the stove.

He’s still in his suit. She knows that he only got home half an hour ago. She places 2.0 back on the ground and she says, “What’s going on?” suspiciously. She crosses her arms protectively over her chest. He’s being weird. He’s acting weird. And she’s scared that there’s some bad news around the corner.

“What?” he says. “Nothing going’s on.”

“What’s with the flowers?”

“They’re for you.”
She stiffens. “Where did you get them?”

“At the grocery store,” he says, his shoulders tensing as he fiddles around with the heat underneath his pan. “When I stopped off after work.”

“Why?” she says, feeling the familiar feeling of panic settling in. “What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

He slaps the pan back down on the stove. The sound is loud and angry, and it makes her flinch. And then he silently starts dropping food into a couple of bowls that he already has ready on the countertop. It’s rice and beans with a little bit of pork. It’s comfort food. He drops the pan into the sink and runs a little bit of water over it before he turns around and gives her an unimpressed look, handing a bowl with a spoon shoved into it, to her. He picks up a bowl of greens he had already prepared. “Where do you want to eat?” he asks. “Do you want to eat here? Do you want to eat in front of the TV? Do you want to actually have a meal at the table?”

She frowns. “Why are you mad at me? What did I do to you already?”

He scoffs. “I was trying to do nice shit for you because you fucking texted and said you were starving and you were having a shitty day. I rearranged my schedule at the end of the day so that I could beat you home. And I already feel really fucking lame and vulnerable about it because I had to tell people that I was cutting out of a meeting because I had to go handle some personal shit — which sounded all fucking alarming when I told people that. So they were asking if everything was okay, and I was like, feeling fucking stupid and telling them it was fine. And I just ended up just telling them the truth. And that was hard. And then you fucking come home and just give me so much fucking attitude!”

“Oh my God,” she interrupts. “Stop yelling at me! Give me a second to process this. Jesus, Grey.”

She tells him that dinner is really, really good. Really awesome. And his mood darkens further at that because, she knows, he thinks she’s saying that because he’s being sensitive and she’s trying to placate him. That’s honestly part of it. Just a small part of it though.

The bigger truth is that she feels like an utter asshole. She wants to go back in time and erase the whole period where she came home and acted like his body was taken over by an alien. If she could redo it, she’d come home and would gush all over how fucking cute he is being and maybe give him a fucking blow job and kill this dry-spell for good, because he’s being so considerate.

But she finds — with him just upset and tense as fuck — it’s hard to transition from this to blow job.

He tells her he needs to clear his head. He’s going to go out for a quick run. She tells him that she can come with — she hasn’t been able to get to the gym in a long while. But he tells her that honestly, he’d rather be alone for a little bit.

The weather is getting warmer. Their stupid wedding is actually just around the corner. And maybe
that’s been a silent source of stress for the both of him. After all, he is the asshole that is forcing a woman to marry him because he cannot stand to be alone forever. She’s giving up all of her hopes and her dreams so that she can be shackled to him forever. And he’s excited to get to the point in their lives where they just start to resent the shit out of each other, for everything that they can’t be to each other.

He’s such an idiot. He’s such a jerk. He just finds this shit so inordinately hard. He can’t even completely blame her, for responding the way she did to the flowers. Even hearing the word flowers in his own head makes him cringe. God, he cares so much — and it looks awkward. God, he fucking loves her so much — and it looks awkward. God, he is being so fucking awkward and so fucking foolish and he just hates it all — how he cannot even convey really simple things.

He’s probably never going to get good at this shit. They are going to get divorced because of this shit.

She keeps eyeing the clock. She keeps trying to calm herself down and stop all of the crying before he gets home. So that she doesn’t further bum him the fuck out. She wants to call up Clea and scream something like, “Does this look easy to you, bitch?”

She’s being stupid and crying into the dishes as she tries to ineptly wash them. She’s so bad at washing dishes. He’s not that neurotic. It’s not a huge deal, to wash the dishes by hand instead of using the dishwasher that they paid a lot of money for.

God, he is fucking bonkers. And this is stupid. It’s so soapy and inefficient. But whatever. She will wash the stupid dishes by hand because she’s in love with some hot crazy guy.

She hears the door open. And she hears his footsteps.

And then she feels his arms come around her midsection. And she’s about to tell him that she knows she’s doing the fucking dishes all wrong — but she’s hopeless and she will probably never do them correctly. She might need to be shown again.

But he says, “Jesus. Thank you. I’m really sorry for overreacting about everything. That was a really weird and bullshit way to respond to you.”

“I’m sorry for being dense!” she says immediately, turning around in his arms, before tightly hugging him to her body. “Thanks for the flowers, baby. I love them. Thank you for dinner. I loved that, too.”

He spanks her on the ass, and he asks her if she’s ready. She looks ahead with determination — and she says she’s ready. She also warns him and Drogo — she tells them that they better not buddy-up and fucking leave her behind if they know what’s good for them.

They got there kind of late, so they are near the back, maybe in the fourth or fifth wave. Dany wisely opted out of this activity. Dany doesn’t like to roll around in the dirt. They are meeting her for dinner later.
Grey spontaneously reaches out for her, hugging her to his body, encasing her head in his arm as he kisses her head. He says, “This looks ridiculous.”

She spends the first kilometer of the “race” — the air quotes are very important — being careful, trying not to get her shoes soaked in muddy water. But when she slips — and she panics in mid-air because she doesn’t want to sprain her stupid ankle again — and lands ass-first in goopy, splashy mud — she gets over the whole being clean thing.

Drogo’s hands are immediately grabbing onto her arms, trying to help lift her up. He says, “Shit. Are you okay, Missy?”

And Grey’s laughing at her, as he half-heartedly bends over to pick at her tank top, to assist Drogo in getting her back to her feet. “Man! I wish someone was recording that!” he says. “You looked so funny when you fell. By the way, are you okay, babe?”

She swats him. “How many times do I need to tell you? Be concerned about my well-being before you laugh at me. You’re always getting it backwards.”

Both Dany and Drogo look like they’re about to barf, when Missandei asks them to remind her how long they’ve been dating. Missy’s not sure what they take offense to — the notion that they are dating or the length of time in which they have been dating. Drogo kind of awkwardly shrugs and asks, “When exactly are you supposed to start counting?”

“Have you met his moms yet?” Missandei asks Dany mildly.

Drogo’s eyes widen. And he urgently shakes his head no. Dany’s eyes track over to Drogo and she’s kind of unreadable.

Grey laughs. “What’s the hold up?”

“And how long was it before you met her family?” Drogo throws back aggressively.

“Fuck you, technically before we were together,” Grey says. “I met them while we were still in college.”

Drogo rolls his eyes.

“What am I missing?” Dany asks. “I’m missing some context here.”

“Babe,” Missandy says. “His mom is like, salivating for him to get married and give her more grandbabies. She’s been hurting for it, for years now.”

“Ohhh,” Dany says slowly. “Damn. I don’t think she’s gonna like me.”

“Probably not,” Drogo says gravely. “You’re kind of hard to like.”
“I really am,” Dany says, sounding very serious about it.

“So that’s why you’ve been putting it off,” Grey surmises.

“Bingo.”

“Do they know that Dany exists?”

“Nope. Not even my sisters. Because they will blab.”

“Oh man!” Missandei says, kind of wiggling in her seat in a songless little dance. “I can’t wait for you to meet his family. It’s going to be so entertaining.”

“Yeah, so I dunno,” Drogo says. “I’m kinda waiting for this relationship to end organically. So that it becomes a non-issue.”

Dany hunches her shoulders slightly, the curtain of her hair lightly swaying with the movement. She shrugs and nods at the same time. She says, “Maybe. Maybe that will happen. Never know.”

Drogo’s laugh is jarring and loud. He reaches a hand out and softly shoves at Dany’s shoulder. She’s so much smaller than he is, but remarkably solid, so she barely moves. And Drogo grins at her and says, “See! You’re kind of funny. Sometimes. That was almost funny. Good job, man.”

Her face breaks out into a grin. It’s so weird to look at. And she continues nodding and shrugging. “I’ve been known to say a joke. At times.”

“See, I find you to be very pleasant,” Grey says to Dany, purposely, leaning back in his chair. “You’re straightforward and honest. I don’t know what Jaime’s problem with you is.”

“Jaime doesn’t like me?” Dany asks.

Drogo is glaring daggers at him. And that’s the point. Grey kind mimics Missandei, innocently swaying a little in his seat.

“That’s fine,” Dany says. “I honestly find him to be very obnoxious. A lot of his self-confidence is unwarranted.”

She’s pretending she’s calm and cool as a cucumber — but she’s actually nervous as hell. Being with him has made her a jittery, anxiety-riddled person.

Just kidding. She was already angsty and nervous and full of anxiety before they met. But he does make her feel it all much closer to the surface of her skin. She’s not religious, but she finds that this is one of those times in life that she wants to pray. She holds onto his hand tightly as they drive to the clinic for their second appointment. They’re not saying very much — he has to be lost in his own thoughts, too.

But she really, really, really hopes that if there is a problem or an issue — that it’s her problem and her issue. She really, really wishes that they aren’t about to uncover another fucking thing about him — because it’s so fucking unfair, how much one person has to fucking withstand in a lifetime.
Missy makes Dr. Petrov jump in his seat, when she suddenly screeches — drops an expletive — and loudly says, “My man!” before she raises her hand for Grey to high-five.

He lamely slaps her hand in a daze — as Dr. Petrov’s words just swirl around in his head. He never thought he’d be so fucking pleased to hear the word average associated with himself. He has a very average, very mundane, very normal sperm count.

He also doesn’t have AIDS or syphilis or any crazy blood disorder. That’s stuff he already knows — but it still feels good to have it confirmed by a medical professional again.

She keeps hearing him constantly laughing in relief — or disbelief. He casually reaches over and pats her knee as he drives. He talks about how funny it was — how freaked out the both of them were about the results of some very simple tests and how they were both trying to pretend they weren’t freaked out about it. He talks about how he feels a weight has been lifted off his shoulders. He talks about how now he can be sure that his problems in bed — he means his issues in bed — are purely psychological, probably. Not physiological. Physically, he seems to be fine. What a relief. Maybe he should’ve talked to a doctor about this years ago? He was so stupid and silly. But live and learn. He laughs again.


She looks over at him — he’s trying to keep his eyes on the road, but he’s also grinning at her, just all widely like he cannot contain it. She says to him, “Let’s just go home, baby.”

He gasps and tries to twist his body away from her pawing hand, which is elbow-deep down his pants. He groans and lightly hits his forehead against the inside of the driver’s side door — just kind of dwelling for a moment on her warm hand working up and down his dick. It’s rough and not smooth because it’s all so dry, but it still feels so, so good. He then carefully peels her off him — before driving into their garage — before shutting off the car engine.

She is already unbuttoning her shirt. Her hand flies out to clasp the back of his neck, before she slants her wet mouth over his, immediately sucking, immediately running her tongue against his. She grabs his hand and blindly shoves it into her now-exposed bra, rubbing his palm over her nipple.

He breaks the kiss, panting. God. He pulls his hand off of her boob. He lifts her hand — again — out of his pants.

He mutely and sluggishly opens up his door — he’s so fucking turned on, of course he is. They have been having very little sex lately. This might be a once in a lifetime opportunity. He pushes his body out of the fucking car, fighting with her as her hand tugs insistently on the back of his jeans, her fingers clawing at his belt.
“We’re not going to fuck in the car!” he tells her, his voice cracking from the effort of yanking his body out of her grasp.

“Baby, I’m so fucking horny right now.”

It makes him laugh. “Yeah, no. I get that,” he says, still laughing at her, staring at her through the windshield. The car is beeping because her door is open. And she looks deeply fuckable. Her shirt is unbuttoned. She’s wearing the purple lacy bra. Her lips are swollen and red and smeared — lipstick. And her hair is a mess — the work of her own hands from the drive home from the doctor’s office. Apparently, hearing that he is very, very average really does it for her.

“Come on,” he raggedly says to her. “Come here.”

He watches her grab the plastic bag at her feet — before she shakily gets up.
Chapter Summary

It's one of those all-sex chapters, one in which we learn what Missandei's greatest turn-on is. And we also learn that Drogo is really self-aware and full of untapped wisdom.

She rips open the condom packet with her teeth, empties it into her hand, and throws the wrapper on the ground. She can hear him balk and say, “Come on, Missandei. The waste bin is like, right there.”

She mutters that he’s so fucking annoying but so fucking hot, and no one will have him but her. His expression is a bizarre mix of wounded baby bird and dark hell demon that wants to kill her with his dick. And it really gets her going — it’s really something attractive to her. She sucks in air through her teeth and she reaches out to cup him, to make him freeze in her hand as she handles one of his most sensitive parts. She lightly squeezes him — and then she squeezes him harder. He has told her that this part, the part where she pinches his nuts in her fingers — is more terrifying than it is a turn on. She has asked him who’s supposed to be turned on in these moments — him or her? Because she likes feeling like she can maim the fuck out of him. That kind of power is a turn on.

She holds the condom up to the light to try and see through it. They haven’t used a condom in years.

He tells her he feel like he’s a college kid again. Minus the morphine. Minus all of the severe depression and lackluster hard-ons. She ignores all of his sad shit. She gamely tells him that he can always fuck her in the ass — if they want to be real safe about it.

He lightly laugh-scoffs. “Oh, do you not get pregnant through the ass?” he deadpans.

“Oh, shit,” he says, when he sees her get down on all fours and present herself to him — after a very, very minimal amount of foreplay. “So this is how we gonna do?” he says, as he lays his hand on her butt cheek, lightly maneuvering her to the side. “Shit. Not in the ass, baby.” He laughs, digging his fingers into her skin a little bit. “You’re so funny sometimes. Just all normal, okay? Shit. You’re so crazy. Shit.”

She echoes that. She says, “Shit,” as her arms go shaky, as she feels the latexed head of his erection insistently press against her, pushing into her body. Her face goes really hot and tears kind of just spring to her eyes in reflex. It’s kind of hitting her hard — that they’re about to fuck.

When he’s fully inside of her, she moans before she says, “Oh my God. Hold on for a second.” Because he feels so fucking amazing and she just wants to bask in it for a second. She just wants to
allow herself to catch up for a second.

“Wait. Isn’t that my line?”

There’s a certain perversion in the way they’re having sex. She’s gritting her teeth — grabbing fistfuls of their sheets and blankets, trying to sync up with his rhythm so she can slam herself backward, to meet his forward thrusts. It’s actually pretty painful — he’s hitting her cervix every time — and here, he is not so average — but it also feels so good and so meaningful. She’s yelling at him to just please, fuck her harder. And then she calls him a fucking bitch, for not fucking her hard enough. And then she starts semi-coherently taunting him for being such a pussy. And then he grunts and angrily slams into her so hard a few times in quick succession that she cries out and almost collapses because it really, really hurts. And she tells him that she wants him to fuck her so hard that the condom breaks, rendering this sex they are having unprotected.

Which is completely counterintuitive to what they are trying to do. And she is just full of primal mutterings and nonsensical shouts at him.

She’s scared him. He freezes for a moment back there, hesitant.

And she yells at him again. She says, “Jesus! Can you stop being such a girl! Jesus, come on! Don’t stop, you fucking bitch! Are you a man, or are you a little bitch?”

“Babe,” he says. And then he makes a choked noise in the back of his throat. And then he probably thinks better of what he was about to say. And then she hears him sigh. And then she suddenly pitches forward as his hips snap harshly against her ass — her face almost hits the headboard if not for her hand stopping the momentum. She muffles a scream. And his voice is pitched low, even, and steady as he speeds back up, as he says, “You are fucking bananas. Is this what you want? Is this how you want me to treat you?”

She hates him, and she fucking loves him. She whimpers as she sinks her face down toward the bed.

The human brain. Is just a mess of contradictions sometimes.

Her heart is still slamming in her chest, as he collapses next to her, after getting rid of the used condom. He’s told her he doesn’t love using a condom. It’s a numbing thing. It’s a barrier thing. She likes that it makes him last a little bit longer. But that’s about it. She reminds him that it won’t be forever. Just until an omelette gets extracted. She nudges for him to roll over onto his back so she can cuddle up on him, as he grabs his phone off the nightstand.

“What are you doing?” she says, resting her hand on his stomach, tracing the lines of his abs, kind of inching her way back to his dick — currently his very cute, very flaccid, very overworked dick. She’s kind of trying to air-dry herself — her legs still spread out widely, over his. She wants to fuck again already.

So she is waiting for him to like — stop being so fucking lame and male. She is waiting for the
refractory period to be over.

“I’m texting Jaime,” he says.

Her laugh is so loud that it surprises him. He twitches next to her. He’s so typical. And he’s so cute. He has friends that he’s close with. And it’s so cute. His phone chimes and she can see him struggle not to let himself smile too obviously, as he reads Jaime’s response. She can see the tremor in his cheek.

“What’s the matter?”

“Basketball, duh.” He snickers. “And also my sperm count. No big deal.”

“Your very, very average sperm count,” she says teasingly. She’s sprawled all over him now, pressing her warm mouth to his warm chest, half kissing his skin, half licking at the salty sweat that is drying. She nips her teeth at his nipple. He has told her it does a whole lot of nothing for him — not an erogenous area or whatever. A lot of his body is insensitive — for self preservation reasons, perhaps. Or perhaps it’s just innate to him. But he does feel pain. He yelps and glares at her whenever she bites down too hard. Her hand slyly brushes up against his soft, tacky penis — which makes him flinch because he’s still sensitive — perhaps his penis is extra sensitive and vulnerable to compensate for the rest of his body.

And nope. No go, yet.

“God, you want to fuck,” he says, running his hand down her back to grab at her butt. “Sometimes you don’t want to fuck at all. And now you want to go again.” He sighs. “It’s not fair.”

She smiles into him. She says, “What’s not fair?”

“That you get to decide when we have sex.”

“No, I don’t. Remember? That’s one of the things we’ve worked on.”

“Well, you get to decide when we have fun sex,” he amends. “How can I get you to want to have fun sex all the time?” he whispers.

“Oh my God.” She nudges her way up his body so that she can plant a kiss on his face. “You’re so cute. You’re the fucking cutest.” First it’s his chin, and then his cheek, and then she’s pushing herself into an awkward sitting position so that she can get to his mouth. And first it’s simple and it’s chaste and comforting. But then he pushes open her mouth and sweeps over her tongue with his — and it is game time.

His phone gets dropped on the bed as he frees up both of his hands. As one sneaks in between her legs. She lightly whimpers because she’s ready — she’s like, ready. She’s swollen and her heart never even got a chance to slow down and she didn’t come from the rough sex earlier. And she’s sliding back down the bed so that she can lie on her back, because she’s done this with this guy enough times — like hundreds of times — to know his ticks and his habits.

They are still kissing — her end of it really inelegant and stupid — as he pushes two fingers inside of her.
He’s muttering these manly words of encouragement to her — his face in between her breasts — and it all sounds really hot and really sexy — as she nears closer and closer to her fucking orgasm.

And when it hits — as she grinds into his hand — it makes her wonder — just why the fuck it’s been so long since they’ve had sex. Because sex feels so good and he feels so good and she can just do this forever and ever with him — just all the time.

She leans forward a little bit and claws at him — one hand is anchoring him to her clit, the other is grabbing that stupid face so she can shove her tongue into it.

The kiss is messy and sloppy — no finesse at all. It’s just something to occupy his mouth so he can’t talk, as she squeezes her thighs around his hand, as she smears herself against him, as she gropes the shit out of him with her left hand — as she quickly and roughly works him from soft to still-soft-but-maybe-not-as-soft, as his breathing stutters and he breaks the kiss to groan out some tension.


She gasps as her orgasm crests — as it starts to taper off into little aftershocks. “Oh my God,” she grinds out, squeezing harder around his hand. “Please hurry — I need this body.”

“I know,” he says. “Sorry.” And then he adds, “I honestly don’t know what I did to cause this. You are so into me right now.”

She pants out his name in a whine, as her body shudders one last time before it goes boneless and weak. She’s sweating. And the bed is all damp in some places, wet in others. She can smell the earthy musk of what he does to her. And she reaches out for him — to get him to put his weight on her, to get him to press his hard body against her tired one, to anchor themselves to one another.

She buries her face into his neck and she asks him if he really wants to talk about this again — right now. She feels him shrug.

How this excruciating conversation usually goes down — and it is excruciating because most conversations about sex and why they aren’t having very much of it are stressful and fraught with his self-blame — is that she usually talks at him for long minutes, struggling to explain how she feels, all the while knowing that she is just one-half of the formula. So sometimes she uneasily puts words into his mouth, guessing what he’s feeling and his experience on the matter — because he’s frustratingly quiet, though not in an obstinate or purposeful way. She honestly thinks he’s just lost and he has no vocabulary sometimes, for this kind of discussion. He keeps sabotaging himself in this conversation by constantly telling her that it’s okay that she doesn’t want to have sex with him all the time. He gets it.

He actually doesn’t get it.

“I hate to generalize, but sex for dudes is easy. You see a naked woman, and you’re like, good to go.”

“Okay,” he says skeptically. “I don’t think so. That’s not actually how it works for me.” He squeezes her butt. “Not just any naked woman.”

“Ohkay, maybe not,” she concedes.

When she’s stressed out and tired from all of the external factors in their lives, she feels vulnerable and kind of sad in those moments. She looks at him when she is overwhelmed, when he is being sweet, and she thinks about how he makes her life easier and how lucky she is to have him. And it
makes her want to physically glom onto his body in a bunch of hugs and cuddles. She doesn’t really want to take off her clothes and act like a porn star — because of how she’s feeling about herself.

She has gathered that he’s different. It’s totally weird to her, but even in the moments when they’re both stressed to hell, even in moments when she’s annoying the shit out of him — he has told her — he’d still like to fuck. He can separate sex from everything else with this crazy emotional wall.

But that’s just not how she operates. She hates to bring up Neal — but she couldn’t even do a friends with benefits thing with that guy because she’s so emotional and clingy. All the one-night stands she’s ever had made her depressed and they made her hate herself. And she doesn’t mind bringing up their relationship — hers and Grey’s — and how it came about. She couldn’t even bear to be friends with benefits with him — because obviously she was so in love with him and it was so easy to be so in love with him. She’s just like, a huge girl when it comes to sex. “And we have been having sex,” she reminds him. “You act like you’re deprived.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I love it when we have sex, and it feels like you’re letting me fuck you out of obligation.”

She lightly swats him, before pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“I hear you, okay?” he says. “I get it. You’re saying I shouldn’t take it personally. It’s just life stuff. But what I’m asking is — what makes today different?”

“We got great news today,” she says softly. “It makes me so happy. For you. For us. And you looked so happy, too — in the car. You were just — you know — all handsome and confident and smiley — and I thought it was so wonderful and attractive.” Her heart is in her throat. She fists away the tear tracks that have made their way down the sides of her face, disappearing in her hair.

“So me being happy really does it for you, huh?”

“Yeah,” she responds in wonderment — this is the first time this has been articulated in this way — and she’s stunned to find that it’s completely simple and so true. “It really does.”

“Oh, shit — so easy,” he says, laughing, lifting himself and propping his head up on his hand. He playfully draws a line between her breasts. “I’ll just be happy all the time now, now that I know it will get me nice and laid.”

She catches his finger, encasing it in her hand. “I love it when you’re like this. I love it so much.”

“I love it when you’re not wearing clothes,” he says. “That’s apparently all it takes.”

She’s sick of lying down all day — they have had a lot of protected sex. He’s probably had his fill. And she’s still really, really into it. And she has asked him if he wants to like — get other things done, because they can just move on with their day and stuff. And he just kind of went into his adorable mode again — told her that he can keep having sex with her. He reminds her that it’s not at all difficult to have sex with her. Though honestly, his dick feels raw and red, like it just got some sort of skin graft. Maybe they can do oral shit so that his dick can get a break.

He just cracks her up so badly sometimes.
To give his dick a break, she throws on a shirt and pulls him into the kitchen for a snack. She digs in their freezer and finds an old carton of sorbet and a hard cheese. She feels him come up behind her as she bends over the garbage bin and tries to scrape off the freezer burn bits — the cheese is probably okay.

He runs his hand down her spine. She doesn’t tell him this — because her feelings on this are so mercurial and constantly shifting. But right now — right at this moment — she thinks it would be so very wonderful to have a baby with him.

She’s sitting on the counter and the back of her feet are lightly hitting the cupboard doors. His hands are on her thighs, smoothing up and down them as she feeds him some really shitty mango sorbet. He hates being fed — he says it makes him feel infantilized. She’s seen him angrily swat food out of Jaime’s hand before. But he puts up with it sometimes, with her. It’s one of those silly things that actually make her feel special.

“You know, Drogo wants to have kids, too,” she says to him.

“Oh yeah?”

“You didn’t know that?”

He smiles. “We don’t really talk about that kind of stuff when we hang out.”

She smiles back at him. No, she supposes they don’t talk about that kind of stuff that much when they hang out. She puts down the empty carton of sorbet and clasps her hands behind his neck. She leans forward, finding his lips cold and sugary and cute. He’s still just one of the fucking cutest things she’s ever been exposed to. Sometimes him being so cute makes her think that a little kid version of him running around would just . . . destroy her. In a good way.

After they pull apart, she says, “Drogo and I were talking about this not too long ago. And he made me so mad, actually. I was talking about me and you — and all the ways our life would change drastically with a kid. And he was telling me that at the very least, I had you. Because his mom was basically a single mom with a shitty job — with a huge family to take care of. Drogo was basically telling me to count my lucky stars, because I was only talking about one kid. And I had a partner in you. So he was basically telling me to quit my bitching.”

“And then you punched him out?” Grey says dryly.

“Actually no,” she says, pulling him closer to her body by digging the heels of her feet into his ass. “I wasn’t mad yet. Actually, I just started telling him that I’d have to put my career on pause to have a baby, rearrange my priorities, feel constantly guilty when I go back to work and leave my kid with a stranger — all of that stuff. And he was being careful about it, but he said that it sucks for children when your mom isn’t home very much.”

“And then you punched him out?”

“Baby, no. Stop interrupting.”

He smirks. “Sorry.”
“Yeah, so I told him that I really don’t want to be a stay-at-home mom. I mean, I know this about myself. And he was saying that, from his point of view, it’s best if there’s a parent at home. And I totally get why he believes that and why he said that. But I was getting pretty sensitive about that. So I told him that it’s unfair that people automatically assume that the mother would stay at home — like, that’s why I feel really uneasy and unsure about having a baby. I think people assume they’d go to the zoo with their kid and teach their kid how to not be a shitty person and that’s all fun and stuff. But I think about how I’d just have to sacrifice so much. It’s like — what did I even bust my ass for — in school and in work — to just give it all up to be at home with a kid? And anyway, so Drogo was getting touchy, too. He told me that he wasn’t saying women had to stay home — totally not what he was saying. I was reading too much into things. He clarified and he said it just makes financial sense for the person making less money to stay home. And that’s when I lost it.”

“That’s when you punched him out,” he supplies.

“Well, I mostly just talked fast at him and said that the person he was talking about — was me. I fucking make less money! I will always make less money than you do. So that means that I have to be trapped at home with a crying baby and just want to slit my wrists while you are off in the world being a badass and doing coolass adult shit? Forever? Just because I’m the loser that makes less money? And I happen to be the woman, so of course I’m the loser that makes less money, who has to stay home with the kid because, what else am I good for? And I asked Drogo — ‘Is that what you’re saying to me?’ And then he told me to calm down. He told me I was reading too much into it. He was just being logical. It just makes financial sense. And I just wanted to cry in frustration.” She frowns. “Oh, wait. I actually did cry. It was very awkward.”

Grey sighs. “Missandei,” he says, palming her cheek. “You know that Drogo is an idiot, right?”

She frowns, nodding. “I told him that if he and Dany have a kid — then he’d be the one to stay at home then. How would he feel about that? And he was like, ‘Oh, fine. I’d feel fine about it.’ And I was like, fuck you, dude — guy who fucking freaked the fuck out and became an alcoholic with the very first career setback he experienced. Please, hypocrite, preach down to me some more. God. It must be so easy to be a man.” She raises her face up. “Now I’m mad at him all over again.”

Grey reminds her that he’s not Drogo. It’s an unnecessary reminder, but it really comforts her, all the same. And she thinks that he must be really strategic about this — he must be feeding her all the shit she wants to hear — as she listens to him tell her that he’s thought about this and he generally gets where she’s coming from. He’s never cared about his job the way she cares about hers — he has always said that it was something cool to do for the time being, but again — women’s clothes is not one of his passions in life. He could leave it. If it’s really necessary to have a parent at home — that could be him. He’s okay with that.

Admittedly, he’d rather not, though. That’s the truth. So maybe they shouldn’t have a kid if the both of them are gonna be lazy and half-assed about this. But at the same time, he also doesn’t hold Drogo’s opinion — that it’s necessary for a parent to be around all the time. He didn’t have parents around for very long. He raised himself. It was fine. But then — what does he know? He is all messed up because of that. But whatever. Their hypothetical kid is still way better off. And Jesus, people who have parents who love them so much tend to be very weak, very fragile, very sensitive people anyway.

“Like, Nick’s mom really loves him and thinks he’s the very best thing in the whole world,” Grey
“Nick’s great as a friend. But I do not want him on my team when the apocalypse comes. He will be first to die.”

“What?” she asks quizzically. “Because you’d kill him yourself or other people would kill him because he’s so weak?”

“I dunno,” he mutters. “Either. I’d have to make a game-time decision on it and stuff. Who knows what the circumstances will be? We could just get hungry or something and someone has to die for the greater good.”

She grabs his ears to pull his face towards hers — so their foreheads are touching. And then she says, “I am so. Fucking. In love with you. Put a baby in me right now. Oh my God, I am joking. Don’t do it. Yet. Maybe not ever. God. Life so hard.”
Jaime is Grey's fake best man

Chapter Summary

Jhiqui pops! Grey and Brienne hang out like besties! Truth bombs get dropped at a pseudo bachelor party!

Missandei asks him about five times over the course of the week, if he wants to tag along on Sunday and meet Jhiqui’s kid — a boy. His first instinct is to say no, but he keeps saying maybe. He doesn’t really like other people’s kids. He likes Pippa okay. But that’s because Pippa is older and cute and actually has long-term memory. She can make corny jokes her dad taught her and synthesize new information.

He’s still loitering around in front of the TV when he says, “Do you want me to come along?”

“She’s standing in the door with her purse hanging off her arm and car keys jingling in her hands. “I honestly don’t care. Come. Don’t come. Just pick one.”

He sighs loudly. And then he pushes himself off the couch. “Fine. I’m coming. Fuck.”

She’s not in the mood to be around a baby, either. So she has no capacity to be upbeat and to lift the both of them up with optimism. The drive to Jhiqui and Nick’s is quiet. She tepidly gives him some information about the childbirth that she learned second-hand from Doreah. Like, Jhiqui didn’t poop on the table. She tells him just to have something topical to talk to him about.

She has some sort of mental blockage with this. Jhiqui is the first of her best friends to have a baby. And what she’s used to in her life — is that she’s used to not being friends with people anymore, after they have babies. That certainly was the case with her Myr friends. And she knows she’s being kind of stupid about this. But it’s just something on her mind. She’s going to try not to feign interest when she has no interest. But it’s making her a bit dour.

He’s so fucking bored. He wants to kill himself. And he knows that Missandei is really bored, too. So he wants to kill her, also. To humanely put her out of her misery. They can both die, together and happy.
Jhiquí’s mom and Jhiquí’s cousins and sister are also at the house. They keep asking Jhiquí questions about the baby and about childbirth. And he’s a real jackass, because to him, it is all inconsequential shit.

“Fifty Shades,” Jhiquí says, talking over the flurry of activity going on around her. “Good to see you, man.”

“You’re breastfeeding,” he says, staring at where the baby has latched onto Jhiquí’s tit. He’s really just making the most painfully obvious observation ever. And it’s honestly weird to see a baby attached to a thing that he has only associated with sex.

“Thanks for not being disgusted, man,” Jhiquí says, almost looking pleased by his inquisitive staring. “You’re being better than my brothers and dad.”

“Your baby is tiny. And wrinkly.” Another really obvious observation.

“He’s looks like a mole rat, I know.”

“He’s very light-skinned.”

“Oh, for real. He needs a tan, stat,” Jhiquí says, sighing. “I don’t want people to think I’m this kid’s nanny when I take him out. Missandei told me you got your Tdap, right?”

“Yeah, dude. Months ago. Not for your baby, though. Because my doctor told me to.”

“Yeah, cool. Just making sure. I gotta. You know?”

“Yeah, no. I get it.”

“Mom!” Jhiquí snaps suddenly, turning to her mother, who had been leaning over and trying to adjust the baby in Jhiquí’s arms. “Can you give me some space!” It sets into motion an explosion of noise — as Jhiquí’s mom snaps back at her in Dothraki. As a bunch of her cousins wildly gesture up and down with their hands — as Jhiquí yells back at them. He suspects that they are criticizing the way Jhiquí is holding her baby.

Grey looks over at Nick, who just looks incredibly shell-shocked and just . . . full of despair.

Jhiquí grabs Missandei’s hand and pulls her closer. Missandei sits down in the chair next to the couch. Jhiquí’s mom has the baby on the other end of the sectional, cooing over him and chatting about his features to Jhiquí’s aunts and cousins in Dothraki as he sleeps.

“Oh my God, thank you so much for coming,” Jhiquí whispers underneath her breath. “I so appreciate it. My mom has been driving me fucking nuts.”

“Babe, you’re hiding your frustration with her really well.”

Jhiquí cracks up at that. She squeezes Missandei’s hand. She keeps her voice very low — she’s leaning into Missandei — as she tells Missy that her mom is talking about fucking moving in with her and Nick for a few months to help with the baby. And Nick had the balls to say that maybe it’s a good idea, because her mom has this wealth of experience when it comes to child-rearing. And
Jhiqui wants to crush his fucking windpipe because she and her mom completely disagree on a whole bunch of shit, when it comes to keeping a baby alive. Like, there’s a lot of new information and research now, when it comes to child-rearing. And her mom is full of old-school superstitious Dothraki bullshit. And Nick should know this shit, but he doesn’t because he’s a fucking moron. And he’s made her all paranoid because it’s like he’s saying that she can’t handle motherhood already. It’s her first fucking paranoid week on the job and she’s already failing at it so hard that they need to fucking call her mother? And don’t even get her started on Nick’s fucking racist mother. Jhiqui is so sick of the passive-aggressive bullshit she’s been hearing from Nick’s mom about the baby’s name and how the baby’s first name doesn’t match up with their family’s surname. And exactly how will it be hard to embroider the name Arqo on shit? Like, why would it be hard to embroider a four-letter name? And why are they embroidering this kid’s name on shit at all to begin with? And this kid already has Nick’s fucking last name! They can’t even given her one name. Just one name!

And Jhiqui’s also still really fucking hormonal. And she’s breaking out and has a bunch of zits on her face like she’s a fucking teenager again. And a baby has been expelled from her body — and she still fucking looks super pregnant.

Missy muffles her laugh. She presses it back with her hand. And she drops her forehead to Jhiqui’s shoulder. Jhiqui smells milky, and also like she hasn’t showered. Missy whispers, “You’ll be okay, babe. I love you.”

Jhiqui starts tearing up. She sniffs and she says, “Fucking hormones. I love you, too.”

Grey follows Nick into the kitchen, as Nick shakily starts pulling food out of the fridge, as he starts heating it all up. He tells Grey he’s all jittery because Jhiqui’s family members are like, hypercritical picky eaters who dislike everything that isn’t Dothraki food, so they basically hate everything he can conceivably feed them. He also tells Grey that his wife currently hates his fucking guts at the moment. He cannot do or say one thing right. And everyone is always yelling in Dothraki, so he has no idea what the hell is going on sometimes. And Jhiqui gets really pissed at him for being clueless — and he’s really afraid to remind her that he doesn’t speak or understand Dothraki.

“She seemed really overwhelmed and stressed out,” Nick says. “And she was saying, ‘Oh, maybe I should ask my mom to come and help out for a little bit.’ And then I said, ‘Yeah, sure. Whatever you want.’ And then she lost her marbles. And started screaming at me and accusing me of saying she’s a bad mother.” Nick purses his lips, as he stands next to the microwave. It’s an appliance that he hates. And then Nick says, “I would never say that. I don’t know why she accused me of that. And then she’s a complete hypocrite and starts slinging shit at my mom, calling her a bad mother. And I’m like, I know Jhiqui’s frustrated, but it’s my mom, you know?” He scoffs. “Sorry I’m venting to you, man. I’m just — Jhiqui’s been really mean lately.”

“Buddy,” Grey says. “I’m sorry. I have no advice for you. That just sounds like it sucks, man.”

Nick slumps, bumping his back against the fridge. “Will you teach me how not to get my feelings hurt all the time? I feel like I need to stop being so sensitive.”
He’s tense as he unpacks his stuff and pulls off his shoes. He’s also deathly quiet and introverted, as he tends to be when he gets stressed out. There’s soft music and everyone is shuffling around quietly before class starts. He’s one of two men here — the other is a lean Yi Tish guy in basketball shorts.

Brienne unrolls her lavender yoga mat next to his before she sits down cross-legged, smiling at him valiantly. She only has like, three classes on him. This is his first time. He had a little bit of a scare when he tweaked his knee on a run — it was painful and swollen for days. He’s aware of the inevitable. Running is hard on the body. Drogo tore his meniscus in high school and had to have surgery — and that guy says he’s never been the same since. It’s always been on Grey's to-do list to be better at increasing his range of motion and to be better at strengthening his core. The tweaked knee and turning 30 kind of kicked those items to the forefront of his priorities.

When he mentioned this to Jaime, Jaime told him that Brienne just started a yoga class and she and Grey should totally go together. Jaime made the suggestion in front of Brienne and she and Grey were both entirely too mute and too caught off guard to know what to say to get out of an activity that is sure to be intensely awkward. It’s not that he doesn’t like her. He likes her a fair bit. It’s just they are both overly quiet and she tends to be very self-conscious around him. Her self-consciousness makes him feel antsy and kind of guilty.

Missandei doesn’t look up from her book when he walks into the living room, after dropping his gym bag in the laundry room. She turns a page and says, “How did it go?”

“Just about what I expected. The class was fine. But when we went to hug each other goodbye, we turned our heads in the same direction like, three times, and almost kissed. She lost her shit over that and laughed nervously for a long time.”

Missandei smiles slyly. She reaches over and lifts up her phone from where it rests on the back of the couch. “I know,” she says. “My phone blew up after the end of your guys’ class.”

She tells their friends that, for the sake of her sex life, if they want to get crunk like it’s ten years ago, then they need to not do it in her house. Because if they do it in her house, then Grey will end up cleaning up after them for the rest of the night. She will not get laid.

This — and nostalgia — is why they end up driving all the way out of the city — forty five minutes — just to drink at the pub that they used to frequent a lot when they were in school. When she enters the establishment — she immediately feels old as fuck. There are students playing pool, students nursing a beer as they flip through thick textbooks on a Saturday night, and students just chilling with their friends. It’s just a lot of students. And she immediately has some sort of buyer’s remorse. She suddenly feels like one of those old people reliving their heyday by going back to the bar that that they used to party in.

That’s actually exactly what is happening.
She feels his hand brushing up against her bottom, as he nudges her to keep walking forward. She’s holding up the entire crowd.

“Over there, is where we met,” Jaime says to Pia. “Remember?”

“Shut up!” Pia says right away. “No I don’t!”

“Well I do. You were a crying, snotty mess on the floor. And I was trying to mind my business and go pee. But you were getting trampled. And I felt sorry for you. So I asked you if you were okay. I took you home so you wouldn’t get roofied. You tried to mack on me. And I was like, ‘Whoa, you’re drunk, Pia!’ And you screamed, ‘Why doesn’t anyone love me!’ And I was like holy shit. Control-Z! Control-Z! Control-Z this whole night!”

“Stop!” Pia says, swatting him, casting nervous glances at Brienne. “You are horrible! That’s not what happened!”

Jaime shrugs. “That’s how I remember it going down.”

Amid the jovial shuffling as their friends settle into their seats with pitchers of beer and stacked glasses, Missy places her hand against the other side of his neck, pulling his head close to hers. She drops her voice to a whisper and talks into his ear, trying not to be detected. She has nothing important or new to say to him. She just tells him that he’s so wonderful and she loves him so much. It’s such a girly and such a squishy thing to say, but her gut still flips when he turns his head to look at her, his lips pursed tightly and his expression amused. It takes him a beat before his face just breaks — it just brightens into a spontaneous laugh — he’s kinda laughing at her and at how silly she’s being — and she agrees with him. Sometimes, life just feels optimistic — like it’s full of promise and full of possibilities.

“So real talk,” Jaime slurs to Grey, after she gets back from her bathroom break, taking a random empty seat at the long table. “If you were to have a best man, who would it be — me or Drogo?” Jaime turns to Addam and Daven. He says, “No offense, guys. But obviously it wouldn’t be either of you.” He then looks to his brother. “And obviously not you, lil man. You guys barely know each other. And he knows that I will fucking murder if he has a Lannister for a best man, and it’s not me.”

Tyrion rolls his eyes. “Contrary to all of your drunken assumptions, Jaime, I’m not actually vying for this spot. I have shit to do other than obsess about your homoerotic subtext with your ex ‘roommate,’ you know.”

“Dude!” Jaime says. “I love the air quotes!”
“Dude,” Tyrion says, snickering. “So does Dad.”

“ Obviously not me or Addam?” Daven says quizzically to Jaime. “What do you mean obviously?”

“Bro, if I have to explain it, it’s gonna be sad and humiliating for you. He don’t love you like he loves me. Because you’re so white.” Jaime pauses — and then he laughs to himself. “Oh, I sort of just explained it.”

“You’re white,” Daven says to Jaime.

“Dav,” Jaime says, holding up a hand. “I just don’t have the time to explain it to you right now.”

Perturbed, Daven turns his attention back to the group — though he mostly addressed Grey — and he says, “Yeah, so who’s your hypothetical best man? Is it Drogo or is it Jaime or is it Addam or is it me?” Daven sucks in a sigh. “It’s probably not me. Because apparently, we aren’t close.”

Grey is just glaring so hard at Jaime right now. And she thinks that it’s so cute. It’s so cute that he is protective of Daven’s feelings.

“I don’t really know these customs that well,” Grey says diplomatically, like a total liar. “So it’s hard to say. Because I don’t know.”

"It could be me, too!" Pia pipes up.

"Nope," Addam says. "Don't think so, doll."

"Because I'm a girl?"

"No!" Jaime says incredulously. "Because he barely registers that you exist."

"Jaime!" Brienne gasps and swats at him, her mouth hanging open in disbelief. "You are such an ass today!"

"Just today?" Dany asks sarcastically.

She’s having a few flashbacks. They’re all following along the same sort of theme. She remembers flirting with him — offering him all of the sex, all of the sex on a platter — in that corner, and by that bar, and by the restrooms, and at the table, and by the door — shit, it’s like a Dr. Seuss book. She remembers him not flirting back — refusing to — saying no thanks to the sex. It’s very much like Daniel in Green Eggs and Ham. She remembers bringing her A-game — and sometimes resentfully because girls like her typically don’t need game.

She’s been drinking a little. He’s been drinking a lot. He keeps laughing and smiling at people. It continues to be such an amazing thing to witness. He’s just so cute. It renders her brain almost dumb, that he’s the cutest thing in the world. She just wants all of that cuteness rubbing all over her body. God, she just wants to go home so she can impale herself on that cuteness, ride that cuteness all night and stuff. Make that cuteness just go insane with neediness for her body.

“What?” Grey says, grinning, staring back at her from across the small table. “Do I have something on my face?”
“I’m gonna be on your face later,” she mutters quietly, aggressively.

“Whoaaa,” Addam says from beside her, his eyes widening. “I heard that.” He whistles. “Damn, baby,” he says to her, his eyes shifting to Grey, who looks stiff and is probably at least a little bothered that she got so personal so publicly. “You go on and get summa dat.” Addam leans forward to try and cup Grey’s cheek, saying, “Damn, stud,” but Grey grumbles and swats Addam’s hand away.

Addam laughs. And then he perks up suddenly. He says, “Hey!” loud enough for their entire party to hear. “Do you know what I just remembered?”

He pauses for way too long. Drogo rolls his eyes and grunts out, “Jesus, man. What the fuck did you just remember, Addam?”

“I just remembered that I sucked face with Missy long before this guy did!” Addam gestures to Grey. To Grey, he says, “I’ve made out with your soon-to-be wife, man!” And then Addam starts laughing.

He stares dully ahead at Addam as the rest of the table kind of stiffens. He notices it acutely. They are all used to him being uptight and not being able to take a joke and being a general stick in the mud. They are all holding their breath for his predictable silent blow-up.

He’s not really going to change on this — short of getting a personality lobotomy. But he can be better about letting this small shit go, especially when it’s so obvious that he’s being purposely baited.

He shrugs. With secret effort, he neutrally says, “Yes, so I’ve heard.”

“I’ve been all up in that mouth,” Addam says, pressing on. “We’re kissing Eskimo brothers, dude!”

“Okay, shut up,” Missandei interjects, holding up her hand. “First, please don’t talk about me like I’m not sitting right here. Second, Addam, please don’t make me say things to embarrass you in front of our friends.”

“Aw, shit,” Daven says, leaning forward. “What are these things? I want to know.”

He has to go pee like, every five minutes. And he’s doing his best to not stumble on the way to the men’s room, just in case some staff member decides he’s too drunk to be served anymore alcohol. He hasn’t been thrown out of a bar since that one time they got into a bar fight and Jaime got his hand sliced by a broken bottle.

Shit. That was nuts.

He sees her waiting for him, as he comes out of the restroom. Her clothes are ridiculous. They have always been ridiculous. They make him want to throw a blanket over her body, at the same time he
shoves his dick inside of her. Okay, he’s actually just thinking about having sex in a bed. “Hey,” he says.

“Hey yourself,” she throws back, crossing her arms, leaning sideways against the wall, held up by her shoulder, her hips cocked to the side.

“What is up?” he says slowly, suspiciously.

“Nothing. Just wanted to say hi.” She reaches out for him, pulling him tightly against her body. He softly groans, and he’s such a sap. He’s immediately responsive. She feels so nice. Her arms come around to hang over his shoulders, as she lightly rubs herself against him — her soft breasts on his chest, her hips tilted toward his. His hands just unconsciously start making their way to her ass, just skimming over the softness of the fabric of her well-worn jeans before he grabs ahold and pulls her harder against him. He might be getting a little too carried away. He might be getting a little too excited.

She can tell. He knows she can tell. Mostly from the way she keeps tantalizingly pressing and rubbing her body against his erection. Mostly from the way she lightly moans and the way she looks at him from underneath her fake lashes. She’s never been known for her subtlety.

“Wanna go home?” she whispers, her breathing started to go a little ragged and heavy. “Have some adult fun, just you and me?”

“Oh my God,” he says. “You know I do. But not yet. It’s rude. We just got here. Everyone’s here for us.”

“I don’t care.”


“Wanna fuck in the restroom?”

She looks startled. “Oh! Oh, I don’t know. Maybe —”

“That was a trick question, you lunatic,” he says, stooping down a bit to press a real kiss to her mouth, laughing into it. “You can fucking wait, Missandei. Jeez.”

“No seriously, who would be your best man?” Drogo asks Grey. “Obviously it’s me, but pretend to think about it. Before you tell everyone that it’s me.”

“Dude, I don’t think so,” Jaime says, looking really offended. “Why do you even think it’s you?”

“I’ve known him the longest.”

“Dude, by a few months. Like those months even matter.”

“Man, it was more like an entire year.”

“It still doesn’t matter!” Jaime says. “It’s about quality, not quantity. And this line of thinking is
precisely why you are a loser.”

Drogo immediately starts to flare red, hot, intense, volcanic anger. “Don’t call me a loser,” he grits out, staring down Jaime. The rest of the table fall down to a hush, as side conversations taper off.

“D, stop being so fucking sensitive,” Jaime shoves out — also getting touchy now. “I obviously didn’t call you a loser at fucking life. I called you a loser at this fucking hypothetical game we’re playing.”

“Drogo,” Dany says softly, lifting her hand to hold the back of Drogo’s neck in a comforting gesture. “Let it go. He’s obviously being inflammatory on purpose.”

“Oh, and you’re a bitch on purpose,” Jaime tosses back carelessly.

“Jaime!” Brienne gasps. “You need to chill out.”

"Can we vote Jaime off the island?" Tyrion asks.

"I second this motion," Pia says tensely, crossing her arms and trying not to pout so obviously.

“What?” Jaime snaps. “God, guys, I’m not even worked up! I’m just joking around!”

"Your jokes are really mean tonight," Addam says slowly. "And they're not funny. I don't actually think they are jokes."

“Oh my God,” Daven murmurs. “Can’t we all just get along?”

"That shit is why you’re not his best man!" Jaime says, throwing up his hand. "God, everyone is fucking picking on me! Y'all are giving me so much shit, and for what? Just because it's so easy to?"

"Not because it's easy, man," Drogo says. "It's because you're being a jerk."

Most of them are drunk, and they’re all just wading through all of the intense, awkward silence. She’s putting up with it because it’s so fucking stupid, and she doesn’t even want to engage with their stupid dick measuring contest or whatever it is. Poor Daven is just scared to talk because he cannot seem to say the right thing tonight around Jaime or Drogo. And Addam just looks like he’s completely over this. Addam just wants to relax and have fun, and his friends always insist on dragging shit down into hell with their petty squabbling — this is one of the things he has complained about to her, in the past. Tyrion looks aggressively bored. Pia looks nervous, like she’s conflated this tiff in her mind to some epicness. Grey looks vaguely annoyed, but also resigned.

Drogo is pissed at Jaime. Brienne is pissed at Jaime. Dany is pissed at Jaime. Brienne used to work for Dany, so there’s a whole extra layer of awkwardness there.

Jaime seems to be pissed that everyone is pissed at him. And he keeps drinking on top of that. Brienne is going to have fun with that later.
The boys work their way out of their bitchy fight really organically — and like total dudes. They don’t apologize to each other. They barely acknowledge that there was a disagreement. Drogo just tepidly starts talking about how his knee recently bothered him a lot during a pickup game — and he’s been thinking about going to the fucking doctor for it. Grey tepidly says a few words about yoga, casting glances at Brienne to bring her into the conversation. Brienne simply nods, affirming that the yoga thing did happen.

To Drogo, Jaime says, “Oh my God, you better finally take your ass to the doctor.” He shifts his attention to Dany. He says, “You’ll make sure he makes an appointment?”

She rolls her eyes in a microsecond and says, “I can’t actually make him do anything.” And then she shoots her eyes to Drogo.

“I’ll go!” he says defensively. “Shit!”

They talk about Drogo’s knee for a while, before Jaime brings up Grey’s ass-bleeding from way back when, and how Grey was also really lame about going to see his doctor regularly and taking care of that. Grey’s just bad about going to the doctor, period.

Grey stretches widely, almost punching Daven in the head with the motion, his voice a low grumble as he reminds Jaime that he’s been to a doctor recently, so these habits Jaime is describing are outdated. Grey reaches over to try and pat her face — she has to duck away because she doesn’t want him to drunkenly swat at her face — as he dryly says that he’s been trained well.

“Don’t say that,” she says. “Don’t make me sound like that kind of woman. I didn’t train you.” She means she didn't bully or coerce him into becoming different or 'better.' She hates thinking about it that way. She hates what it means, what it represents. She hates that it's one of those things that slip easily off the tongue — that it's some sort of cliche, that behind every successful man is a great woman. It is utter bullshit.

She's probably being too sensitive, and she's probably taking this flippant comment too seriously.

He softens. His expression kind of goes fuzzy around the edges. He quietly says, “I know.”

Everyone except for her and Brienne start feeding one another shots — lots of shots. They are all too old to be taking shots. And she wants to tell them to slow down — by a lot. She doesn’t want her guy to get so plastered that he can’t have sex later — because the whole point of going to a bar instead of chilling at their house is so she can get laid tonight. Everyone seems to be forgetting the main priority.

“Baby, no,” she says, leaning forward and placing her hand on his wrist as he holds a small glass of amber liquid. Very basic, bottom shelf whiskey. She wants to just throw up just from the smell of it. “Please slow down?”

“Aw, come on, wifey!” Addam says. “It’s not a big deal. He’s just having fun. Let him have fun!”

She wants to tensely tell Addam that there’s a fertile middle ground between being some fun-killing shrew of a wife and being an enabler just so she can look cool in front of the guys. She don’t give a fuck about being cool. Because they aren’t the ones who have to drag a half-conscious Grey to bed
and deal with his cranky, miserable hangover the day after. They aren’t the ones that have to listen to the guy complain about how he shouldn’t have drank so much, that he regrets drinking so much.

But before she can open her mouth, Grey waves off Addam. He slaps the table hard as Addam loudly boos her — to distract from the sound of Addam’s drunken jeering.

And to her, Grey says, “Okay,” before he sets his glass back down. She nudges his glass of water toward his hand.

He doesn’t know why he does it. It’s probably because he’s so drunk. But he blurts out that Jaime would be his best man, if he were to have one. It’s been explained to him that a best man is like, someone who would plan his parties and be his personal errand boy. And it’s also someone who is essentially his very best friend. And it’s not really that hard to pick out who that person is. He texts Jaime more than he texts Missandei. He and Jaime are emotional with one another. They’ve been through a lot together. They’ve had very real fights. Jaime just gets him, so effortlessly. Jaime is so judgmental, but also not. Next to Missandei, Jaime is probably his favorite person.

He holds up his hand to block Jaime's stupid face. He says, “Don’t.” He means don’t touch him. Don’t try to hug him. Now is really not the time. He might punch Jaime in the face because he hates feeling like this — like he's the center of everyone's attention.

“I won’t,” Jaime says — acting and sounding like he’s being really brave. Grey can’t even look at the guy.

“Okay,” Drogo mutters. “Well, this really fucking sucks. For the record, Dovoeddi would be my hypothetical best man at my hypothetical wedding. But whatever.”

“Jesus,” Grey says to Drogo. “You are making me feel horrible. If Jaime dies, or if he just becomes more awful than he currently is — it's you, D.”

“Whatever,” Jaime says darkly. "I'm going to live forever. And I'm going to try not to fall below the acceptable threshold of awful."

Drogo scoffs. "Jaime's white."

"Which fucking makes this feat amazing!" Jaime grunts. "God, I love winning. I love it so much. Fuck you, Drogo."
She tells their friends goodnight for the both of them, as she shoves Grey toward their car. Jaime’s arm is wound around Brienne’s waist as he hollers to Missy that he hopes the sex is good. She resists kicking gravel in his face. She merely ignores him as she dips and grabs onto Grey — holding him up as he stumbles.

He’s groaning and mumbling about how he’s so dizzy as she drives them back to the house. She tells him to tell her if he needs to vomit, so she can pull over.

She’s trying to distract him from how drunk he is by trying to get his mind on sex instead, even though she knows it’s a lost cause. She digs into the deepest recesses of her imagination and she tells him a bunch of dirty profane things about what she’s going to do to that body once she gets it naked. And he keeps sounding far away. He keeps fading in and out. He keeps pretending he’s listening to her. He keeps absently saying, “Okay, babe, sure,” to appease her.

She tasks Grey with taking off his clothes and waiting for her in bed — as she goes and takes care of Momo 2.0 for the night.

He looks dead — or he’s sleeping — when she re-enters their bedroom.

She takes off her clothes before she starts violently shaking him awake. She says, “Dude, sorry, but we’re doing it. You promised. And I had a particular vision, for how tonight would play out.”

He kind of jolts in place and his eyes peep open momentarily, cloudy before they focus on her face, and he says, “Huh?”

“Sex, baby. Sex.”

“Oh, right,” he says, furrowing his brows. He holds up a finger. “Just give me five minutes.”

She nudges for him to shift a bit, so that she can lift their blanket.

He is beyond drunk and beyond unconscious. It’s still actually really nice to be in bed because her day was long and her joints are achy. The bed with their clean blankets and sheets smelling like laundry detergent feels so warm and cozy.

She looms over his exposed naked body, leans her face close to his soft, stationary penis. She presses short and innocent little experimental kisses on it to see if there’s any life in there.

There doesn’t seem to be life in there. The cute little thing is just flopped over, askew, also managing to be tired-looking. She’s been with men who have told her to stop calling their dicks cute little things. Grey has never been someone who takes offense to it. He gets what she means. And he is
also devoid of masculine ego — which is sometimes a double-edged sword. She finds his lack of machismo to be this great contributing factor to his experimental and spontaneous nature in bed. She loves that.

But she also finds that he deeply under-values himself and sometimes is deeply insecure and pessimistic. He tends to think she says over-inflated nice things to him only because she loves him. In truth, she knows he’s objectively amazing and beautiful and quite the catch. It feels like she will never completely convince him of this. It feels like he thinks she’s at least partially crazy for being so attracted to him. She does not love this.

God, he’s totally just dead to the world right now. And — he’s her man, her baby — and it’s still something that makes her feel giddy and breathless at times. She lies down to get more comfortable, curling her body up a little bit, nestling in between his legs, running her hand up and down his thigh, letting his hair tingle her fingertips, tracing the very subtle tan line between the skin that is sometimes exposed in shorts, and the skin that never sees sun.

How he can sleep with the lights on is beyond her. She kind of gently prods and pokes at his testicles — that word manages to be badly designed, in all the languages that she knows — to see how firm and tight he is. The answer is not very, at the moment. He’s so soft and vulnerable like this — and it stirs these feelings of protection in her.

It’s funny — how the way she identifies him flip-flops all the time. Sometimes he’s her baby, someone to care for. Sometimes he’s her man, someone to fight for. Sometimes he’s her best friend, someone that she wants to experience the outside world with. Sometimes he’s even her adversary, an obstinate obstacle standing in the way of an easier course of action. She wants to shield him, fuck him, hang out with him, and beat him dead — sometimes all in the course of a day.

She sniffs and smells soap and also the very light, distinct, almost metallic musk of him. She gently picks up his penis and examines this line — which looks like a little bit of scar tissue but it can’t be — running down its length. That wrinkle of skin gets stretched out and disappears when he is erect. She uses fingers from both hands to gently pull at his foreskin. That’s really a really cool, really interesting part of him.

Men are just fascinating — well — their parts are. Not all men are fascinating on the inside, emotionally, psychologically. This one happens to be. But his parts are also very interesting, because they are wholly unlike her female parts. It’s so interesting how his stuff just hangs out all the time, when he’s just walking around, going about his business during the day. It’s interesting how the two of them physically connect, how he fits inside of her, how sometimes he doesn’t have to — how sex is had in the multitude of ways that it is had.

And it’s so crazy and amazing and just a minor miracle — that he can sleep like this around her now, that she can touch him like this now. He is so unconscious. He actually looks like he’s not breathing. His sleep is so deep. He looks so relaxed. And it’s so cool, for all the things that it represents — his general trust in her to keep the both of them safe while he’s conked out — his general trust in her with his body — his general trust in himself, to allow himself some much-needed rest. It’s so amazing.

Grey wakes up in the middle of the night because his bladder is screaming for release and because his mouth and throat are desert-dry. And it’s a few slow seconds of blinking against the painful
bright lights, before he suddenly panics — when he realizes that Missandei isn’t next to him in bed. He jolts up into sitting position, his heart pounding as he blurry eyes keep fighting to adjust to the light overhead.

And then he feels his legs, restricted and sweaty. And he sees her. She’s sleeping oddly, totally naked and curled up between his legs. Her face is uncomfortably angled up, pointed right at his dick. He can feel the soft, damp, warm puffs of her breath on his skin.

What the hell?

He gently slides a hand, with some effort, underneath her cheek, prying it off his sweaty thigh, lifting her head enough so he can get out from under her. He hears her protest in mumbles, in her sleep. And then he pushes off the bed — his back lightly cracks — and he pads to their en suite bathroom to pee and to brush his teeth and grab some water.

He turns off the bedroom lights when he comes back.

After he gets back to bed, he grabs onto her sleeping body and gently drags it up. He positions her head on their pillow. There. She looks way more comfortable. He presses a kiss to her mouth, which she sleeps through, before he closes his eyes.

She’s ass-deep in some bullshit mess because she didn’t press the lid down tightly enough on top of the blender. Her smoothie went all over the counter. She’s hungry and she has to clean. She ate too many nachos the night before at the bar because she had consumed empty calories of alcohol and wasn’t making decisions with the soundest of minds. She fell asleep without brushing her teeth or tying up her hair. She’s so annoyed with herself.

She’s sopping up the goopy mess into the sink, running the water, using her hands to shovel it down the drain. Oh, he would really hate this. He doesn’t like thick stuff going down the drain. But thankfully, he’s not around to see this.

He’s shirtless and awake and hanging out on the couch with Momo 2.0 when she gets back home from the gym. He also looks irritated — it takes her a second to realize he’s irritated at himself, not with her. And he says, “I am so sorry for falling asleep on you last night.”

She tosses him the crumpled greasy bag that she stopped off to buy, on the way home. “Breakfast. Or lunch, really. Spoiler alert: It’s a double cheeseburger and fries. I stole a few, though. And God I hate you.” She means that she hates that he can eat anything — that he has to load up on calories otherwise he’ll waste away to nothing. What she would fucking give, for that. “I’m gonna go jump in the shower now. You good?”

“Don’t shower yet,” he says, unwrapping the foil paper from his burger.
She laughs at him and swats his hands away as he grabs at her boobs. And she shrieks when he tickles her. She asks him to stop stretching out her clothes — as she battles with his hand in wrestling off her shirt. She’s still sweaty from the gym, so her clothes are sticking to her body. And then she tells him to stop trying to feed her his burger. He laughs and tells her to just put it in her mouth. She fights him off and tells him she already had her shitty oatmeal smoothie that tastes like wallpaper paste. She tells him that this new sex game is really weird.

He’s trying to multitask. He’s trying to eat his lunch as he simultaneously tries to get something going with her. He keeps nudging her with his feet when his hands are busy shoving food into his face. She has told him that it’s totally fine for him to finish eating — and then they can start having sex. But his mood is funny and goofy and it’s special and precious to her, so she’s carefully treating it like some elusive thing.

Her face almost burns in embarrassment when he comes out of the bathroom with a wet hand towel. He pulls her panties off and pushes her legs apart — the cool air hits her skin before he swipes the terry cloth towel, not particularly gently, in between her sensitive skin, nearly causing her to jump. He tells her he’s just cleaning her up a bit before he gets down to business. She says, “Baby, seriously. Let me just shower real quick. I’m not that fresh.”

“No, it’s fine,” he says, throwing the towel and her underwear into the laundry basket. “I like it when you haven’t showered.”

Her face feels hot with inexplicable shame — and also arousal. She keeps wanting to whimper out her anxiety — and she can’t even watch him as his fingers spreads her and his face takes on a scrutinizing quality, as he continues to assess what’s the situation is, down there, as he sits her on the bed, gets down to his knees, and hikes both of her legs over his shoulders. She has no balance this way, nothing to brace against.

She smells pretty amazing. She looks pretty amazing, too. She looks all soft and sweet and pink and swollen and wet and ready for some fun, which currently, is in stark contrast to her face. He can easily sense her apprehension — she’s weirdly shy and self-conscious today — and he digs it. It makes him laugh because he can compare it with all of the other times they have done this, with her bravado choking up the room. She keeps misinterpreting his laughs — perhaps thinking they’re at least a touch mocking. But no. She’s just an adorable mess of contrasts. He tilts his head back to look up at her. “I thought you were gonna get all up on my face?” he says innocently. “Or was that just a joke? Were you just talking a big game?”

“Baby,” she says softly, condensing her body tightly and self-consciously, but really pressing her breasts together and bringing his attention to her how perfect and round and perky they are. “Stop making fun of me,” she says.

She just slays him sometimes. And he smiles at up her. “I’m not making fun,” he says. “I promise I’m not.”

She’s very quiet as he wetly kisses and licks his way up her leg, starting from the soft skin on the inner side of her left knee. He can see her gripping the bed, clawing her fingers into the mattress, in
his peripheral vision. Sometimes she just breaks his heart in these moments, over and over — in her tiny little gestures.

He keeps his lips and his mouth gentle as he circumnavigates her clit — as he avoids directly touching it, trying to coax and tease out her adventurous, playful side. She keeps dropping these breathy gasps and moans, just soft wordless sounds as he gets it going. He already has a plan. His plan is to start very laidback and gentle and smooth and consistent — and then end it hard and fast and rough — with her suffocating his face with her thighs, screaming his name.

This is a place he’s been before — a lot — and yet there still always manages to be some sort of novelty in how he feels about it, every time he does this. She’s unintentionally hilarious, as she holds her breath, as she tries not to make a sound. And he’s just waiting for it — it’s like clockwork.

When she drops a gasp and a near-silent whimper escapes, when her weight just lowers the teeniest bit — it signals to him that he’s doing something very right. She starts to unconsciously grind herself against him, trying to get his mouth and his lips and his tongue and sometimes even his teeth on the area she wants them the most, creating this steady rhythm that he indulges her in. Her soft stutters in breathing just doing very nice things to his ego, making his dick just throb painfully, as it remains on standby. She says, “Baby, please,” twisting her hips so that his tongue touches down directing on her clit. A keening whimper escapes out of her throat. And she says, “Please, again.”

It goes like this for long minutes — he keeps tracking the sound of her voice, the flickers of inflection that shift over time. More and more urgency creeps into her voice. More and more frustration at his deliberate slowness — at his deliberate obtuseness — starts to creep out. She becomes bolder, keeping her body upright with a hand braced behind her on the bed. Her other hand reaches around to hold the back of his head, shoving it harder between her legs, smearing herself against his mouth, almost suffocating him in her body and her smell.

His hands come to her hips — he momentarily forgets to be gentle when he touches her — she has told him all of the shots she’s been taking makes her skin feel bruised and sensitive — he hears her yelp, this loud sound just breaking like a ripple over his consciousness.

He can watch this forever. And it’s with a lot of self-satisfaction — and a promise to himself that the payoff will be more than worth it — for the both of them — that he pulls his face from her body.

“What am I doing?” he asks simply.

Her eyes narrow, almost imperceptibly. And then she surprises him by sliding her legs off his shoulders, by kicking off him and scooting backwards on the bed. She flops down on her back with a sigh and says, “Whatever. You know I can take care of this myself, right?” She sneaks her own hand between her legs.

“What the fuck —” He shoots his hand out to clamp it down over her wrist, clenching down tightly.

He yanks her so she slides down nearly a foot down their bed. He snatches one of their pillows, lifts up her hips, and slips the cushion underneath her ass. He hastily crawls over, on top of her. And then his mouth is back on her, harder, faster — her groans are savage and loud — he’s repeating certain routines, keeping it harsh, but consistent — until it’s not, until he pauses and stops in agonizing seconds, to prolong this. His throbbing dick is in her face and he hopes she takes the hint. She will.

He holds her thrashing body down. He’s running his free hand, the palm and his fingers, firmly over her wet entrance, smearing her arousal all over, alternating between that and cupping her ass. She
really starts to squirm, erratically going with his motions at times, sometimes going against what he’s
doing. Every bit of sound she makes and every twitch of her body just feeds him — it makes him
feel like he was put on this planet for a purpose — that purpose isn’t just to have sex with her — it’s
just the way she makes him feel. He feels like he has power and like he has ownership over his life.
He feels capable. He feels optimistic. He feels addicted to happiness.

He accidentally bites down — a little too hard on her clit — when her hot, wet mouth sucks in his
dick. She doesn’t even get a stroke in before her whole body shudders and she lets his penis loose —
as she cries out in pain.

He gives them both a short break. He sinks his forehead down against her pubic bone. He says, “Ah!
I’m so sorry! That was an accident!”

“It’s okay, honey,” she says, gasping. “I know it was an accident.”

He stares at his phone in the middle of the work day, and he wants to know if this is a fucking test.
She told him that he doesn’t have to go to her latest ultrasound — she told him it’s all boring and
routine by now, and she’ll just text him or talk to him later if something is amiss. The word amiss just
sends alarm bells blaring in his head. Honestly though, he’d have to shift a lot of annoying shit
around in his schedule, if he were to make the appointment. And this is totally his bitch’s fault,
because she didn’t mention to him that she had an appointment today — but he has refrained from
telling her that, lest it make her irritated with him. She would probably insist that she
did tell him at
some point — he just didn’t listen.

Which may actually very well be true. But he generally does not like to lead with that, in their
arguments about this sort of thing. He almost wants to bring up the whole calendar thing — how he
thinks they should create a shared calendar so that he will always know what’s going on. She hates
this idea and has resisted. She says it’s so creepy and Big Brother of him. She says she already over-
schedules her work life — she does not want to do it in her personal life, either. Besides — Jesus
fucking Christ — how hard it is to listen to your wife-person tell you shit. And then remember it? He
usually gets offended and tells her that his memory is actually really excellent. Maybe she really
didn’t tell him about the appointment at all.

And then she usually stops herself from screaming at him — instead, she tells him he’s actually a
really horrible listener when the shit he is supposed to be listening to doesn’t interest him.

Grey texts back and asks her — again — if it’s really cool if he skips out on this ultrasound.

She lets him sweat it out for more than half an hour. She would probably tell him she didn’t delay her
response on purpose to fuck with him — she was legitimately busy doing her fucking job because
her life doesn’t actually revolve around his fucking cognitive meltdowns.

Great. They’ve gotten to the point where they don’t even actually need to have their arguments
anymore. He already knows exactly how these arguments will play out. That’s convenient.

When she does text him back, she’s calling him an annoying fuckface. And she’s telling him — for
the last time — she doesn’t give a fuck if he comes to her appointment or not. This is not a test. She
is totally cool. Well, sort of. Honestly, in the course of this day-long texting convo, she has steadily
lost her cool. Because he is honestly, the very worst sometimes. She promises him that she’s going to
beat him when she gets home.

It makes him laugh out loud — which makes Brian look at him all suspiciously. He ignores Brian, and texts Missandei back. He tells her that he's really excited to get beaten later.

He often wonders what a third party would think — if they read through his text exchanges with Missandei.

“Baby!” she hollers into the house, dropping her keys down on the side table. “I am producing so many eggs. It’s is pretty gross and creepy and cool!” She walks into the living room. “Babe?” And then she peeks into the kitchen. “Momo 2.0?”

Oh, they’re not home.

“Oh my gosh! She is so cute!” a perky blond gushes as she stoops down to pet Momo 2.0, who is not into it. The pup’s not used to this kind of high energy and she’s still very skittish around strangers. She keeps trying to nudge her head in between his shins, because that’s her safe place. The blond is undeterred and keeps holding out her hand for 2.0 to sniff. “What breed is she?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “Mutt?”

“She looks like she has some toy poodle in her, maybe some pom. Oh my gosh, what a little sweetheart!”

“This dog,” he says to Missandei, as they cook dinner. “Is a people magnet. And I do not like it.”

“Oh, were you accosted by another beautiful woman wanting to know if you’re single?” she says sarcastically, lifting the strainer out of the pot of boiling water, draining it. “God, it’s so hard being you.” She flips the strainer over one of their really stupidly expensive pasta bowl that they got as a gift from Tanja even though he repeatedly told Tanja not to buy him shit. And then he was all obligated to spend money and buy her a vase that Missandei picked out — so that he isn’t indebted to that silly woman. Missandei is rinsing the strainer out with some water as she says, “You know, if we have a kid, you’ll have to be dealing with that on an exponential level. Everywhere you go — just people pawing at your super cute child and asking you all sorts of personal questions. It’s your worst nightmare, dude.”

“You really think our kid would be super cute?”

“Our dog is super fucking cute. So why wouldn’t our kid be super cute?”
“Babe,” he says patiently. “Your logic sometimes fucking kills me. How can someone so beautiful be so dumb?”

She snickers, doing a small hop toward him before she presses her lips to his cheek. “You’re an asshole,” she says. “And I said that just to drive you nuts.”

“I know,” he says. “And even though I know it’s a trick, I fall for the trap every single time.”

She rolls the condom on him, slapping his hand away when he gets impatient and tries to help by being a bully. The hormone shots have been annoying and they’ve made her skin tender. She winces when he touches her roughly. She also loves it. She loves that he touches her like she’s strong.

She leans over and she tells him that she loves him — he palms both of her breasts in his hands, alternating between gentle, which gives her shivers, and hard, which shoots right to between her legs. And then her mind just goes fuzzy and a bit blank, as she lowers herself onto him. She curls herself over and sinks her forehead against his chest — he’s breathing hard, too — and she says, “Holy fuck. This seriously never gets old.”

His hand smooths down her back to grab at her ass. He lifts her just the smallest amount before he grinds her back down, mashing them together, pushing himself deeper inside her. He groans. “Yeah, no,” he says breathlessly. “I’m still liking this a lot.”

She lifts her face to look at him. “You just like it?”

He grins, automatically picking up the thread. “Yeah,” he says. “It’s pretty adequate. It’s pretty okay.”

She feels him expand a little bit, inside of her body. It grounding and it’s him. And she smiles at him — she entwines their fingers together — she tells him it’s a little dorky but it’s also cute and romantic — and then realizes she has no leverage when they holding hands like this.

So she lets him go before she rocks forward, planting her hand on the bed next to his head. He keeps running his callouses up and down the entire length of her back. And then he corrects himself. He exhales out a groan as she sinks down on him again. He says, “Jesus, I honestly cannot live without this.”

“What if I suffer some sort of accident or you have some sort of accident and we can’t fuck like this ever again, though?”

“What?” He groans again, thrusting up into her, transferring his palms against the peak of her breasts. It’s really, really awesome and distracting. “Shut up, you are so annoying sometimes.”

“Would you still love me if we can’t have sex like this anymore?” Honestly, she is just messing with him. She’s messing with him by asking him a serious relationship-y, loaded question while he’s all stupid with all of his blood in his dick instead of in his beautiful brain.

“God, shut up,” he grunts out, as they slowly pull apart before joining up again. “Baby,” he says. “God, you feel so good.”

“So that’s a no?”
He angrily snaps up, digging himself deeper and harsher into her, making her bounce, making the room spin and go blurry because it is so good. “Shut up!” he snaps. “God, you are so annoying! What do you want me to say? That I will love you until the end of time even if your vagina dries up into a barren desert wasteland? Fuck you. Obviously. And besides, you still have a mouth — and an ass. We’ll be okay.”

“Aw, baby, so sweet,” she says, smiling at him as she rolls her eyes. And then she lifts her hand and clamps it over his mouth so he can’t talk. “Now, I’m gonna fuck you all nasty for that comment, you ass.”

It’s pillow talk time. She loves pillow talk time. Naturally, he is just merely lukewarm about it. Sometimes, he’d like to just get up from bed after sex and go do the laundry or go start cooking food or go run an errand. He’s a machine. He is a non-procrastinating machine of efficiency all the time. Sometimes she doesn’t even know how a human like him even exists.

“One of our smoke detectors is running low on juice. I need to replace the batteries,” he says. “I need to go pull the ladder out of the garage though. It’s the living room smoke detector.”

“I love your penis,” she says, lying with her head on his stomach, staring down the thing in question.

“Yeah,” he says airily. “I generally like it, too. It’s been good to me lately.”

“Good to us,” she corrects.

“Good to us,” he affirms.

“Isn’t it crazy when you think about what it was like when we first started having sex, versus now?”

He hums out an uh huh, before he says, “I remember when I didn’t even enjoy sex.”

“I remember when I didn’t know what orgasms were all about. And I was just cool with in-out stuff all the time.” She pauses. “You opened up a lot of things for me.”

“You opened up a lot of stuff for me, too.”

She flips around so that she can look him in the face. “I’m glad we’re getting married.”

He’s smiling back down at her, his hand brushing hair off of her face.

She says she doesn’t want to buy a new dress for the actual wedding. He tells her to just shut up about this already and buy a new dress — or don’t buy a new dress, but shut up. He picks out his credit card that gets the employee discount and points — even though she’s on his account and has her own card — but he does it for the sake of the gesture. He tosses his card in her general direction and tells her to buy herself something pretty.
Which he thought would be funnier than it is. But she actually gets really angry and and upset about it. She tells him that he’s making her feel bad about money again. He sighs and quickly does the mental math. Adara is 20 and has two-and-a-half of school left. Kamil is 17 and is only starting to think about college, but Missandei has been setting aside money in an account for him.

Does it really mean that he has to wade through five more years before Missandei will stop constantly being stressed out about money?

He knows he’s setting himself up for another long argument. But he revisits the subject again anyway. It seems like an appropriate time. “Babe,” he says. “What if we join our accounts?”

She scoffs. “No!” she says. “I’m not taking more of your money. You’re already paying more of the mortgage and more of our daily expenses than I am.”

“It’s our money, baby,” he says. “It’s literally just sitting around, accruing interest because there’s no other shit we need to buy — and it’s crazy that you’re so stressed out about not having enough money, when we have it.”

“Grey,” she says warnedly.

“When will we be able to actually live our lives together without your parents hanging over our heads?” he says testily. “When will you stop giving your fucking deadbeat parents money all the time!”

“I’m not just giving them money!” she shouts back. “I’m giving my siblings an education!”

“Your parents have fucking jobs, too,” he says. “Your siblings can actually choose fucking cheaper schools to attend. You also don’t have to pay for room and board and books. You can actually tell Adara to get a fucking part time job like we both had, when we were in school. And people can take out student loans! It’s not crazy to have some debt when you leave school.”

“Life is already just so hard. I’m trying to give them a chance —”

“How are they going to learn that life is hard when their big sister is paying for all of their shit?” he interjects.

“My brothers did it for me —”

“That’s different,” he says. “You could see your brothers struggling. You grew up with your brothers. Adara and Kamil and your parents actually don’t see your struggles. You’re just some mysterious benefactor to them. I fucking watch you guys Skype. They think everything is great and fine — because Adara and Kamil are kids and kids are self-involved, so of course they do. And your parents are —”

“What are my parents?” she says, crossing her arms defensively, narrowing her eyes at him. “Tell me.”

There’s a long pause, before he says, “I really don’t like them. I don’t like how they treat you. I don’t like how they talk to you. I don’t like how they are taking advantage. They don’t appreciate it. They act entitled to your money. It’s utter bullshit.”

“So what?” she says challengingly. “You want me to stop giving them money. For what? So that we can buy a yacht and take up sailing as a hobby?”

“What happens if I leave my job for something that doesn’t pay as much?” he says. “What happens if
we don’t have my income anymore — and I need you to pay more of the mortgage and more of our
day-to-day bills and stuff?” He reaches out to grab her hands. He pulls her closer, and he stoops
down to look her in the face. “See — that’s the thing. I can’t leave my job. I have to stay at my job
because you are giving your family so much money. So that’s one way this affects me, which in
turns affects our relationship. And you being so fucking stressed out also affects our relationship.
You being stressed out stresses me out. I feel stressed out about money all the time.”

“Baby,” she says quietly. “Are you wanting to leave your job?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “There have just been a lot of changes lately. I don’t like them.”

She sighs. “Babe. You gotta talk to me about this stuff more.”

She immediately has a sixth sense about it, when Marselen’s text comes through, asking her if it’s a
good time to talk. She immediately texts him back and asks him if everything is okay. He tells her
that it’s not.

She calls him right away. She asks, “What happened to Grandma?”

His voice is gruff and choked up, when he says it’s Moss, actually.

It just hits her in the face. Her hand flies to the mouth and a muffled whimper comes out.

He quickly tells her that Moss is alive. He’s completely physically fine. It’s just — Okha left him for
another man. Moss is not in a good state.
Chapter Summary

Missy and Grey venture to Myr, apparently just so Missy can punch a bitch out. These things never really go according to plan.


He kind of blinks at her eloquence. “Missandei,” he says patiently, standing stationary in their bedroom as she runs in and out of the closet, throwing clothes into her suitcase in a flurry of anger. “We’re getting married in less than a month. You really can’t wait that long before you go ‘punch a bitch out?’”

Missandei throws him a look — a look that conveys how generally unimpressed she is with him. She starts zipping up her suitcase, struggling because a bunch of her camisoles are still not all the way in the suitcase and the zipper is getting stuck. She's bending over, mashing her body weight and her boobs on top of the thing to get it to close properly.

“Missandei,” he says, walking around to gently pry her off her suitcase. “I think you just packed fifty tank tops, no pants, and no shoes, no underwear. Let me pack for you. Why don’t you go look at plane tickets?”

He texts Drogo furtively as Missandei does some price comparisons in a rage — and he tells Drogo that Missandei is having some sort of woman meltdown. And in any case, would Drogo be interested in watching Momo 2.0 over the weekend? They have to take an emergency trip out of town so that Missandei can go punch her sister-in-law in the face.

Amazingly, Drogo texts back less than a minute later — ignoring all the details about Missandei — excitedly saying yes, asking if 2.0 can sleepover at his place, asking when he should pick her up, asking if they actually need him to stay at their house if that would make 2.0 more comfortable.

If both of them were to die, orphaning 2.0, he’d want Drogo to take her. He should tell Drogo this to make him feel good. And it’s also sad that Daven loses again.

Grey texts back, says that either is fine.
She’s standing in the airport customs line with her hip cocked, with oversized sunglasses on her face, teetering on black strappy heeled sandals, black leggings, a low-cut white top, and just tons of attitude. She keeps occasionally grumbling “fucking slut” under her breathe every few minutes. He constantly wants to laugh at her — not at all to minimize the gravity of what is going on — but more in appreciation of her extreme commitment to her pissy anger.

He hasn’t heard the end of it. On the plane, he was subjected to hours of analyzation, hours and hours of the history of Okha and Mossador. He has listened to Missandei’s bewilderment and her disbelief. She keeps saying that she understands that fucking marriage is hard — but when you have kids — how about not fucking going off and banging some fucking manager at a fucking payday loan place and then deciding that you want to fuck up your entire life and give up your marriage for some middle-aged pasty white fuck who drives a Ford Mustang GT because his pasty dick is small.


She sighs impatiently, her arms still crossed over her chest, her stance widening as she intimidatingly peeps down the customs line, willing it to move faster. “Oh, I fucking bet you that fat fuck drives a fucking Mustang. Remember, I used to hang out in my brothers’ garage as a kid. I know what fucking midlife crisis white dudes drive. I’m going to slash his tires and key a picture of my brother’s huge dick into his fucking car.” The people around them collectively stiffen and wisely pretend not to be eavesdropping in on their conversation.

“I drive a Ford, too,” he quips. “A Ford Focus Electric. I like that it makes me feel like I’m saving the environment.”

“Baby,” she says snippily, continuing to stare down the line. “You’re really distracting me from my anger by being super cute. Would you please stop?”

They have the Uber drop them off at her grandma’s before they head over to Mossador’s. The idea being is that they have to stop at their elder’s house in greeting before going about the rest of their business. Besides, Missandei wants to drive her grandfather’s incredibly ancient truck. She refused to rent a car because it’s a waste of money, which he finds to be insane logic. The last-minute plane-tickets were exorbitant and she didn’t even blink an eye at that.

The second they step inside Grandma’s house — the second Grandma spots them — there is an immediate explosion of angry feminine shouting in Low Valyrian. It’s dizzying, and he’s following along as Missandei bitterly repeats all of her shitty bad words in another language. Grandma is in the middle of cooking — and there’s a kitchen knife in her hand that she gestures with, as she angrily says that it was a mistake to condone that marriage. She says that Okha as a young girl was too pretty and so promiscuous. She had a boyfriend before Mossador. And Missandei keeps shouting over her grandma, yelling about the kids and how is Okha gonna do this to her children.

He’s been getting a really good idea of what Missandei could be like, as a mother. He’s also probably getting a really great picture of how she was raised. Missandei and her grandma are mirror
images of each other, down to the little hand gestures they make.

He’s telling her to call ahead first, before she barges into Moss’ house. She tells him to stop being so fucking reasonable. It’s really killing her vibe. She mutely shoves her phone in his chest, so he can be the adult, whatever, as she sweatily climbs into her grandfather’s massive truck and experimentally starts the engine. The thing is so old, but she experiences an uptick of sheer happiness, when it roars to life.

Grey is still texting from her phone, as he distractedly climbs into the passenger seat. He tells her that the text is sent.

The mood at the house is actually incredibly somber and quiet — like a death has occurred. Missandei’s shoes still clomp on the floor as she goes seeking out her brother, walking through the living room, walking through the kitchen before she spots him on the back porch, quietly playing a card game with his kids.

“Hey,” she says, hanging back, standing in the opening of the sliding glass door.

Moss doesn’t look at all surprised to see her. But the kids are. Delia and Kemi kind of take their time getting to their feet, before they shuffle over to hug her. Hassan — now over six feet tall — hangs back awkwardly, throwing a ball back and forth in his hands.

Grey kind of takes Moss’ seat, after Moss gets up to follow Missandei into the house so they can talk in private. He slides the chair across the porch and he asks the girls what they were playing — and if they can teach it to him.

“Looking back, I think we’ve been unhappy for a while,” Moss says. “We were fighting a lot. We couldn’t agree on much. We were just kind of existing next to each other, just day in, day out — taking care of the kids. So yeah. I don’t know.”

“You seem to be taking this super well,” Missy says. “Mars made me think you were losing it.”

“Oh, that was last night,” Moss says dryly. And then more seriously, he says, “I can’t freak out in front of the kids. They’re already freaked out. Hassan is pissed at her and won’t talk to her. And the girls are just confused and don’t understand why their mom doesn’t want to live with us anymore or
why she’s doing this. Fucking Okha is already talking about visitation and having the kids go over to —” Moss growls, “— that guy’s house. But I’ve been saying fuck no to that. We haven’t even started any divorce proceedings yet. And she has already moved the fuck on. She started moving on a long time ago and just only chose to fucking clue me in.”

“The girls are 12 and 14?”

“Yeah. Hassan is turning 18 this year.”

They have dinner together and they largely pretend that everything is okay and normal. Missandei asks the kids about school and the sports they are doing. She asks Moss about work — which is going fine. And there’s just a lot of dead air in between questions and answers. Her brother looks completely drained — exhausted and an emotional wreck and brittle. It makes her really hate Okha. And she tells Moss and the kids to just go ahead and go to bed — no need to entertain her. She and Grey will clean up.

The door lightly creaks when they are drying the dishes together. Grey hears it first and he freezes. In the living room is Hassan, wearing shoes, wearing a jacket, wearing a hat.

“Where are you going, kiddo?” Missandei says softly, leaning over to look at Hassan, with a dishrag in her hands.

Hassan tenses — like he feels like he’s caught doing something wrong. But it’s a Friday night and he’s just about an adult. He says, “I asked Dad permission already. I’m going out to see my girlfriend. I’ll be back before midnight.”

“Oh,” Missandei says, trying to sound light. “Okay, hon. We probably won’t still be here. Have fun. Stay safe.”

Hassan nods before ducking out of the house. And Missandei blows out a breath when she turns back to Grey. She stonily says, “He better not be getting that girl pregnant.”

Grey taps his damp finger on her forehead. “So pessimistic,” he says. “He’s probably still at the holding hands stage. Think about what you were doing with boys at 17.”

She swats him with the towel in her hand.

“Thanks for coming with me,” she says, swinging lightly on her grandfather’s old glider armchair in the living room. “You didn’t have to.”
He eyes Grandma as she lays down some tea and some small biscuits on the coffee table — even after they told her they had already eaten. He takes a biscuit for propriety's sake. And he switches to Low Valyrian, too. He tells Missandei that he likes Myr, so he likes coming to visit.

She rolls her eyes and calls him a suck-up.

They spend about an hour hanging out with Grandma, sometimes watching TV — watching this local station with a boring infomercial about a vegetable cutter. Grandma’s not especially keen on talking — but they exchange some more words on the situation at hand. Missandei is worried about the kids and how this will affect them. Grey says the kids are old enough to understand certain things about this. Missandei wonders out loud, if the kids know that their mother is a fucking slut. And Grandma generally answers that Mossador is letting Okha lead with the explanations. He hasn’t wanted to alter the kids’ viewpoint of their mother. But kids tend to be smart when it comes to these things. The youngest, though, is having the hardest time grasping this.

Grandma says that she just wishes Okha would change her mind and come back.

And Missandei tone is no-nonsense, when she says that Okha can go fuck herself. She is never allowed to come back. She has fucked up. There is no going back from this. Because this is who she is. And this is what she is capable of. Moss deserves better.

Grandma says that it’s better for children to have two parents, above all else.

Missandei says that she really, really does not agree with that. It’s better for children to have happy parents who live apart than it is for two miserable parents who stay together for the kids.

Grandma says that Missandei only believes that because she’s not married yet.

“Oh my God,” Missandei says in English, directing the comment at him. “We’re gonna have kids and then get happily divorced and then happily continue to co-parent — to teach her a lesson.”

He holds her hand up to the sliver of moonlight, drawing a line down the middle of her palm. He whispers to her that she smells really good. Her lips find his in the dark, and she lowers their hands, clasping onto his tightly. She kisses him slowly and chastely — just an exploration in a strange and weird and too-small bed. When she pulls away to breathe, in between small pecks, she tells him that life is so weird. Because she remembers being at Mossador and Okha’s wedding. Her grandpa was a prominent presence there — naturally. And she and Melaku were probably too young and super annoying, so they were just running around trying to pretend to sneak sips of alcohol when the adults weren’t watching. But she was like, too afraid to actually drink anything for real.

She’s like, witnessed the entire lifespan of a relationship. She remembers Mossador dating Okha. And now, it’s so weird — and it’s painful — to watch him deal with this wreckage when it all started so promisingly.

“How do things get so bad?” Missandei whispers to him.

“Missandei, are you thinking about us?” he says, voice equally as quiet.

“Kinda yes. Kinda not really,” she says. “I mean, kinda yes in an I-can’t-help-it kind of way. But I know that you and me are different.”
“This is not going to happen to us,” he says.

“No, I know. It will never happen to us.” After a pause, she says, “So why won’t it happen to us? I mean, I totally know the answer. But I want to know if you know the answer.”

He laughs softly. Because she’s just the best.

He tells her he has no real wisdom, no real insight on what makes relationships successful or not — and after all, she is technically his very first and only relationship.

Being reminded of that fact makes her groan. She hesitantly tells him about men with midlife crises, who leave their wives to go sow their wild oats.

He dryly reminds her that although she is his only legit relationship — because she’s the only person that has ever made him want to just act a fool and be a total lovesick sap and all of that — he has already sown his wild oats. Like, a lot. So he doesn’t anticipate wanting to go back to the sad, sad state of affairs at any point again.

“Baby,” she says, “I love it when you talk about all the people you fucked while I was crushing so hard on you like a dork and you just ignored me. Those were some real good times.”

“That’s not how the story goes, and you know it. You just like to tell the story that way so people will sympathize with you.”

She tells him she’s just joking around. She tells him she thinks she knows what makes relationships successful. She tells him that she’s copying some of these words from Jhiqui, but Jhiqui actually articulated it really nicely. So what he does for her, as a partner, is that he just does his very best to support her and help her become the version of herself that she wants to be — and he does this without judgement. She tells him that she feels such gratitude for this. She actually wakes up every day and feels thankful for him. And all the little challenges at work, in life — when they crop up — she thinks about him immediately. She thinks about what he would say to her in the moment, what he would think, what advice he would give — then depending on the severity of the problem, she might think about how they might divide and conquer.

“That was nice, what you said.” He sighs. And then she feels him shrug. “On my end, I don’t really have an explanation. It’s just a feeling. I still never feel like things are just going to work out. I still never feel like things will just end up okay. Except when I think about you and us. That’s it, really. I just feel optimistic about us. It’s easy, when I think about us.”

When she walks into the coffee shop — when she sees Okha — she generally wants to go over there and punch Okha in the face and be done with it. But instead, Missandei applies considerable effort standing in line to order a hot tea.

Okha looks nervous. Which is good. Because she should be. Okha also looks like she’s lost weight, which also manages to piss Missandei off. And with her hot tea bleeding heat into her hands, Missandei says, “So what? You don’t want to be part of my family anymore?”
Okha just lays out these facts that Missandei already knows. She and Moss got married so young. She was still a child. And she was still emotionally a child when she became pregnant. And for a while, it was really great. But then it got hard. Sometimes she looked at Mossador and she thought about all of their incompatibilities and all of their differing beliefs — and she just kept coming back to the thought that maybe she had been too impulsive and had been too short-sighted and shouldn’t have married so young. He was her only serious boyfriend. She didn’t have anyone else to compare him to.

“Okay, whatever. So you had a fucking freak out. Whatever. So why didn’t you just fucking ask my brother for a divorce and just end the marriage before you went out and found someone new? Why did you cheat on him? That’s the part that gets to me.”

“I don’t know,” Okha says. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I don’t know what I’m doing. I didn’t get to do what you got to do. I didn’t get to spend my twenties figuring this stuff out. I was raising a family in my twenties.”

Missy presses her hands into her face. “Okay,” she says, muffling her words. “Okay, fuck you. I don’t even know what to say to that. That is not an excuse.”

“I’m not excusing it. I’m just trying to explain it.” After a pause, Okha trembling voice says, “Divorce is unheard of in our culture. My own parents aren’t speaking to me. They’ve disowned me. And I know my own kids hate me. I don’t get to see them very much, and I miss them so much that I can’t stand it sometimes. And I know everyone hates me and says things behind my back. I’ve lost all of my friends. And I know that I’m the bad guy here. I know I am evil. I know I’m being punished.”

“Whoa,” he says slowly when she pulls back into the driveway. “How are you not in jail for assault right now? I had bail money ready and everything.”

Missandei hops out of the massive truck and slams the door shut behind her. She locks it back up with a key. She sighs. “I came to brawl. I left feeling really sorry for her. So . . . that’s what I’m all about.”

She warns him that they are going to do something really corny. And he tells her it’s fine. Game on. Challenge accepted.

She drives them to the shore, just a very short distance away. It’s the same beach — twenty minutes off road — that she keeps coming back to, time and time again. It’s the beach that Melaku showed her when they were kids.
She kicks off her sandals and leaves them on dry sand, as she gestures for him to do the same. And then she drags him toward the water. He quizzically asks her if they’re gonna go swimming or something, because she should’ve said something earlier. Is she even wearing a swimsuit?

“Babe,” she says. “Shh.”

“What the hell is going on, then?” he says in agitation. “Are we swimming or not?”

“Jeez, we’re not,” she says, lightly shaking her head, the wind making her hair bounce and dance. “Chill, man.”

“Missandei —”

“Wanna get married?”

“What?”

“Like, right now?”

He looks around the secluded beach — as if expecting all of their friends and family to pop out of out nowhere. It’s impossible. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s how we used to do it way back in the day,” she says. “We’d loudly declare our intentions to our God. And then it is done.”

Comprehension and a memory immediately comes to the forefront of his mind — bright and lucid. He puffs out a sigh of disbelief — and gratitude. His eager nod gets lost as he pulls her body to his, as he holds her tightly and bends his face down into a rough kiss.

They spend Saturday night cleaning Mossador’s house. She releases Grey into it and lets him have run of the place as Mossador takes the kids out to dinner at some pizza place that they really like. She is a total snoop, so she rifles through all of the paper in his house — his bills, his mortgage statements, anything having to do with the garage. She even shows Grey the information, because Grey is a genius machine when it comes to this sort of money stuff. And they are both very pleased to find that Mossador and Marselen are actually really savvy business owners.

“I mean, people like to assume that their loved ones aren’t incompetent, but you always wonder,” Missandei says. “Yay. My brothers aren’t dummies. Why are they manually inputting everything in Excel though?”

“Hey,” Grey mutters, flipping through papers. “If it works for them, it works for them. Don’t mess with it, you nosy busybody.”

“Babe,” she says.

“What?” He doesn’t look up from the papers in his hands.

“We’re married.” She kinda can’t help but smile giddily over it. And she kind of feels like a douchebag, for daring to be so fucking happy in her relationship while her brother’s marriage has just imploded. But not that guilty. Because this is just a secret, small, tiny, private thing of hers. No one
“Okay, that’s it,” he says, placing the papers on the desk. He pretends to be irritated and annoyed for a slow second, before he dips and lunges toward her and picks her up. She lightly squeaks and her hands go to his shoulders as his prop her up at the butt. She squeezes her legs tightly around his hips. She presses soft kisses all over his face as he stumbles a little, as he maneuvers them to the couch. “Five minutes,” he says softly. “I’m giving us five minutes. Then it’s back to cleaning.”

She catches Hassan right before she and Grey leave. She puts her hand on his arm and she asks him if he will hang back for a second so they can talk.

“What’s up, Auntie?” he says, slouching his shoulders, as if he’s still not used to how tall he’s gotten.

“Hey, I wanted to talk to you about your dad.”

“What about him?” Hassan says, voice pitched low — like he’s embarrassed to be having this conversation.

“He’s going through some shit right now. You guys might not see it because he’s doing his very best to hide it from you guys — but he’s going through some heavy shit right now. And as the oldest, you need to watch out for your little sisters — if your dad ever like, drops the ball and makes mistakes.”

“Auntie —”

“And you need to watch out for your dad. You know? Give him a break sometimes. Help him out. Clean up around the house. Make sure he doesn’t get depressed and lay in bed all day. Make sure he eats and stuff. Make sure his clothes are clean —”

“Auntie,” Hassan cuts in again, looking at her face real quick before he shifts his eyes away. “I know all of this stuff already. I have been cleaning the house and taking Kemi and Delia to school. I have been making sure Dad gets out of the house sometimes. I know.”

“Oh my God,” Missandei says, reaching out for him, forcing his long and awkward teenage body into a hug. “My little squirt.”

“We should totally have kids,” Missandei says, when she crawls into bed with him. “They are great.”

“Shut up,” Grey says, patting her stomach. “Don’t even talk to me unless you can have this feeling consistently for at least three days straight.”
eighty-eight

Chapter Summary

Missandei re-learns that it's hard being a woman. Grey re-learns that ladies do not love the b-word. Also! Another party gets thrown in his honor, against his will!

After a five-hour flight delay because there was something wrong with the plane’s oxygen masks and hours of sitting apart from Missandei because of their last-minute booking, after leaving the airport in darkness, after spending barely any time in the sun, he collapses on their bed — his body is physically tired, even though jetlag is still ahead of him and he isn’t yet sleepy.

Their broken headboard rattles — and he finds that he misses little Momo 2.0, even after only a couple of days. He misses her jumping on his stomach and trying to ferociously kiss his face as he blocks her and tries to get her to knock it off. He misses the sound of her nails clicking on the floors. The house is eerily quiet and empty without her — it feels empty.

They are not slated to pick her up from Drogo's until tomorrow because of the late hour. Over text message, Drogo had half-heartedly offered to stay up so that they could pick up the dog tonight. Grey had thought it was stupid and hysterical — if they were to take Drogo up on the empty offer — even though he really, really wanted to swing by to get his dog back. He had considered blaming it on Missandei — like, oh, she’s such a girl and really wanted to see Momo 2.0 right away. But he supposes he uses her enough as an excuse to get out of things that he doesn’t want to do that he is probably stockpiling a fair bit of bad karma upon himself and her.

Missandei kicks off her shoes before climbing on the bed and straddling him, immediately peeling off her shirt. She reaches around and unclips her bra, freeing her breasts.

“Oh, it’s just you again,” he says, his mouth twitching with effort, trying not to smile.

She leans forward and presses her ear against his chest, presses her entire body against his, as he rubs the indented skin where her bra strap was. She murmurs, “Your insides sound gurgly.” And after a microscopic pause, she says, “Babe, we’re married.” It’s been something she keeps quietly repeating to him — a thing that has become a mantra, an affirmation.

She had told him that she didn’t anticipate very much changing after they get married. Because they’re already shacked up. They’re already intertwined financially. They’re already making a bunch of sweeping life decisions together. They are essentially already married.

But there was something about saying it out loud and kind of doing it in a ritualistic way that kind of makes things feel just a little bit different.

“You’re stuck with me,” she whispers to him.

He smiles wryly. She’s prone to such obviousness sometimes. He says, “Bummer.”
She ignores all of his shutdowns — that might be her superpower — her imperviousness to his oblique way of protecting himself. She just runs her mouth against his t-shirt, pushing the hem of it up his chest, exposing more skin, stretching it out. “I like being secret-married,” she says. “Maybe we should just cancel the wedding and be secret-married forever.”

He huffs out a laugh, as he lifts up a bit and lets her pull off his shirt. He wants to say something meaningful and sappy and emotional and romantic to her. But instead, he finds himself correcting her. He says, “Missandei. That’s just exactly what we currently have — except we’re now calling it being secret-married.”

She tilts her head so she can better see his face and he can see hers. He sees her eyes light up anyway, in spite of his lameness — taking on a hazy, smoky quality.

She asks him how he plans to beat jet lag. He doesn’t pick up on her coyness, either on purpose or he actually doesn’t pick up on it. So she switches gears and folds in a certain explicitness. She asks him how he thinks married people have sex.

“Oh, I dunno,” he mumbles, looking as if he’s considering the question rather seriously. “Based on sitcoms, I would say that they make jokes and the husband chases the wife up the stairs before it all fades to black.”

“You’ve watched sitcoms?” she asks, arching a brow.

“When I was younger. They used to play in the background at the houses during dinner or when I was doing my homework at the table.”

She sits back, still straddling his body. He’s already told her a lot about his childhood, yet this little factoid has slipped through the cracks. He never forgets what he has told her, and he never repeats stories. For a moment, she wonders if it’s normal to know a person for more than a decade and still be unearthing these little details about him. Is it normal or is it just him and his secretive nature. And does he already know everything about her because, in contrast, she’s more open?

“Missandei,” he says patiently. “Are we going to have sex or are you just going to stare off into space all night?”

She rolls her eyes. “Stare off into space all night.”

They are actually going to have sex. This is the last time they can have sex before he has to abstain and before her discomfort with all the drugs raging through her body makes her not want to have sex ever again.

“Oh my God, my baby!”

Missandei is a blur, rushing over in Drogo’s tiny apartment so she can crouch on the floor next to the couch and rub her hands all over Momo 2.0’s squirming body, picking her up and inundating her
head with audible kisses. He wants to tell her to cool it. It’s going to teach the dog to be hysterical whenever they come home.

But he bites his tongue and turns to Drogo. “How was she?” Grey asks. “Was she noisy? Did she have accidents? I know she can sometimes lose her shit in a strange place.”

“Relax, man,” Drogo says. “She was fine. She cried a little when you guys left, but that was it.”

It kind of stings his heart — the knowledge that 2.0 was scared that she was being abandoned. But he shoves that feeling away and instead refocuses on the more tangible things. “She didn’t annoy you with the whimpering, did she?” he asks. “Sometimes, she just doesn’t get that we’re not leaving forever, and I don’t fucking speak dog, so I don’t know how to convey this to her. She’s so stupid sometimes.”

Drogo swats him, laughing. “Would you stop! She was awesome. You have an awesome dog.”

She intuits that she should drive home, so she snatches the keys from his hand and shoves the dog and the dog’s leash at him.

She keeps casting these furtive glances out of the corner of her eye. He is so weird. He keeps hiding the fact that he has missed the dog like crazy. Missy doesn’t fully understand why he has to keep this a secret from her, but she supposes that to him, it’s instinctive and it’s a protective measure, not a thing that he is applying conscious effort to. He keeps tepidly patting the dog’s back as 2.0 sits on his lap during the relatively short drive home — usually he has her sequestered in the back seat. Missy keeps getting these small flashbacks to a previous life where he sort of behaved this way with her — with him constantly hiding his general feelings for her.

When they arrive home, she tells him she’s going to go soak in the tub for a while, to give him some alone time with 2.0.

Jaime is predictably annoying and impatient as he explains to Grey that, for what Jaime says is the billionth time, he’s not a buy-one-get-one kind of attorney. He really only does immigration work. For all the shit that Grey needs, it’s best to consult with someone who does family law. Jaime has some referrals, possibly.

It’s not that Grey doesn’t realize that Jaime is an immigration lawyer. It’s more that he just needs the paperwork filled out and filed. Any monkey with a law degree and licensed to practice can meet Grey’s criteria. Grey mostly doesn’t want to meet someone new and talk to someone new about his life.

Also predictably, Jaime is not made sympathetic by that explanation. Jaime silently stares at his phone, pausing their game, to flick through his email contacts. “There,” Jaime says. “Sent you some names and numbers.”
Drogo invites a bunch of Dothrakis and a bunch of people like him, Missandei, Jaime, and Brienne to taste-test the food. And it’s only a lot obnoxious, the way Drogo keeps viciously shutting them down and telling them they are wrong because they don’t know Dothraki food whenever they offer him some of their very mild opinions. Even the non-critical ones. Even observations such as, “This is kind of a salty-sweet kind of thing, huh?”

In contrast, whatever Drogo’s Dothraki friends say about the food gets careful consideration and thoughtful discourse. Drogo is getting on Jaime’s last nerve — Jaime keeps muttering that Drogo better learn to cater to people like him — white people like Jaime — if Drogo wants his business to survive.

“That’s my favorite,” says Dany, pointing to a skewer in front of Jaime smeared with green sauce. “I like it because it’s bright and it’s fresh. Dothraki food is kind of meaty and heavy. I suggested that they add a few salads.” Dany’s eyes wander over to where Drogo and his mom are standing. “But they said that their people just don’t eat that way.” She shrugs, making kind of a funny face of very, very slight exasperation.

Brienne’s grin is wide and bright. She says, “How goes it with your future in-law?”

Dany’s frown deepens. “Don’t joke about that,” she lightly admonishes. “She really, really doesn’t know what to make of me. I don’t cook. I don’t clean. I don’t wait on her beloved son hand and foot. And I can’t have children, so grandkids are out.”


“I can’t have kids anymore,” Dany repeats, eyes steady. “I haven’t mention it to you guys? It’s not a secret that I keep.”

“Oh, dude,” Jaime says. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Dany says. “I’m okay with it.” She scans her eyes over to where Drogo is hovering over a plate, conversing all gravely and seriously with his Dothraki crew and his mother. “He might not be, but —” she shrugs, “— it’s not something we have to figure out right now, I suppose.”

“There are other options,” Missandei says.

“I know. But that’s far beyond the scope of what our relationship currently is,” Dany says. Then, she suddenly snorts. “His mom keeps telling him to shit or get off the pot, to stop stringing me along if he’s not in it for the long haul because we’re both getting too old to be mucking about. Him being with me is probably preventing him from finding the person he’s actually meant to be with.”

“I don’t agree with that,” Jaime cuts in.

“I don’t agree with the way that’s been communicated,” Dany says, nodding at him. “But she may not be wrong.”

The actual wedding is only a few weeks away, and the closer it looms — actually — the more angry
and depressed she feels over it — the more she shuts down and withdraws from him at times. It’s not something she can completely pinpoint the cause of. She just melodramatically tells him that everything good eventually dies. He mildly tells her that if she’s talking about people or any sort of organism, then yes — they all eventually die.

He leaves to go on his run, as she talks to her brother on the phone. She’s been making a conscious effort at it. The guilt that she lives so far away has been weighing on her, more than ever. She can’t be around to simply pull him out of the house for a beer or to be his weekly maid. She starts half-heartedly straightening up her own house, to quell the anxiety — even though everything is already pristine and in its place, because of Grey.

“You should come visit me,” she tells Moss. “Get away for a bit. The kids are old enough to take care of themselves for a week or so.”

He tells her that he can’t — the garage.

“Mars can handle it.”

Mossador tells her that Mars could handle it — but it would be very fucking annoying, and he shouldn’t have to. In any case, he doesn’t want to leave his kids alone so he can go relax without them on vacation. And they don’t have a school break for months. And it would be crazy expensive to fly all of them to Westeros.

She kind of feels slapped in the face with her own privilege. She can’t even imagine what it’s like to be going through a divorce and to have to constantly keep it together for the kids. She says, “I can pay.”

Which elicits a very tired-sounding defensiveness from Moss. He tells her that he resents being treated like a sad charity case, that he’s actually getting along fine, considering. She responds by telling him that he’s not a charity case, and he needs to stop being such a dude, all stoic and strong and silently suffering. She uses the words self-care, obviously a term that means almost nothing to Moss, just about a Westernized concept that is so outside of his everyday immigrant life. But she pushes down more of her guilt over the different ways in which they respectively live — and she tells him he has to deal with his feelings.

As an ultrasound probe and a tube gets shoved up her poor vagina, as a suctioning needle goes hunting for mature oocytes in her first ovary — Missy can’t help but think about Grey’s responsibility in all of this. All he had to do was pump and dump into a plastic cup earlier — at home, even. Leading up to it, he had the gall to pace nervously and act like it was a hardship. In contrast, she has to undergo a surgical procedure and run the very small, but still very real risk of dying from very unlikely complications.

It is so easy being a man. No one dies from jacking off.

Fuck him.

“You’re doing great, Missy,” the nurse rubbing her arm, Diana, says. “Everything is looking great.

She’s about to snort and ask him how he’s so sure everything is great, with that lack of medical degree and training and all, but she thinks better of it when his head dips down a little more, blocking some of the light. She sees his lashes flutter — and she feels her concentration slipping away a bit more because of the drugs.

She’s slouched on the sofa, in front of the TV, with a heat pad on her stomach and a small carton of dark chocolate ice cream. She feels bloated and sore. She is a cliche. The sofa springs lightly crunch and moan as he plops down at her feet with his own spoon, reaching over to steal some ice cream.

“So I was reading —”

“Oh really?” he interjects, voice deadpan. “You read something? What did you read?”

She yanks the ice cream away from him. “Don’t be a jackass,” she says waringly.

His eyes narrow. “What did you read, Missandei?”

She almost doesn’t want to tell him because he’s being a bit of a jerk about it — but it would be a bitch move to do that. So she sighs and hands over the carton, mostly because it’s making her hands too cold, spoon stuck up inside of it. She gently pulls at their throw — a knitted blue thing that he likes because it’s neutral-looking and boring — and unfolds it a little before reaching out to grab at Momo 2.0, making the dog sit on her lap in the jumble of softness. She smells 2.0’s head. 2.0 smells like their laundry detergent.

“I read that relationships can suffer during in-vitro.”

“We’re not doing IVF, though.”

“Okay, so there’s not a lot of literature on the emotional fallout of egg retrieval procedures,” she snaps. “We’re basically going through IVF, but we’re stopping before the part where you implant shit back into my body. And you know that. You know what I meant. Why do you need to always correct me? Is being absolutely accurate that important to you? Is lording your anal correctness over me really that fun?”

“So is this why relationships suffer?” he says. “Because women get really bitchy after the procedure?”

Immediately — immediately — tears sting her eyes. She blinks them back. She hates crying during their stupid arguments, because it’s cheating. It also undermines how right she is by making her look emotional.

She kind of stares at the flickering TV for a long moment, pretending to watch the program — some cooking show — because she just doesn’t want to be a loser and leave the sofa. She was here first. He should be made to leave. He was also an asshole, so he should leave for that reason, too. He always has a real problem handling the tough stuff fairly. He likes to shut down and harden and forcefully be alone. And this time around, it’s really, really fucking annoying. Because she did all of the fucking hard stuff! She took all of the medication, like clockwork — for them. Her body went all beserk — for them. She had to undergo a surgical procedure — for them. She has to heal and recover physically from it — for them.
He only had to watch her do all of this, physically unaffected. And he had to fucking jack off twice. Big deal. And he is acting like a fucking stupid bitch over it. It’s amazing that he called her a bitch when clearly, he is the biggest bitch. He would probably correct her if he heard her. He would probably tell her that he technically implied that she was being bitchy, not that she was a bitch. God, get it right.

Dammit.

“I want to be alone with 2.0,” she says, blinking back more tears. “Since I was here first and I don’t feel like moving, do you mind giving me some space for a bit?”

He manages to look stunned. She doesn’t even know why. Maybe in his crazy brain, he thought they were just having a normal, everyday discussion. And she can’t stare at his expression for very long. It only makes her more emotional.

“Missandei,” he says, his voice soft now. “I’m sorry.”

Oh great. She really wants to cry now.

He reaches down and lightly squeezes her socked foot. And he needs to really just go away for a bit because he is so fucking annoying and she is so fucking lame because she forgives him too easily. She watches him stand up in her peripheral vision.

“I’ll, uh, go for a run. I’ll take my phone. You can text me, if you want me to turn around and come back early.”

He is the stupidest, harshest motherfucker on the face of the planet. It is amazing and crazy that he has emotionally manipulated a nice person into being tied to him. He has actually tricked a lovely, beautiful woman into mashing her genetic matter together with his genetic matter. That is crazy.

What’s crazier is that he only can bring himself to run a mile and a half. It takes less than ten minutes before he turns around and heads back to the house. He’s only minutes away from it, too. He was only planning on running circles around the block like a psycho. And he’s about to be a stupid motherfucker who doesn’t respect his wife’s request for personal space.

For a freak second, she thinks they are being robbed and she’s about to die — when she hears the door get wrenched open, hitting against the stop with a rattle. Her heart is pounding against her rib cage — her hand is on her chest, holding it back — as he walks back into the living room in his running shorts, breathing hard. He never cuts runs this early.

“Jesus! Grey!” she says. “You scared the shit out of me!” She swallows the dry patch in her throat. “Is everything okay? Are you okay? Why are you back already?”

He looks like he’s steeling himself to be smacked or something — as he takes the few steps forward, before ducking down to get eye-level with her. Momo 2.0 thinks he’s come to lavish attention on
her, so her attention perks up and she starts wagging her tail on Missandei’s lap. His hand comes up to cup Missandei’s face — she starts inexplicably tearing up because she’s a stupid mess — and he says, “I’m sorry. And I love you. I didn’t realize I was — you know — being horrible.”

She reaches out and closes the distance between them, hugging him tightly to her body. He immediately lets out a sigh and squeezes her back, turning his face to bury it in her hair and in her neck.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, the sound of the apology muffled against her skin.

“This is not how you’re supposed to win arguments,” she says, voice thick from almost crying.

“I don’t think I won though. I’m pretty sure I lost that one.”

It’s somewhat perverse — the ways that this kind of heightened emotional state turn him on. She has told him that it’s actually human nature — to be aroused in these sorts of moments. They are lying down on their sofa, from noses to toes. He keeps disregarding the fact that her body is sore — he keeps smearing himself against her. To be fair, she keeps egging him on by arching her back, by pressing her breasts tantalizingly against his bare skin, by the little moans and sighs that keep passing through her lips.

He keeps kissing her, cradling her face close in the crook of his arm, boxing her in. His hand keeps wandering over her body, wedged between the couch and her back, the couch and the dip in her spine, the couch and her ass, the couch and her legs, which he tries to wrap around himself.

It’s getting so hot underneath the throw blanket — he’s starting to sweat — so he yanks it out from behind her back and drops it to the floor.

They were told no intercourse for about two weeks or so, as her ovaries heal. The procedure really did a number on her insides. She’s been taking antibiotics to stave off infection and hormones so her junk will get back to normal. They didn’t even think about timing when they signed up for this — he only thought of efficiency. He’s clearly an idiot. But he figured it was smart to just get it out of the way and done with. Then they wouldn’t have to worry about it again until it was time to worry about it again.

As it is, they will not be having penis-in-vagina sex until close to the wedding — maybe after. Maybe never ever again.

He’s a tad fatalistic about it.

He throws his head back and grunts, grinding into the hand that that has snuck into his shorts. It’s not really enough — it’s not exactly what he wants — they’re not going to get what they want — but it’s something at least.

“Hey, roll over a bit,” she says. “Lie on your back.”

“Huh?”

She gives him a look, pulling her hand out of his shorts, transferring her fingers to the elastic waistband. “Dude, don’t even play dumb. Come on. You know what’s happening.” She starts
tugging them off.

He automatically lifts his hips to help her. His fucking shoes are still on. They’re probably getting the couch dirty. Crap. He says, “Wait —” He really meant to say wait — wait while he kicks off his shoes so that he doesn’t mess up their sofa — but the thought shoots out of his brain when he feels her crawl backwards — down his body — straddling him. He actually does know where this is going. And he doesn’t actually feel like he deserves it, because he’s been mean to her, and she can’t have sex, kind of because of him — and now she’s on her hands and knees and her face is hovering right over dick.

“Fuck,” he says, bracing his foot against the arm of the couch, raising his head to watch her as she takes him in her mouth. “Babe!” he says. “The dog is watching. Oh my God. Hold on, hold on.”

She tells him he’s being a bit of prude, and he’s really killing the mood, as he springs up from the sofa, pulling up his shorts. She watches as he nearly trips and falls — like his legs aren’t working — as he scrambles to fill up Momo 2.0’s food and water bowls.

His expression is one of frazzled bewilderment — and she thinks it’s so fucking cute — as he tells her that they really shouldn’t do any of that stuff — he gestures to the front of his shorts, and she thinks that’s really fucking cute, too — in front of their dog. It’s weird. It’s weird because she was just sitting there on the end of the couch, just watching them. And it’s doubly weird because she’s like, their kid.

He immediately flips around and ducks out of the conference room when he sees streamers and balloons and a cake. Hands on his chest stop him in the hallway — Tanja — and he is pushed backward, back into the room. He could easily knock her down and run away if he wanted to, but this is also a place of business and that would be unprofessional.

“You?” he mutters.

“Because you refuse to tell us when your nameday is, and HR won’t give it up,” Tanja says simply. “Relax. It’ll take all of half an hour. Just sit. Eat some cake. Have a chat with us.”

God, he wants to quit this job and get one where they don’t want to get all up in his personal shit.

“So how did you guys meet?” Emi asks.

“That’s none of your business,” he says automatically — and then he retroactively realizes how harsh it sounds. It elicits some chuckles around the room. But Emi is nonplussed, having worked with him for more than five years. “In college,” he says, softening his tone a little. Tanja had the
sense to keep the group small — just the core group of people he likes the most — and fucking Brian.

After a long pause, Emi says, “Good story, bro.”

“They met because he was dumb, and she was his tutor!” Tanja supplies, purposely telling the story wrong, baiting him. “And he was like, hey, Teacher, whatcha got going on later? Wanna do a private study sesh in my dorm?”

He regrets becoming friends with her. He regrets introducing her to Missandei. “I didn’t live in the dorms,” he says, but no one is listening to him.

He frowns as Tanja keeps spreading misinformation, as he raises his phone up at the room — trying to get some of the cake — before he snaps a photo to send to Missandei. She would want to know that this happened to him.

“So can I give you some personal advice?”

He looks at Barristan with a blank face — as sheer disbelief just stings the back of his eyes. He feels the onset of some headache coming on. And he can’t shut down his boss the way he shuts down all the other assholes he works with. “Sure,” he says, scraping some of the frosting off the sheet cake. Spontaneously, he starts thinking that the leftover cake would be a good thing to take home to Jaime — before he realizes what year it is — and that he’s not living with Jaime anymore.

“When I was younger, I used to not celebrate anything,” Barristan says. “I used to not see the point in it and I didn’t think I needed it. It also rang as false and forced to me.” He leans back in his seat. “But now — I celebrate a lot of things. Sometimes I celebrate with my wife and we go out to dinner when I have a good day or when we close out a big project. It’s good to take some time and bask in the good things — to enjoy them and linger in them with the people you care about. Because, you know, life doesn’t always dole out good things.”

On the commute home, sitting in traffic, she thinks about her parents’ shitty marriage and how her mom knew a volatile, intense love, which blew up in her face, so then she settled for companionship and a man that she professed isn’t very remarkable — who probably spread his unremarkable genetics into Missandei. She also thinks about her grandparents and how they were rock solid together — but they suffered such heartbreak under their children and grandchildren. Missy thinks about Moss and Okha. They had a nice run of nearly 20 years, before they devolved and ended up in such a tragic mess.

Grey has told her that these things aren’t formulaic. Having something great doesn’t create a vacuum elsewhere. Besides, Moss and Okha actually didn’t have a good 20-year run. Some if it was good, some of it was bad. It turned bad long before they called it quits.

She had asked him if that was supposed to be comforting.
She’s more prone to corniness and sappiness compared to him — though to be fair to her, a rock or a glob of mud is more prone to corniness and sappiness than he is. But she tends to hold onto him too tightly sometimes. She’s aware that she’s so happy with him. It would be so horrible if something really bad happened to one of them.

He has told her that she’s going to make her fears come true subconsciously — if she keeps obsessing. He has told her to stop thinking about it. Sometimes over-analyzing is detrimental. Sometimes she just had to put her head down and ride out the storm. He has told her that they will be okay.

She immediately grins when she sees a purple orchid — a new purchase — sitting in the middle of their kitchen table, in full view when she walks over to drop her purse down. She ignores Momo 2.0’s pawing feet on her legs — Missandei hated wearing stockings to begin with, but she full-on stopped after this dog. Her heels click on the hardwood floors as she goes in search of him. He is constantly on her ass about taking off her shoes so they don’t scuff the floors too much, but it’s a losing battle, what with their easily excitable dog.

She spots him, wiping down streaks from the cleaner on the guest bathroom mirror. He obviously heard her coming, but he doesn’t pause or turn around. He does glance at her through the mirror though.

“Thanks for the flowers,” she says, grinning. She’s grinning because she’s sure they are not going to accidentally fight over flowers, this time.

“What makes you think they’re for you?” he says.

She shrugs as she pushes off the door jamb, as she takes a small step forward so she can lean in and kiss him hello on the cheek as he continues cleaning.

He turns his face at the last moment, and her mouth touches down on his mouth, wet but simple — and it’s with a certain kind of intention and a look in his eyes — when they pause and pull away from each other a bit — that gets her skin heating up and her pulse going. He drops his cleaning supplies in the sink before standing up to his full height, before he crowds her body against the wall. He quietly stares at her and he quietly says, “I love you,” and she can’t take much more of this anymore.

She pitches her head forward, shuts her eyes, and pulls him in for a better, sexier hello kiss — her hands around the back of his neck, her tongue jamming into his mouth as his hands dig into her ass, tilting and melding her hips into his.

“Are you still sore?” he mumbles against her lips. He means sore from the egg extraction.

“Yeah, a little,” she says honestly.

His face is cupped in both of her hands. She laughs very lightly, smearing the sound of it against his mouth, feeling him smile and feeling his kiss on her bottom lip.
He feels tied to this sense of honor — because of the beginning of his life, he’s particularly preoccupied with equity. Because she is an integral part of his adulthood, he’s especially preoccupied with fairness. It’s a thing that trickles down to the tiny mundane details of his current daily life in unexpected ways. It’s the reason he tells her that if she can’t have sex, then he won’t be having sex either. They are a team, after all. No man — or woman — will get left behind. He kind of blurts it out before he has a chance to really think it through.

So he feels utterly grateful and his love for her just throbs in his chest, when she gives him an unimpressed, skeptical look and snorts. Her hand sneaks down and presses over the front of his running shorts, just applying comforting pressure initially. His body generally moves without active thought in these moments, without his permission. He kind of tilts his hips to press his hardening dick further against her warm palm, even as he’s saying these things to her — about how it’s fair if neither of them get to have any sex until after the wedding, when she’s nice and healed and the risk of infection is closer to nil. Additionally, he tells her, it will make it extra special, when they eventually have sex again.

His resolve and his commitment to this weakens when he feels her sneak under the band of his shorts, and her familiar hand invades his space intimately. It’s all just so unbelievable — this life. His jaw just hangs, unhinged and worthless, as she slowly starts stroking him, agonizingly meticulous — mellow and syrupy — as she presses the front of her body, her soft breasts, against him, her open mouth on his neck — they’re standing near the doorway of their house. He’s only just gotten back from his run. He can’t remember how they even got on this topic — he can’t think coherently, not with her hand down his pants, gripping his hard-on.

Oh, that’s right. She complimented him when he got home, sweaty and plugged into his headphones — her mix. When he pulled out the earbuds, she had repeated herself and told him he looked good enough to eat and he probably smelled amazing — and he had looked back at her like she’s insane and he told her that BO must really turn her on. It was a small joke — but her eyes were hungry and intentional. And then she ran her teeth over her bottom lip. And then she started stalking over to where he was standing. And that was when he tried to talk to her all seriously about sex. They haven’t gotten near it since that thwarted time on the couch with Momo 2.0. He had been too freaked out by the dog being a voyeur and them being exhibitionists. And then they had to go grocery shopping.

It’s gonna get nuts if he lets himself touch her, so he reaches blindly behind his body and grips the edge of their console table. “Missandei,” he says, kind of in warning.

“Dude,” she says, sliding her hand down his erection, her movement restricted by the elastic waistband of his shorts. “I don’t give a shit about having to wait or not being able to get off. We still have you.” He can feel her other hand searching for the tie on his shorts, to loosen it. “Are you really saying you don’t want this?”

He wants to punch her in the face because she’s a bitch with her rhetorical sex questions. Of course he wants this. Fuck her for asking and for messing with his brain. He breathes out a groan and leans
more of his weight against the console table, the side of his hand pushing against one of their knicknacks, a ceramic bowl that holds their keys, the scraping sound of it just jolting up his spine.

He angles his face down so he can attack hers with his mouth. The kiss is ridiculously inelegant and wet. It’s all tongue and sucking and her gasps — she unconsciously squeezes him harder and it makes him shiver and tell himself, *fuck it*, as his hands leave the console and start just laying themselves all over her body. They travel up and he digs his fingers harshly into her curls, anchors her face against his, knocking their teeth together as he pushes further into her mouth, pulling in her breath and tasting as much of her as he can. It’s not romantic or sweet — it’s certainly not gentle. It’s rough and fast and full of spit.

It’s when they are both panting and her damp hand has left his shorts so that they can messily dry hump with her leg hiked over his hip, so they can grind against each other against the kitchen counter as they suck face — as little Momo 2.0 bounces her paws against the side of his knees — that’s when Grey shoots back to reality. He breaks the kiss.

“I was just about to take her on a short walk — when you came home, actually,” Missandei says breathlessly when she pulls back from him, pressing her thumb against the artery in his neck when he tries to close the distance again, keeping him at bay.

His mouth hits her cheekbone. He tightens his hold on her hips and back for just a moment longer, before reluctantly letting her go. “Oh, okay. You want me to come with?”

“If you want. But you don’t have to.”

“I might go shower,” he says.

“Oh, okay.” She gives him a valiant smile. She’s distracted still. And her face is flushed. And her mouth is dark and swollen. And he can just punch himself in the fucking face because she is so fucking wonderful and beautiful and hot and looks really incredible naked.

“Oh, okay. See you in a bit then,” he says.

She makes a stink-face. “Oh shit, I have to call the caterer and my grandma about some last minute allergy stuff. Did you know Pia is vegan now? She said not to worry about her because she just won’t eat, but I was like — no, don’t be fucking stupid. I’m not aiding and abetting your eating disorder. Of course you will eat at our wedding. It’s a Naathi wedding! No one goes hungry!”

“Jesus,” he mutters. “Of course she’s vegan now. Of course.”

Missandei swats him, before she goes to clip a leash on Momo 2.0. “Try to be nice.”

He grins at her — probably like a goofball — before she leaves the house with 2.0. “Raincheck?”

She knows exactly what he’s referring to. She gives him a small smile, too. “Raincheck,” she affirms. “You’re gonna get some. Tonight.”

His legs feel unsteady and weak and awkward, as he makes his way upstairs to their bedroom.

They actually don’t manage to have time for one-sided sex — because things kind of blow up. The
caterer is a small mom-and-pop operation, and they don’t really know what vegan means. Missandei’s not altogether confident that they won’t accidentally dose Pia with an animal byproduct. Naathi are naturally very vegetarian friendly, but they also use a lot of honey and a lot of dairy products in their food. She’s read that sometimes a bag of sugar has animal byproducts in it.

Even though she thinks Pia is being really fucking ridonkulous and this is just another one of those diet-phases Pia goes through, Missy can’t knowingly-accidentally dose someone with an animal byproduct. It just isn’t right.

So she starts distractedly brainstorming an easy way to deal with Pia’s new diet without knocking too many other things out of whack.

“Goddamn, babe,” Grey says from underneath the bed covers impatiently. He’s been waiting for her to put the computer down. “Who the fuck cares? Let her starve. She always does this shit. And you always work too hard to accommodate other people. Come to bed.”

“No,” she says. “It’s not a big deal. It’s an easy fix. I just have to look up this one recipe and see if we can swap out ingredients. My grandma can take care of the rest.”

“This is so much trouble.”

“No, it’s not.”

He doesn’t love running with 2.0 — not because she can’t keep the pace — she’s actually like the little engine that could, sprinting at speed alongside him for a good five miles or so before she kind of starts pooping out and slowing down a bit. It’s more that he isn’t mentally sharp when she runs with him. He’s always preoccupied with whether she is safe — he’s always watching her paws and the street for broken glass, watching other people extra carefully, watching other cars extra carefully. He’s also preoccupied by just generally how cute she looks — this tiny fucking dog running her little legs in a blur like she thinks she’s on the hunt for something. It’s like she thinks she’s a wolf. And that is just too fucking adorable and hilarious and he keeps watching her and getting knocked out of his concentration when they run.

But after Missandei makes a case for exercise — little dogs need exercise, too — he has started to take her out for longer runs once a week. Well, longer runs for her. Short runs for him. He also sometimes shoves her into a backpack, unzipped at the top so she can stick her head out — and goes on runs with her that way. The modest flopping weight also fucks him up a lot — but the extra resistance is probably good. Mostly, he’s been trying to get her to be used to sitting in a bag for long periods of time — in preparation for the plane. He and Missandei don’t want to stash her somewhere for two weeks, so they’re taking her with. She has to be a carry-on. This dog has never been carried around in a purse in her entire life. It’s always a battle to get her into the backpack — she panics and fights him with her feet and squirming body, looking at him like he has gravely betrayed her and she is all alone in the world.

And he generally feels like crap over it, but he has the gift of foresight. She needs to learn so it’d be easier for her later.
Missandei is actually not going to sleep at all, the night before their flight. She said she has a lot of work to prepare before she goes off on vacation. He has to remind her that they’re not actually just going on vacation. They’re getting married in front of people. So it’s kind of a big deal. People at work will understand.

He’s relatively less encumbered — he just handed all of his shit over to Brian and was like, bye, bitch. It was that easy. He has spent a lot of years making mistakes and over-extending himself. He has learned a lot of lessons through Selmy, about how to delegate. He also doesn’t care if they fire him. They will never fire him. But he really doesn’t care anymore. This is why he’s stress-free and lying in bed by himself in the dark. Alone.

Fuck this. This is fucking lame.

She jumps a little bit, when she feels the weight of his hands fall on her shoulders. He had snuck up on her. She tilts her head up to look at his tired face, smiling as he yawns and slowly drags a nearby stool to the computer desk. He straddles it and positions himself behind her, his chin on her shoulder.

“What are you doing?” he mutters, looking at the computer screen, his voice low and soft.

“Responding to all of these emails I’ve put off for the last week.”

“Christ.”

She raises her hand up to touch his forearm, which has wound its way across her chest. “Sorry. I will be done in like, another hour.”

“Another hour,” he repeats incredulously, laughing lightly into her neck, pressing his mouth there in a simple kiss. “Okay.”

She leans backward a little bit, to push herself further into his sleepy warmth. She tells him that he doesn’t have to sit there with her — really — she’ll be up in an hour or so. But he mumbles that they can sleep on the plane — and this is probably going to help them get over jetlag faster.

Missandei rented a van to take the eight of them to the airport. If it were up to him, he’d just worry about the two of them and Momo 2.0 and leave everyone else to fend for themselves, which is naturally why she took the initiative.

Pia and Peck are the first stop after he, Missandei, and their dog are picked up. He doesn’t even know Peck other than the random dozens of times they hung out as a whole group — but when Pia asked him if she could bring a plus-one, he was what-the-fuck-ever about it and told her she could do whatever she want if she’s willing to pony up some cash for the flight and hotel.
“Hi, guys!” Pia says, ducking into the van with a humongous shoulder bag. “Are you excited! I have coffee for you! I don’t know what kind you drink, Grey — you guys didn’t respond to my text messages in time. So I made you a latte.” She thrusts a hot disposable cup at him sheepishly before she also hands one to Missandei. “I know your order, lady. Soy dark mocha, one and a half pumps of sugar, no whip.”

Missandei gratefully takes the paper cup, groaning in appreciation. “Thank you!” she says. And at Grey’s targeted look, she says, “Friends learn things about each other when they hang out,” explaining why Pia knows her coffee order.

Pia and Peck are still awkwardly balancing six more hot, covered cups between the two of them. Grey juts his chin out at the collection as the driver pulls into drive. “You made these?”

“Yes!” she says brightly. “We got an espresso machine over the holidays! I can make cute little patterns with foam, too — well, mostly hearts. I made both of yours guys’ with hearts. You know. Because it’s thematic! Too bad you can’t see them with the lids.”

He winces at her peppy tone. It’s fucking four in the morning.

Then he suddenly remembers something. He reaches out and snatches Pia’s own coffee cup out of her hand. She protests with a weak squeak of indignation, as she watches him bring the cup to his mouth and sip from it.

And then he says, “There’s cream in this.” He says it more to Missandei than Pia. He blindly hands Pia her coffee back.

“Well, yeah,” Pia says. “So?”

Missandei is not in the mood for his I-told-you-so. She’s very sleep-deprived, so she stays quiet and unresponsive to his probing stare. She flicks her eyes away, holds up Momo 2.0, and re-crosses her legs. She sips from her own coffee cup. She says, “Thanks again, P. This was very thoughtful. It’s yummy.”

Drogo is last to be picked up. They see him standing just outside of his building with a suitcase, by himself.

The moment the light turns on in the interior of the van, Jaime says, “Dude, where’s Dany?”

Drogo’s voice is entirely too casual and too normal-sounding, when he says, “We broke up. She’s not coming.”

He and Jaime are standing in line getting some overpriced baked goods — utterly silent because it’s not even five in the morning. It’s really a one-person job, but Jaime wants to mull over the menu and decide what he wants at the very last moment, which is generally how this sort of thing goes. Jaime also wants to pay. Grey is tasked with remembering everyone else’s order because Jaime is selfish
and can’t be bothered.

It’s only Brienne and Pia that walk up to them while they are still in line. Peck is saving them a seat at a table, which is dumb, because no one will really fight for a table at almost-five in the morning.

Pia reaches out to lightly shove both him and Jaime. “You guys should talk to him.” It’s obvious that the him in question is Drogo. He and Missandei are sitting further down in the terminal somewhere, hanging out with 2.0. She told Grey she just wants a water. He’s pretty sure she needs to eat something or she’ll vomit. He’s going to bring her back a sandwich.


Pia looks at him incredulously. And then she swats him again. “He’s going through a break-up!”

“So?”

Jaime gets hit again. He’s starting to lose his patience — starting to get a little irritated at Pia. Brienne merely bites back her smile as she reaches out to rub his shoulder, reminding him to play nice. Jaime lifts his hat to claw his hair off his face. And then he says, “Dude, the last thing that guy wants is for us to not be normal and to start bugging him about his feelings. Trust me.”

“You’re just saying that because you don’t like her very much,” Brienne says softly, putting her fingers to his face. “If it were someone you really liked, you’d be all up in his business about this.”

Jaime shrugs. “Maybe.”

He figures he has the rest of his life to sit next to Missandei on a plane, so he asks her if she’d mind sitting by herself for a while. She waves him off and says she still has 2.0 under the seat. Also, she’s planning on sleeping the flight away anyway. Go nuts.

Drogo kind of grins at him, giving him a small wave hello — before Grey sits down. It’s the first time they’ve really had some substantial interaction. He swings his body into the seat next to Drogo — the fucking middle seat — landing with a thump. Grey blinks his dry, tired eyes and he says, “I’m getting deja vu. Remember that longass flight to the Summer Isles, and we were all hungover?”

“Yeah,” Drogo says, chuckling softly. “That was nuts. I barely felt human.”

The person on his other side isn’t particularly big, but Grey still leans toward Drogo anyway. He doesn’t realize he has fallen asleep until he suddenly jolts awake, which the plane goes through a little bit of turbulence.

Drogo is awake and his arms are casually crossed over his chest — Grey realizes he had been sleeping on Drogo’s shoulder. “Oh,” he says. “Sorry I fell asleep on you.” He means it literally and figuratively.
Drogo kind of smiles — his mood has been so low-key and reflective, and it’s a little weird. Usually, D would give him a little shit over it, because D goodnaturedly gives people shit over everything. Drogo says, “No worries.”

“Oh my God,” Pia says, when they step off of the plane. “I am dying already.”


Behind them, Jaime laughs. “If you think this is hot, you should visit the Summer Isles.”

Missandei hikes the strap of the bag carrying 2.0 higher on her shoulder and quietly tells him she’s been texting Dany, asking Dany why her bitch ass is letting some dude make her miss Missandei’s wedding. After all, they were friends long before Dany started mashing her privates with Drogo. Grey swallows his surprised laugh out of reflex, before he just breathes out a sigh — relaxing into the evening sun and the heat. If Pia is pissed about the temperature right now at the tail end of the day, she’s going to go apeshit when she realizes it gets even hotter.

“And? What did she say back to you?” He can’t see her eyes. She’s wearing sunglasses. He only sees his own reflection.

“She told me she was already in the middle of changing her flight. She’s coming later in the week though, right before the wedding.”

“Oh, great. You invited drama to our wedding.”

“Yeah right, dude.” She starts ticking things off her fingers. “We have alcohol. We have my depressed brother who’s going through a divorce. We have a bunch of randos I don’t know that my gran invited, just showing up for free booze and food. We have Addam and alcohol. We have Jaime and alcohol. We have Drogo around alcohol.” She grins. “I don’t think we need to worry about Dany, who bites off the heads of live baby birds for breakfast so she can retain her power, you sexist.”

Jaime has never seen her childhood home before, and he’s the kind of person that takes an avid interest in this kind of stuff — the origins of certain people in his life. He kind of gives himself the entire grand tour, poking around in all of the rooms except for her grandma’s.

The entire house is packed. She’s never seen so many white people in her grandma’s house before and it’s honestly freaking her out a little bit. It’s freaking her out because she has no idea how her grandma feels about it. Her grandma keeps silently chopping up chicken with a massive cleaver in the middle of the kitchen floor. Addam keeps talking over the chopping — Pippa is outside playing
with her nieces — his voice loud and very, very Western. He keeps complimenting her grandma, saying that dinner smells so amazing and that she’s so great for feeding them. Her grandma keeps occasionally raising her face to smile at him like he’s some pale lunatic, not comprehending any of the words he is saying, only intuiting his good intentions.

“I just saw the room that you’re gonna fuuuck in,” Jaime says teasingly in a low whisper, before he cracks a smile and tilts his beer bottle back for long sip. “I like the boy band posters on the wall. I like the dolls on your bookshelves. I couldn’t find your diary, but it’s only the first day and I didn’t look that hard.”

“Joke’s on you, Bieber,” she says smartly, sipping from from a boozy glass of punch. “My ovaries are all tore up right now. And that room has never been fucked in. We’re only staying with her for a week. After that, we’re renting a house nearby.” After a pause, she says, “You must’ve been the most annoying brother to your siblings ever.”

Jaime points the neck of his beer bottle to her. “Dude, for real. They have stories.”

His hand pretty much never goes empty. Just as he finishes a beer, another cold one gets shoved at him. Drogo observes that there is overlap here — Dothrakis also really love to booze it up at weddings, too. They drink like they don’t care about living. They drink to perhaps chase and reinforce their manliness. This is something Grey already knows, but he lets Drogo kind of muse over it anyway. It’s nice to hear the explanation and the thoughts.

Right as he hears Missandei shout out his name, he’s already booking it out the door barefoot, hopping over the railing of the deck because there’s a baby gate blocking the way. He sprints over to where the girls are screaming and pointing — and he quickly bends over and grabs Momo 2.0 by the scruff of her neck — she yelps from pain and shock and he feels sick — as Lucy, Grandma’s dog, growls and lunges at 2.0 again.

All the girls crowd around him, their hands trying to peel at his arms so that they can see if 2.0 is okay, their worried chatter droning on around him. He catches his breath and he sees Moss stooping down to pick up Lucy so she can’t jump at 2.0 again.

“All the girls crowd around him, their hands trying to peel at his arms so that they can see if 2.0 is okay, their worried chatter droning on around him. He catches his breath and he sees Moss stooping down to pick up Lucy so she can’t jump at 2.0 again.

“Is everyone okay?” he asks. And after they all nod and say yes, he says, “What happened?” holding 2.0’s shaking body tightly, directing his question to the oldest, to Kemi.

Her eyes are wide and white in the dimming light. “We were just playing!” she says, panting too from the commotion. “We were running around with your dog and we were playing chase around the yard. And we tried to get Lucy to play, too, but she was kind of grumpy. So we tried to get Momo to convince her to play — and we tried to get them to play together — and then they just starting fighting. Lucy started attacking her!”

He feels her hand on his back, gripping his shirt. He turns back and only has to catch a glimpse of her worried face before he transfers their shivering dog into her arms.
“Oh my God,” Missandei says, examining 2.0, stroking through her fur. “Is there blood? Did she break skin?” And then to Moss, Missandei says, “Is Lucy up-to-date on her vaccinations?”

“Yeah, I think so,” he says.

“Oh my God,” Missandei mutters again, before she quietly turns around and carries 2.0 back inside the house, presumably to examine her under better light.

“Girls,” Moss says wearily. “Lucy is old, and she’s cranky. Don’t go throwing her around at other dogs, okay?”

“We’re sorry, Daddy,” Delia says, as the rest of the girls hang their heads and chorus that they’re also sorry. “It was an accident.”

“It’s okay,” Grey says quietly, touching his hand to Delia’s head. “It happens. Everyone’s okay.”

The dog looks fine — something that her grandma blithely said to her in the kitchen — but her mood has tanked, and she shuts herself in the bathroom anyway, under the guise of looking over 2.0 some more. Really, she just doesn’t want people to see her so upset. They already know she’s upset. The house was hushed when she walked back inside awkwardly with her dog in her arms — everyone was staring. And then they were asking if 2.0 was okay, which just made her so emotional — even though 2.0 is clearly okay. A bit shell-shocked, but okay.

She hears a quiet knock and then she hears her name. She reaches over and twists the knob, unlocking it. He slips in wordlessly, automatically locking the door again behind him. The bathroom is impossibly small and they are so cramped. Their puppy is still quietly whimpering and shaking in her arms. And when she sees his face, she presses her forehead into his chest and just starts crying in frustration as his arms come up around her.

“Lucy is an asshole,” Missandei mutters.

“Lucy’s just never been around other dogs,” he says reasonably. “She was scared, too.”
Pre-wedding bliss

He wakes up when he feels her stirring, when she tries to move and finds her movement restricted by his body in the tiny bed. Momo 2.0 is on alert right away, jumping to her feet and watching them with avid interest to see if they’re about get up and take her to go pee. He hears Missandei sigh softly, as she remembers where she is, before she relaxes and wraps her arms around his head, pulling him tighter against her body.

“You’re gonna suffocate me in your boobs,” he mutters, his voice muffled by her breasts. They had shifted in bed overnight and he somehow moved lower while she moved higher. His sweaty face has been using her sticky chest as a pillow. He takes a moment to indulge, pushing his face in deeper, smearing it against her skin, lightly pulling down the neckline of her tank top, biting the exposed skin — then smiling when he hears her soft gasp.

She says, “What a way to go, though, right?”

He softly chuckles, running his hand into her underwear to squeeze her bare ass.

Traditionally, people don’t sleep in the same bed before the wedding. It’s usually not even a discussion point because usually the bride and groom are still living in their parents’ houses. But seeing as how they are currently old as dirt and they already live together in King’s Landing, Missandei’s grandmother is choosing to look at this like a long overdue formality. To her, they have already been married for a while, so it’s less of a point of contention that they’re sleeping in the same bed. Or — grandma is just getting soft and pliant in her advanced age.

He realizes they are getting carried away when he blinks through the haze and finds her turned over, with his erection cradled against her warm, grinding ass, with his hand pressing hard against her pubic bone, keeping her anchored to his dick. His other hand has somehow traveled up to a breast, pinching and rubbing as her gasps and sighs get louder and his breathing gets heavier and more desperate. Her hands are braced against the wall, using it so she can push herself backward into his body as much as she can. He lets out a low grunt as she rolls her ass back against his hard-on, from the top to bottom. It's amazing and it makes him hate himself because it feels too good. It would be so fucking awkward if her grandma walked in on them right now.

“I bet we can do it,” she says. “It’s almost been two weeks. I feel pretty healed and stuff. I really miss being with you.”

“I really miss you, too. But I’m also super freaked out about getting caught,” he says honestly. “And our stupid dog is literally in bed with us right now. We’re so gross.”

With that, Missandei slows the grinding to a stop, her body going soft and boneless, sinking back into the bed. She makes a low and disappointed noise, in the throat.

“I should probably get up and get ready to go on the next airport run,” he says, pressing a kiss to her cheek. His heart is still hammering and his dick needs to chill out. “I’ll take her to pee, too.” He sits up in bed — the shifting makes the tenting in his sweats very obvious. He watches as Missandei’s eyes drift right to it, and it makes his face flare up in heat.
Momo 2.0 immediately tries to jump on him to lavish affection — completely aimed at his dick. He has to block her — her face hits his arm and she bounces off him, falling back on the bed — stunned.

Missandei laughs and leans forward to pull 2.0 into her lap. “Silly puppy,” she says. “You’re such a silly puppy. You totally do not get what’s going on.” Then, after a moment of contemplation, she says, “Isn’t it weird that 2.0 will have a whole life without ever having sex? She’s a sterile lady. She will never be a mother, and she will die a virgin. She will never know the touch of a boy dog.”

“Hey,” he says, when Sandor throws open the door to the truck after carelessly tossing his deteriorating bag into the truck bed in the back.

“Hey,” Sandor says gruffly, climbing into the passenger seat. “Good to see you. Thanks for picking me up.”

Even though the area of Myr she lived in isn’t a tourist destination by any stretch of the imagination, she’s still really excited to show their friends all of her old haunts and all of the places she used to frequent, like her old high school. It stupidly gets to her, when Addam makes a stupid comment about how she must’ve been a really peppy cheerleader. After that, she makes it a whole overdone point — showing them the gymnasium where she used to play volleyball, the field where she used to play soccer. She tells Drogo — with Addam and Jaime listening in — that her school was so poor that they didn’t have money for uniforms. So they just wore matching yellow shirts, trying to get close to the school colors. They were also not very good and she was only able to play for two years because the program was cancelled in her junior year of high school.

Drogo loves talking about being poor — he says it keeps him real — so he starts telling her about all of the ways his school fudged when it came to jerseys and padding. “Most alarming were the helmets and how they kept reusing old busted ones,” he says, laughing.

“Totally get you,” Jaime cuts in. “When I was in school, my dad forced me to share a Range Rover with my sister instead of getting each of us our own. It was such a pain in the ass — and so embarrassing because none of my other classmates had to share a luxury vehicle with their twin.”

“Uh, I had to buy my own clunker,” Brienne volunteers. “And I took the bus and walked everywhere like a normal person. Jaime forgot to tell you he also had a driver growing up.”

“Darryl,” Jaime supplies, lightly nudging Grey. “He was Black. Obviously.”

Grey shoves him.

“What is a bus?” Addam asks, with his face straight and serious. “Is it like a train?”

“Bro, shut up,” Jaime says. “You totally know what a bus is. Right? Right? Please tell me you actually know what a bus is.”

Addam’s face cracks and he starts laughing, causing Pippa to slap at his arm, trying to get his attention, demanding to know what is so funny. “Dad,” she whines. “Why are you laughing so
much? I don’t get it. Why is it funny?”

“Of course I know what a bus is!” Addam says, pointing at the rest of them. “You guys just love believing the worst in me!”

She doesn’t know whose bright idea it was — it was actually hers — to invite their friends to come down so early. She was being too optimistic. She also thought she’d have time to frantically do some last-minute wedding stuff, but she’s all tied up playing hostess. She kind of takes a moment to center herself, in the doorway of a local restaurant — a rundown Naathi place that can fit a maximum of 20 people at a time — as her guests from out of town pile in — as Drogo automatically starts shoving tables together to accommodate their group, as the staff fusses over the sight, trying to get him out of the way so that they can do it themselves.

Grey is still outside in the parking lot — on his phone — talking to the caterer. She had bitched to him that she just fucking can’t anymore, with this shit. Addam and Daven had shipped an insane amount of alcohol without really telling her about it and were like, ta-da! Here you go! The caterer was clearly pissed over it, saying that she didn’t tell them about this and that they don’t have enough staff to serve the alcohol. She’s pretty sure they are pissed because they think she’s trying to go around them and cut down on cost by procuring her own booze instead of drinking theirs. At this point, she doesn’t even give a fuck. She will have double the booze and give them all of her fucking money as long as they just put down some plastic cups so her fucking guests don’t have to drink out of bottles like the animals that they are.

Grey told her he’d take care of it — the whole business with the caterer — which made her skeptical, though she doesn’t know why. He’s frighteningly dependable. It’s just that he isn’t used to dealing with this wedding stuff.

“Yo!” Drogo calls out to her. “What should we eat?”

“I don’t like lentils,” Pia adds. “But I’m cool with eating around them! Unless the lentils are super mixed in.”

“We can’t do anything spicy,” Daven says, speaking for himself and Kara. “Sorry. We’re white.”

“We’ll eat literally anything put in front of our faces,” Jaime says — trying to be helpful. “I’m starving.”

“Ah, do they have sandwiches or something?” Addam asks. “It’s my kid!” he says immediately, upon receiving Jaime’s unimpressed look. “She’s so picky with food.”

“I’m not picky, Dad!” Pippa says, blushing because Addam has apparently embarrassed her in front of all of her aunts and uncles, including the ones she doesn’t see very often. “I want to eat something different.”

“What?” Addam says cluelessly, flipping another page of the menu. “I’ve never heard those words come out of your mouth — ever. Look, they have burgers on the back page for people like you. You want a burger?”

“Dad!”
Pippa looks like she’s about to cry in frustration. And Missandei really feels for her — but Missandei is also so utterly tired of being the point person for everything and having to make every single minute decision for everyone. So tired. She kind of wants to cry over it, too, so she gets what Pippa is going through.

She looks up and sees his face hovering over hers after she feels him placing his hand on her shoulder. He looks tense — which makes sense because the caterer is a pain in the ass. He tells her everything is worked out and taken care of — which makes her jaw drop. And then he’s frowning as he surveys the menus splayed open all over the table and asks them if they’ve ordered yet. She’s about to answer him, but Drogo cuts her off and says that so many things on the menu look interesting to him.

“Okay, but we can’t order the entire damn menu,” Grey says, tempering his language because of Pippa’s presence. “You’ll be fine, Drogo. And you’re here for a week so you’ll have more than enough time to try the food.”

“Man, I wasn’t intending on ordering the whole menu,” Drogo gripes, looking around the table. “Unless the rest of you guys are into it?” he asks hopefully.

“No,” Grey says, shutting it down, picking up her menu from in front of her. “That’s a waste of food. No one will eat the leftovers.” He flips a few pages of the plastic covered menu before he lifts his hand off her shoulder. “I’ll go order,” he says, leaning over to gather up all of the menus — holding the pile to his chest as a middle-aged man — the owner — runs over to them in an agitated panic and tries to wrestle the menus away from Grey. The owner is embarrassed that his hospitality is apparently being challenged — his patrons are pushing tables together and cleaning up the menus themselves.

Strategically speaking in Low Valyrian — so only she can understand him — Grey tells the owner to bring out just enough food for their party — not too much. The kitchen can pick what food to make, some common items, some uncommon ones — it would be good to have a variety because some people can’t eat everything.

The owner nods eagerly, knowingly, and he tells Grey he knows exactly what to make them. He nudges Grey, with the stack of menus in his hands, stating that his wife’s sisters and their families just came for a visit a week ago. Such things are great fun — but also a massive headache sometimes. Grey unexpectedly grins, crossing his arms over his chest and straightening his spine, getting on this tip toes before he replies that it is an incredible headache sometimes.

“I’m gonna go pee,” Grey announces to the table, as he likes to do — it’s the one and only thing he will overshare on — before he rounds a corner and disappears behind flapping curtains.

“Oh my God,” she says in a daze, as a young server starts unloading an armful of ice water onto the table. “I love him so much.”

Jaime snickers across from her. “He really is the best wife. God, I miss living with him. Step up your game, Brienne.”

They start chipping away at Addam and Daven’s crates by sneaking them onto the beach. It’s legal, but there are children around and as Westerners, they feel slightly awkward about it — enough to
half-heartedly try to keep their drinking underwraps. She’s still full from lunch, but her brothers arrived with coolers jammed with more beers, meat, vegetables, dragging a portable grill and bag of charcoal. A comical trail of their children carrying chairs, bowls, and bottles of liquor siphons onto the beach as Amiri lays down a tarp so sand doesn’t get in the way of her food prep, distractedly directing the kids on where to drop the supplies. She tells them to go and try to foist the liquor bottles onto the uncles.

Grandma is lumbering a little awkwardly, her sun hat bobbing up and down, her arms full of grocery bags. When Mossador catches sight, he spins his head around to find Hassan, who is hanging out with his girlfriend, and Moss snaps, “Go help her! God, she’s old, son!” Hassan scrambles, kicking sand onto his aunt’s tarp, causing her to shout at him to be more careful.

Missandei lifts up her sunglasses. “I told you that we’ve eaten,” she says, walking up to Mars.

He gives her a look like he totally does not even understand why she is hysterical and what she’s going on about — already eaten? — whatever. He shrugs and just blithely continues setting up the grill.

She can hear Sandor’s throaty laugh over the sound of the waves. She turns to see him gingerly grabbing a brown bottle from Mara, who looks shy and embarrassed and confused as he laughs at her. Sandor doesn’t have a big family — or any family. He doesn’t have nieces or nephews to constantly go fetch him bottles, to aid and abet in this sort of vice.

He’s so fucking full — and he keeps watching in horror as Amiri slaps whole fish after whole fish onto the grill, as she simultaneously picks the leaves off of herbs with her other hand. Addam, Daven, Kara, Pia, and Peck, having grown up in a different sort of culture, don’t feel that oppressive sense of guilt and shame when it comes to food. So they have been pretty okay with holding their bellies and saying that the food is like, so delicious, but they are beyond full. They can’t eat anymore. They keep sending away children with plates of food still in their hands.

Grey has already told Addam and Daven to just fucking eat the food so it doesn’t go to waste. They complained to him that they feel uncomfortable and they might puke. He has noted that they’ve been drinking — and they have told him that it’s different. Liquids go to a different part of the body. Grey left them in disgust, annoyed by their soft composition.

In contrast, Jaime and his oppressive white guilt continues to be the gift that keeps on giving. Jaime has been a champion — forgoing his health and comfort in order to not be culturally insensitive. He’s also applying inordinate pressure on Brienne to eat, too. Jaime has weirdly become Grandma’s favorite white guy. She keeps pointing to Jaime and addressing Grey, telling Grey in Low Valyrian that his gold-haired friend is a good boy.

Drogo is a garbage chute. That’s nothing new. Drogo’s limitless ability to eat was costly when they were poor college students — and it got him in trouble in his mid-twenties, with the weight gain and how he became such a baby about that. Drogo likes to stress-eat. He also likes to depressed-eat. Finally, he also likes to eat just for fun. He’s hanging around Moss, sitting in the sand with his elbows dangling off his knees, a beer in hand. He’s been carefully nursing that beer for the better part of an hour.

“Who’s that?” Grey says.
Hassan looks off into the distance, using his hand to block some of the sun, looking to where Missandei is standing a ways off, talking to a woman Grey doesn’t recognize. “Oh, that’s Kiki,” Hassan says. “I think she and auntie are about the same age. Maybe they went to school together?”

Missandei tries to smile against the bite of the wind, as grains of sand hits her face. She actually has these memories of coming down to the beach with Kiki and the rest of the gang, after school so many years ago. They used to say that sand in their face was like a free microdermabrasion treatment.

Behind her glasses, Missandei keeps casting glances at the little boy who has his face smushed into Kiki’s sundress — her youngest and her last, she had said — and it’s a little odd and disorienting to Missy, only because the predominant memory she has of Kiki is one of Kiki sneakily popping on fuchsia lipstick and cackling over it, after stomping onto the school bus.

It’s a little difficult and awkward to have a catch-up conversation over the roar of the ocean and over the hustle and bustle of both of their families. Kiki has been at home with the kids for more than fourteen years — but her littlest has started kindergarten, and she’s pretty ready to go back out there and make some money.

Their conversations around that aspect of life makes Missandei sweat with discomfort. Kiki vacillates between over-projecting pride over her kids and her family, stating that she has no regrets — and self-consciously saying that her last job was actually babysitting her neighbor’s children. When she asks Missandei about what she does, Missy just wants to blow past it and not answer — because she just feels like it will all sound really douchey, no matter what. She kind of fibs and says she’s kind of a translator, which makes Kiki smile over a memory.

“See, that totally makes sense,” Kiki says. “You were always getting perfect scores on those quizzes in Mrs. Torino’s class.”


“I heard through the grapevine that you’re in town because you’re getting married,” Kiki says. “Congrats.”

“Yeah,” Missy says, shrugging. “I’m way too old to get married, but here we are. It’s really happening.”

Kiki frowns. “I don’t think you’re too old. Lots of people wait these days. And you still look great.”

She really didn’t intend to solicit a pep talk. She was just trying to down-talk herself because she’s a real idiot. And now she feels like an even bigger douchebag.

“I actually ran into Neal the other day. He was visiting his folks.”

“Oh.” Missandei straightens, kind of surprised. She hasn’t thought about Neal in a very long time.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring it up,” Kiki says, misreading Missy’s response. “If it’s a sore subject.”

“It’s not.”
Dany’s flight comes in late at night — and though cultural norms compelled her bend the fuck over backwards to accommodate the shit out of her guests, Dany does Missandei a favor just by being quintessentially Dany. Dany blew off all of Missandei’s attempts at being considerate and Dany rented a car, booked a hotel room at a place twenty miles away, and told Missy to text or email her the address. Dany allayed Missy’s fears about getting lost or stuck and trapped somewhere in Missandei’s hood late at night, by reminding Missandei that she actually didn’t grow up wealthy. Dany’s not an idiot. She knows how to get herself from one place to another.

Missy was apparently doubtful, based on the relief that floods through her when she sees a well-put-together petite blond woman standing in the doorway of the house that some of their friends are renting. Missandei’s grandmother is tired of all of the hub-bub and didn’t want them to party and keep her up at her house. Her brothers dropped by for a while, but then they had to go home and take care of their kids because of school the next day.

“Oh, great, you made it,” Missandei says, ushering Dany into the house. “You didn’t text me? You said you were going to?”

“It was chaotic at the airport,” Dany says. “And then I just forgot. And then I was driving.”

“Mother of dragons!” Jaime bellows over the music when he spots her. “You are here! Drogo, check it out! Daenerys is here.”

“Yeah, I can see that, man,” Drogo says, stooping over to snatch an open wine bottle from the refrigerator. “Thanks.”

He materializes a moment later, offering a glass of red wine to Dany, who takes it like it’s a routine of theirs. It’s weird. They are weird. They are exactly the same in their breakup as they were when they were together. While they were waiting for their flight, Drogo told Missandei that he and Dany just ultimately wanted different things in life. That was it. There was no huge fight, no egregious betrayal. They were just adults about it and decided to make a difficult decision that made the most sense.

Missandei has only known knuckle-breaking contentious break-ups that leave her sobbing for days — and nearly all of those incidents have been with Grey.

And it’s working out for them. She can’t even fathom being with anyone else because no one else is him, so they just have to deal with the shit that occasionally gets in their way. It’s hard for her to wrap her mind around the very soft and tepid and friendly end of a relationship. She doesn’t believe that you can love someone and leave him or be left by him and manage to look into his face without wanting to kill him or beg him to change his mind and to come back.

“It’s too cold,” Dany says, swirling the wine in the glass before sniffing it.

“Yeah, I know,” Drogo says.

“Thanks though.”

“How was your flight?”

“It was fine,” she says, tilting her head up to look at him. “Tiring because I left right after work. But I
did leave my computer at home.”

“Whoa,” he says, before whistling lowly. “No way.”

“Way,” she says. “I had my assistant put up a vacation message and everything.”

He laughs softly, smiling at her. “Never thought I’d see the day,” he says.

She laughs, too. “I mean, I still have my phone. I’m still compulsive about checking it religiously. But baby steps.”

She tells him that she thought they were going back to her grandma’s where their dog is probably waiting for them, when he parks in an empty lot behind a beach park and kills the engine. It’s inky and dark through the windshield. The warm wind rattles the sturdy truck and his face and his pensive expression disappears as the overhead light gradually dims to nothing.

She feels his hand reaching around in the dark, landing on her arm before it drifts down to touch her forearm. “Come here,” he says, lightly tugging her. “I just need some alone time — with you.”

She crawls forward, the truck roomy enough for her to situate herself on his lap. She touches his face with both of her palms. She says, “You know, when I was little, my grandpa used to let me drive his truck, with me in his lap. I thought it was so fucking cool, and I wanted to do it all the time and be like him. That’s probably why I can’t let this thing go, even though it’s so ancient.”

“And what would he think now? Knowing you’re sitting in the lap of some other man in his truck?”

She can practically hear his smile. She pulls him closer to her. She says, “I don’t know. Hard to say. I’m an adult now. He never knew me as an adult.” And she finds herself unexpectly tearing up, as a lump grows in her throat. She clears it. “He would probably be okay with it,” she says softly. “Because I think he’d really like you.” That makes her cry in earnest. She’s sniffing and bumping into his hands in the dark, as he blindly and accurately wipes at her eyes with his thumbs. Her makeup burns her eyes. “Sometimes, I just get so sad because I just wish that you had been able to meet him, and he had been able to get to know you.”

He sighs, his hands squeezing her face almost painfully for a moment before he softly kisses her swollen lips. He says, “That means so much. Thank you. Sometimes, I don’t think I’m deserving of the things you say. And I feel like I’ve tricked you into being with me.”

“Oh my God,” she whispers, pressing herself even closer to him. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve swindled you real good, too.”
Chapter Summary

It's wedding day #1!

As Jaime tips back another beer and leans back into his rickety plastic chair — actually a carryover toy from when Moss’s girls were younger — he comments on how the division of labor works out really great for them — not so much for the ladies. This shit is so easy. Grey feels a few eyes shifting to him, anticipating his response, as he generally shrugs and says that he’s just going along with everything, just doing whatever people tell him to.

“That’s a good attitude to have, brother,” Mars says. “It’s really stressful for the ladies and one wrong question from you — one wrong comment —” he hisses, making an exaggerated slashing motion over his throat, “— you are dead meat. You know what they say. Happy wife. Happy life.”

“Your sister’s not like that,” Grey says automatically, garnering a small smile from Moss. “I can say all sorts of shit to her and she generally responds like a reasonable person who can manage her emotions.”

“Wow, great stump speech,” Mars says. “She’s really done a number on you.”

“No, she hasn’t done any number on me,” he says defensively.

“Chill,” Moss says, interrupting, lightly kicking his foot out and hitting Mars’ knee with his toes. “He doesn’t mean what you think he means. He just talking out of his ass because you made him feel a little awkward by passionately speaking about his sister in a respectful manner.”

A lot of the wedding traditions have had to be adapted for two reasons, the obvious one being that they are very, very old — a fact that Missandei’s grandma keeps griping about — and also because Grey completely has no parents — no mother, father, or older brother to stand in as his representative during some of the ceremonies. He and Missandei had initially suggested that someone like Jaime stand in — but that earned him a slap and the accusation that they were not taking things very seriously from Missandei’s grandmother. He’s not altogether sure what her grandma took the most offense to — Jaime being the same age as they are, or Jaime not culturally being a good fit — that is, too white-looking.

He had refrained from commenting on the very, very odd logic of things, when it was decided that a random elder from Missandei’s grandmother’s temple will stand-in where Grey’s father would be. He was told that Matah is very respected and would be a good representative so that the marriage will start off auspiciously, considering the circumstances.

He has a lot of mixed feelings — actually, mostly negative ones — about having some man he doesn’t know stand in place of where his father should be. But that is one of those things he has chosen to stay the fuck quiet about so that they can just get through it.
Naturally, Mars and Moss are the heads of household now, and they will be repping Missandei during all of this bullshit.

He hasn’t seen her all day. She keeps sneaking texts to him, updating him on the hell she’s going through. She has told him she’s really not good at sewing, so the stupid garment she’s cobbling with her two bleeding hands is going to look like a piece of shit. She has told him she learned a really sexy dance that he will see her perform in public in front of a bunch of fucking strangers and their friends and family. And just kidding, the dance isn’t sexy at all. It is awkward and weird and she looks awkward and weird as hell when she’s doing it.

The flurry of violent emojis that she sends back to him, after he lightly reminds her that he recalls her talking so big about her moves being fresh to death, makes him laugh out loud. It inspires Addam to peek at Grey’s phone screen curiously, saying, “What’s so funny? What’s she sexting you?”

So far, Grey has had to wash his hands and feet carefully. There was some chanting. And then he got to eat. And then he got to change into his regular clothes and go hang out at Mossador’s house with the rest of the guys. The rest of day one will continue to unfold like this — with him and the guys doing jack — eating and shooting the shit. Until they convene at dinner time, which Missandei’s grandma is spending hours on. But, as Missandei’s brothers like to repeatedly tell him, that woman loves to cook — she lives to cook and feed her family. So it’s cool to let her do her thing.

Tomorrow, there is the whole ritual of going off and fetching the bride and transferring symbolic gifts over to her heads of household so that he can essentially buy her from them. That seems really fun and not at all archaic or unnecessary. He’s always known why Missandei wasn’t super keen on getting married — but now, confronted with all of the rituals of this wedding, he now has a more intimate perspective on it.

“Ah, I remember exactly what you’re going through, dude,” Nick says, grinning on the couch, squished between Sandor and Addam. Nick and Jhiqui had arrived earlier in the morning. They left the baby with Jhiqui’s mom — a fact that sends Jhiqui into moments of pure happiness and moments of pure guilt-addled panic. “Dude, I sympathize with you, so much,” Nick says. He looks to Mars and Moss. “Will he have to kill a chicken at any point in this? Because he’s like, really good at it.”

“Dude,” Drogo says testily — because he can pick out that the chicken comment is referring to Dothraki weddings. “Centuries of tradition is actually fucking cool, white people.”

“We didn’t say it wasn’t,” Addam says, as Nick flushes a little pink. “God, so sensitive already.”

“I hear where you’re going with the conversation,” Drogo mutters.

“Oh really?” Tyrion says, looking so amused. “You can predict the future now? Too bad that skill didn’t come in handy when I played that ceiling ball right into your face last week! Oh, damn son!”


“But the ceiling ball,” Tyrion says. “The ceiling ball!”

Tyrion and Tysha were supposed to come in the night before, but their flight was delayed. Grey also didn’t expect for Tyrion to show up at all. He didn’t think they were that close — based on all the smack Jaime likes to talk. It’s nice that Tyrion came.
She keeps getting confronted with the fact that she has really shitty wife skills. Her aunties keep overreacting whenever they catch her being bad at something — just so shocked and stunned that she’s asking questions about how to thread a sewing machine and how they want the onions chopped up for soup. Their maws generally pop open as they tell her that she has to be yanking their chain. And then she generally has to stand around feeling stupidly humiliated over this stuff, even though she knows she has done nothing wrong — as her friends who don’t understand the language watch these exchanges in confusion. They know she has fucked up somehow — they are just unclear on the specifics.

When one auntie teases her one too many times by asking her exactly what wifely skill she’s actually good at — in a moment of extreme stress and very bad judgement, Missandei sarcastically remarks that she’s really good at taking off her clothes and lying down. The words have already flown out of her mouth and the room goes dead quiet when she realizes that she totally did not just think that to herself. She actually articulated it.

Amiri is the first to start laughing, leaning over to pinch her thigh harshly. “Missandei!” she says, “There are young, impressionable girls here!”

Missandei touches her hot face, avoiding eye contact with her grandma. “Oh my God,” she says.

This is also the moment that Dany takes to remind the other women that she speaks Valyrian. She cheerfully translates what Missandei just said to Brienne, Pia, Tysha, Clea, Doreah, Jhiqui, and Kara.

Missy’s on her way to getting drunk and she keeps sticking needles into her fingers accidentally because of it. She keeps trying to not spill wine on this piece of shit bag-dress she’s sort of contributing to.

So apparently everyone knows she’s slutty, and they are generally okay with it. Her aunties keep making silly tongue-in-cheek jokes about how Missandei has to be the oldest virgin on the planet, one who happens to live in the same house as her fiance. They keep teasing her about the wedding night and all the scary and confusing things that will happen to her body — but don’t worry — don’t worry. It will turn out all right. It’s how babies are made. In stage whispers, they ask her if she knows how babies are made yet.

Missandei keeps accidentally laughing too much over all of it — just spurring on more jokes. Even her grandmother looks mildly amused.

They also tell her that in the old days — after the night of the final day of the wedding, after the groom and bride consummate their marriage — the bride’s relatives would go in and strip the bed of its sheets, transferring them to the groom’s family as assurance that the girl that was given to them was a proper virgin.

When Missandei scrunches up her face in distaste, Sylvie, her grandma’s best friend, laughs and says that that particular ritual was still practiced when she married. She grew up in a very small village in Naath — a very long time ago.
When he finally sees her again at dinner time, she mockingly curtsies and says to him, “Check it out. Me and my people labored for hours to make you dinner so that you will have strength to go out and do whatever it is that men like you do. Spend hours having meetings on the stuff rich women wear, I guess.”

“What are you wearing?” he says, gazing down her body.

“You like it? Do you think it’s sexy? I made it just for you.” Missandei raises her arms and models the ill-fitting bag-dress. “My grandma is forcing me to wear this. Or I guess I really mean she asked me to wear this, and I agreed to. It’s made from humble materials, and it’s really itchy. It’s symbolic for something. I forget how they explained it to me. Because I’ve been drinking.”

The smile that overtakes his face is so bright and so awesome to her. She loves it and she wants to bottle it and save it and wear it like perfume like a total creepster. She kind of preens and spins around some more in her shitty bag-dress as she plays hard-to-get for all of half a second before she runs into his outstretched arms, slams into him, and lets him envelope her in a tight hug that forces the air from her lungs.

“Baby,” he says quietly when they pull apart a little bit, tilting up her chin so he can look at her face. “You’ve had a day, haven’t you?”

“I really have,” she says in mock seriousness.

He makes a sound of sympathy, before his fingers drift to her stomach, before they suddenly dig in — before she loudly squeals in a laugh and grabs onto his wrists tightly.

“Cool it, Fifty Shades,” Jhiqui says, walking by, on a mission to get a wad of paper napkins to the table — they are going to eat buffet style. “I know you’re excited to get it on with your blushing bride, but she has to stay a virgin until the wedding night or else this bitch massively goes down in value and her family is out for your blood.” She starts cruelly snickering over her own hit-and-run burn, raising her hand up as she walks up to Brienne, expecting a high-five. Brienne high-fives Jhiqui even though she doesn’t completely know what’s going on.

“Grey, I was talking to your rent-a-dad and did you know his father was a teacher at a university before Naath was taken over by slavers? His father taught him how to read and made him read books. He’s self-educated. That’s why he was able to come over here and become an under-the-table accountant, instead of being a laborer.” Grey looks over to Jaime, who is the midst of cramming fistfuls of rice, greens, and pork into his mouth. “Really interesting dude,” Jaime says with his mouth full, accidentally spitting out a few grains of rice.

Grey sighs. “What are you getting at, Jaime?”

Jaime swallows the thick lump in his mouth, sneering slightly before he says, “Dude, sometimes I say things to you because I just want to share shit with you, not because I have some agenda. Shit, man.”

Next to Jaime, Tyrion snickers. Then he mildly says, “Jaime — you’re not the kind of person who can say the words ‘dad’ or ‘father’ without some intent behind it.”
It’s hours before the last guest leaves. Predictably, her grandma starts cleaning up and washing the dishes before the party even starts dwindling down. Also predictably, Grey sweeps over the room grabbing abandoned dishware before scraping food discards into the garbage bin and neatly stacking the soiled plates on the counter next to the sink for grandma, who has finally accepted that he is a big woman. The actual women who have never seen him in action before are predictably stunned by him — before they start cooing over how he’s just the very best as he awkwardly pretends not to hear any of it. They also talk about how Missandei is just a garbage wife. Which is — as always — her very favorite topic.

She’s actually starting to drink the Kool-Aid. She really is a garbage wife. He’s so perfect. And she can’t even separate her whites from the colors when she does her laundry.

Now that the wedding has started in earnest, there’s this weird fakery that they all indulge in. They want to keep with the Naathi traditions — but the traditions are old and sometimes difficult to follow. Case-in-point is the dad thing, which is truly awful, but Grey is being a really good sport about that. Another example is the general segregation of men and women before the wedding. She doesn’t think she’s meant to sleep with him anymore. Well, she knows she’s not meant to sleep in bed with him anymore because when an auntie asked her grandma where Grey was staying and her grandma responded that he’s staying in the house — a bunch of women gasped and superstitiously said that it’s very bad luck and the two of them need to separate — stat. Missandei just deflated when she learned that her grandma is also susceptible to peer pressure. Her grandma announced to Grey that he is to start sleeping elsewhere — starting tonight.

Missy is not okay with not sleeping with him. She will put up with all of the other traditions without much fuss — but sleeping with him is seriously the highlight of her days. It’s the thing she looks forward to — the thing her mind goes to in order to cope — when she’s ass-deep in some subservient female wedding shit.

So it’s become a Romeo and Juliet thing, with her quietly sneaking out of the house with Momo 2.0 when her grandma is asleep so that she can quietly drive ten minutes to the rental house that Jaime booked — the one that Grey is sleeping at for the next couple of days. She takes Momo 2.0 because that dog would totally blow her cover if she was left behind.

It’s kind of funny. Because it all reminds her of her rebellious teenage years, sneaking out to go meet up with a boy. Albeit, this time, one that her grandma approves of. Finally.

“\n
“I have a question for you,” Drogo says quietly, sitting on the back porch of the house, the orange glow of the joint brightening enough to kind of illuminate his face momentarily. He holds his breath and hands the joint over. The house is quiet and dark. Because it’s late and everyone is coupled up and they are older now and sometimes they prioritize going to bed at a reasonable hour.

With the damp end between his teeth and his lips, Grey says, “Shoot,” before he sucks in a cloud of smoke. He needs this. Because he’s been feeling a bit tense and stressed out over all of the wedding shit.
“Oh God,” Drogo mutters. “This question is so fucking lame.”

Grey chuckles. “Uh oh,” he says, handing the joint back to Drogo.

“How did you figure out that Missy was like, the one for you?”

Grey generally expected this sort of question. He could see it coming just based on Drogo’s demeanor, based on the build-up, and also based on the fact that Drogo and Dany just broke up. It still doesn’t dam up the awkwardness. This is generally a Grey-and-Jaime conversation. It’s not really a discussion he has ever had with Drogo. But then — that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. The past doesn’t have to dictate the future. “I don’t know,” Grey says. “There wasn’t really a moment of epiphany. It was kind of just a gradual realization.”

“A gradual realization of what? That you love her?”

“No,” Grey mutters. “Love is the easy part. It’s easy to love her. It was letting myself actually believe that she really wasn’t going to give up on me or leave me or get tired of me — that’s the hard part. Still have my moments sometimes.” He shrugs in the dark. “What’s up, D? What are you thinking about Dany?”

Drogo laughs — a deep-throated, hollow chuckle. “Mostly that she’s here, and it’s weird.”


“I thought it didn’t. But then it really started to.” Drogo lightly shoves him. “I never really understood it at the time,” he says gruffly. “Back when Jaime was just — back when he basically lost the will to live after his breakup with Brienne. And back when you and Missandei were apart and you locked yourself up in your apartment of despair and wouldn’t see anyone. I thought you were both being a bit weak and melodramatic.”

Grey laughs quietly. “And look at you now. So productive. So social. You are really showing us, man.”

“I’m dying inside, man. It fucking sucks. And I want to drink until I pass out and forget what this feels like, all the time.”

“Okay, well don’t do that,” Grey deadpans. Then, after a moment, he says, “Drogo. What was the dealbreaker? Was it children?”

“Yeah, because I’m the asshole that leaves someone because she can’t have babies — after the horrible shit she’s already gone through, having a baby.”

Grey shrugs. “I don’t know. You could be that asshole.”

“She’s not a soft person. She’s not a warm person.”

“Yeah,” Grey says slowly. He sighs. “Sometimes, people are different. Because of how they are born or because of their life experiences or whatever.”

“I pictured someone different.”

“Like, from when you were younger and had zero concept of what a relationship was all about?”

He can feel Drogo’s stare. “I didn’t realize you were such a fan,” Drogo finally says. “Of her.”

“Shit,” Grey mutters. “I didn’t either.”
“I don’t add anything to her life.”

“As Jaime would say, boom, there it is. This is not really about her or her supposed deficiencies, man. It’s about you.”

He smells like weed, so she knows that he’s been making certain decisions. And she doesn’t care. She just tucks herself into him, trying to get in deeper and closer — trying to stay awake because time is just wasted being unconscious and sleeping. He is sequestered to the couch because the house is small and there are only three bedrooms, occupied by Jaime and Brienne, Peck and Pia, and Drogo. His arm is curled around her back tightly, so she doesn’t fall over the edge. Momo 2.0 is sleeping on their conjoined hips. She keeps pressing kisses to his face — he’s kissing her back — it’s just a lot of innocent kissing and very sparse conversation. She’s already said everything she wants to say to him for the time being. And she just wishes this wedding was over already so that they can go back to their lives.

His phone is squeezed tightly in his fist when it buzzes, when the alarm loudly and annoyingly blares a few bars, before his brain snaps awake and he fiddles around with the screen with his arms around Missandei’s head, shutting off the noise so he doesn’t wake up anyone else in the house. Momo 2.0 also snaps awake before she relaxes again, settling back to sleep when she sees nothing is amiss. Dog’s tucker out, too. The sun has only started rising, and the room is only a little bit brighter than he remembers it being, right before he fell asleep.

She groans, stirring, so warm in his arms. She whispers, “Baby, what time is it?”

“Four in the morning,” he whispers back. And then reluctantly, he says, “I think you have to get going.” He knows that her grandma wakes up disgustingly early.

She sighs, gripping tighter onto the fabric of his t-shirt at his chest, her eyes still shut close. “So tired,” she murmurs. “I’m going to crash the truck if I drive. I don’t want to leave. You’re so cozy.”

She’s saying all the things that make him want to say, fuck it. Forget it. Cancel the wedding. Just stay with him forever then.

He hooks his fingers into the belt loops on her jeans as they stand on the front stoop of the rental house, as he keeps her pressed up against him, as he continues waking her up with a real kiss — the kind that makes him have to hold up some of her body weight because she goes knock-kneed — the kind that elicits all of these secret noises from her that he only hears when they are alone.

The early morning has a little bit of a bite, so her hands are underneath his shirt, staying warm. And he’s never been more in love with her.
“I’ll see you later, I guess,” she says glumly, after they pull their faces apart.

“This is so dumb,” he says. “Whose fucking bright idea was it to do this?”

She smiles. “It was yours!” she says unnecessarily. “This is all your fault!”
ninetynine

Chapter Summary

Grey learns that you generally get what you paid for.

Her grandma is already awake when she trudges back into the house — they make quick eye contact, with Missandei in the entryway and her gran in the kitchen. Missandei kind of winces out a smile and waves, toeing off her shoes before she shuffles into the kitchen. She hovers near the eating table and she mutters that she’s sorry in Low Valyrian. She doesn’t expand on what exactly she’s sorry for, but she supposes that it’s more than enough that she’s expressing contrition. After all, she’s an adult woman now, no longer a twerpy teenager.

But she’s also Naathi. And the old woman who is sighing and handing her a blue mug of coffee pretty much owns her until the end of time.

Her grandma asks her if it’s honestly *that hard* to wait a day.

Missandei doesn’t really know how to answer that.

Grey has the traditional Naathi garb that the groom wears hanging off of his shoulder in a bag when he runs into Okha on her way out of Mossador’s house — on the stoop. She looks shellshocked and stunned to see him — her eyes wide, distracted, and gaunt. She stutters out a hello and a congratulations on the upcoming nuptials — he thanks her — and then she explains to him that she was dropping off the kids so that they could be at his wedding. She waves goodbye as she quickly jogs to her car.

Clea unloads the entire contents of her makeup bag as the other ladies crowd around her — minus Brienne and Dany, who both have little interest in this sort of thing and would prefer to stay out of the way. Clea and the rest hold up blushes and lipsticks against Missandei’s skin in a chaotic flurry of mutters and rhetorical questions to one another, also shoving a magnification mirror up to her face so that Missy can see every single pore and dark shadow on her sleep-deprived face.
“Do you think cool tones or warm tones?” Clea asks. “God, I love that your skin can go either way.”

Jhiqui is sitting by her side, taking it upon herself to massage Missandei’s hands as Doreah and Pia start shoving their fingers into her damp, freshly showered tresses. Years and years of girlie slumber parties containing hours of deep analysis on hair has embolden these two white girls with stick-straight hair to the point where they think they can capably do this shit — that is, make Missy’s curly hair look not-crazy and not-bonkers.

Missy honestly feels like . . . a Barbie doll. A very bewildered, very ethnic Barbie doll.

“Do you like this hazel color or this dark brown?” Clea asks, holding up eyeshadow.

Missandei sighs, before she says, “I honestly do not care. Do whatever you want to me.” She doesn’t care about looking pretty, looking like a drag queen, her hair frizzing out, or all of this white person’s make-up getting painted on her face. She has long been resigned to the fact that this wedding isn’t about her. It’s about making the people around her — namely her grandma and her brothers — happy.

“Oh — my God! I do not think so!”

Missy looks up to see the figure of Amiri in the doorway, light shining behind her, making her look like she’s an angel or something.

Amiri and a bunch of other women — Naathi — sweep into the room and start ripping away make-up brushes and hair product out of the hands of her friends. And Missandei doesn’t even get a moment to feel vague appreciation or gratitude, because it all descends into hurt feelings and squabbles over which direction to go with her face and her body. Huge topics of discussion include her body mass index, her nose, her breasts, the hair on her body, her ass — as a bunch of women continue to poke and prod at her.

At one point, an auntie whose name she doesn’t know lifts up the flap of her robe like it ain’t no thang — and Missy has become Westernized enough — or she’s self-conscious because of her white friends. They haven’t seen her naked yet. She’s not sure now is the right time to rip off that band-aid. So she generally grunts in embarrassment and tries to get the auntie to stop trying to expose her body. She awkwardly tells them she wants to go change in the bathroom or a bedroom, with some privacy or something — something that some of the older Naathi woman balk over.

“Everything alright?” Grey asks Moss, lowering himself carefully onto the couch so he doesn’t wrinkle his shit too much. Or accidentally rip it. Missandei measured him and sent in his numbers nearly half a year ago. He’s been trying not to gain or lose too much weight in the time since. He has joked with her that he now understands what women have to deal with.

God, he misses her terribly.

Moss closes one eye kind of squinting and trying to get a good look on something vague past Grey, before he blandly says, “Everything’s fine. I’m just tired.” He claps Grey on the knee, just as Delia bursts in the room, panting with her face flushed and her hair wild. She announces that she is done getting dressed, but she needs Mossador to zip up the back and tie her bow. Then she asks him if it’s okay for her to go watch TV until it’s time to leave.
As he picks up the tray lined with jewelry underneath a piece of elaborate cloth — as he looks down the line of his people carrying a bunch of elaborate shit that is supposed to represent the dowry he’s supposed to pay Missandei’s family, for Missandei — he thinks that he really just cannot believe he’s doing this. Not that he can’t believe he’s marrying her — that part he worked very hard for. It’s more that he can’t believe he has acquired so many people in his life and they’re all standing around half a world away because they are somehow invested in whatever shit he’s doing with Missandei.

He actually really did have to cut Missandei’s family a check — figuratively a gesture of his seriousness and his ability to care for their daughter — an actual dowry. It’s a cultural tradition. But logistically, the bride’s side uses the money to pay for the wedding costs.

And now — just seeing all of the stuff and then some, as it gets uncovered, well, it’s habit for him to keep track of expenditures in his head. They have gone over budget. He will need to remember to have Missandei transfer over more money, when all's said and done.

She knows he wants to crack some wry statement about how he has come to buy her ass — and she wants to crack the same joke when she sees him for the first time all day. But mostly, she just starts crying. He’s wearing their traditional clothes.

She feels unexpectedly emotional. The house is sweltering hot. There are so many people just crammed into it. She hasn’t seen him all day. She looks fucking ridiculous and completely unlike herself — but she also looks like such a reflection of where she comes from — and it’s all just getting to her.

He’s looking at her sympathetically — and helplessly — as she generally just sobs. He tries to reach out to touch her face — but his hand gets slapped for that mistake. She tries to convey to him that she’s okay, but instead of words, a sad-sounding wail slips out before her vision blurs and she gets a little dizzy.

She is reminded of this soap that she and her grandma used to watch when she was little. Their bonding was exemplified in this stack of video tapes that her grandma would plow through with her huddled underneath the blanket, curled around her gran’s legs, always asking too many questions because her child-brain couldn’t understand why adults did the things they did. Missy remembers one scene where a woman was forced by her family to marry a man she didn’t want to, for some political alliance or something — and she was crying her face off and wailing — because she was wrecked, because her true love was impotently watching her get married just a few yards away.

That’s what this reminds her of. This is what her ridiculous display of emotion looks like. She is acting like a fucking lunatic.

He keeps trying to catch her eyes. Her eyes keep blurring from tears. She knows he’s trying to reassure and tell her it’ll be okay. Or he’s trying to tell her to just fucking pull herself together already. But she can’t even look at his face without bursting into new tears. She keeps thinking about sacrifices and about the meaning of things. She thinks about what has been lost and who is missing.
— and what has been gained and desperately wanted. She mostly thinks about him and how he just continues breaking her heart in all of the untrackable and minute ways — in all the good ways.

“Ah,” Amiri says loudly, for the benefit of everyone in the room. “She’s crying from happiness. She’s so happy!”

Oh God. She feels pretty humiliated, as the room kind of lifts in appreciative applause and laughter around her. They are definitely laughing at her.

The chanting and the bowing lasts for an eternity. Or an hour. It’s agonizing. Each time they get back down to their knees, a whimper slips out of her. He keeps trying to look at her out of the corner of his eye, even though they are supposed to be looking forward at the shaman — as he generally tells their fortune and says a bunch of stuff about how they will have a brood of four healthy young boys based on the way the tongue of the chicken is spit out. The whole ceremony is in Low Valyrian, in their family’s accent.

He can see their friends patiently flanking him and Missandei — just quiet and unmoving and just being completely amazing — even as they understand nothing about what is being done or what is being said. He can see Addam keeping Pippa quiet — or her keeping Addam quiet — as she lays her head against his shoulder and they lightly sway back and forth on Addam’s feet.

Missandei’s mostly quiet now — save for the occasional shuddering sigh and sharp intake of breath. He just wants to be able to touch her. All he wants to do is touch her to make sure she’s okay. But he’s under the watchful eye of his rent-a-dad — and such familiarity is inappropriate at a wedding. It’s common for the groom and bride to not know each other very well at all — for obvious age-related reasons — so Naathi treat weddings as the first step in an entire journey of getting to know one another.

He’s known her for just about his entire adult life though. He’s known her for more than a decade. He’s already loved her for more than a decade. This fact creates an odd inflection over the whole procedure of getting married.

Missandei fights to remember all of the details in the long email that Mars had sent her — a transcription of what their grandma had dictated to him. The email contained details about what was going to go down over the course of the multi-day wedding extravaganza. She bows to her grandmother and to her brothers as she offers them a tiny cup of wine. And then she pauses — staring back into their expectant faces — and too many seconds tick by — the silence gets awkward — and then in English, actually, she says, “I’m sorry. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say.”

She actually feels really stupid about it, but Moss and Mars faces simultaneously break into identical smiles. And then Moss whispers, “Thank her.”
It’s really the pointless explanation that seriously pisses her off. She was led to believe that he would merely be symbolic — a figurehead of sorts. So the fact that he is actually speaking — and speaking with lofty amount of authority and a certain amount of familiarity, well, that throws her off a bit. And then she can feel anger superseding everything, throbbing in her temples, when she hears Grey’s fake dad address the crowd and say to them that he is standing in as Grey’s elder.

No shit. He doesn’t need to say that because it’s self-evident.

She clenches her fist. And then she hears him indulgently take the time to explain to everyone that he’s standing in because, while Grey parents would surely want to be here to witness their son getting married, circumstances have prevented them from doing so.

She can see the rigidity in Grey’s back — the straight line of it — and she can feel him putting up with this as he simultaneously retreats into himself, shutting out the sound. And she remembers what he was like when they first met. And she remembers all of the things he has said to her over the years, the trickle of information that bled out of him over time. It was slow-going because people kept letting him down, time and time again. She can’t blame him for his wariness and how he protects his privacy.

She’s conflicted — someone’s going to be pissed — but overriding that is her fat mouth.

She interrupts Matah and she asks him to please not talk about Grey’s parents — because he doesn’t know them. He’s wrong in what he is saying. And it’s incredibly insensitive to talk about things he doesn’t know.

Grey whips his head over to look at her. The room was already quiet, but it goes dead silent.

Jaime has his hands shoved in his pants pockets and he’s kind of bouncing lightly on his feet, kind of trying to nudge Grey out of his mood.

“So, that was . . . really weird,” Jaime says, keeping his voice low. “Just when I thought I had figured out what was going on, bam, something new happens. And then it’s like, whaaat? Is she going off-script?”

Grey looks to Missandei’s bedroom, where her grandma had shoved her, shutting the door tightly behind them and her brothers.

He feels Jaime rubbing his back, patting him between the shoulder blades. “Sorry, man. Dany translated for us.” Jaime sighs. “It was an awkward position to be in.”

“I’m not going to apologize,” she says resolutely.

“He’s really upset,” Mars says. “You really embarrassed him in front of everyone.”
“I don’t care?” Missy says, shrugging. “I really don’t.”

“You don’t have to mean it,” Moss says. “Just say sorry and smooth things over.”

“What the fuck, man?” Missandei says. “He should be apologizing to us for just taking it upon himself to make a bunch of bogus assumptions about Grey.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “We didn’t even want to have him as part of the wedding to begin with. It’s our fucking wedding! Spotlight on us, please! It’s not the fucking fake-dad show! What the fuck was he on, taking all that fucking time chewing up the fucking attention? I’m not saying sorry to him because I’m not sorry!”

“Missandei!” Grandma snaps loudly.

There’s apparently no shortage of drama at Naathi weddings, so the guests gradually ease themselves into joviality, cranky bride be damned. Food gets dished out and passed around — alcohol gets poured. He hears people joking around about Missandei’s lack of ability to cook as they hand out the food — generally going uh oh, did Missandei make this? And the women titter and say no, Missandei did not make the food, which results in a bunch of people breathing really exaggerated sighs of relief. And some relatives of hers that he doesn’t know kind of nudge him and conspiratorially whisper to him that bitches be crazy sometimes. In essence. It sounds different and long-winded in Low Valyrian.

It all really irritates the fuck out of him, but he lets it go because he would like for Missandei not to come out to a dead room.

He actually feels horrible that she’s getting in so much trouble just because she has the stupid tendency of constantly protecting him.

He feels Mars’ heavy arm come around his shoulders, before Moss slaps a beer bottle into his hand.

“Guess what?” Mars asks, entirely in too good of a mood, entirely too cheery.

“What?” Grey says dully.

“You’re an orphan again. Matah called it quits because he cannot stand the disrespect. You can thank your wife for that.”

He can see the door to the bedroom open. He can track her as she slowly makes the rounds around the house, with her grandma’s vice-grip around her elbow — quietly greeting every single one of her relatives and her grandmother’s friends, bowing in humility and shame and accepting all of the well-wishes and all of the forgiveness from her elders. It takes her a good twenty minutes before she’s
Grandma gives him an exasperated look — flicking her eyes to Missandei in a micro-second — as if to say that she’s entirely his problem now. Good luck.

Her body is slumped and tired — and her face is . . . not looking its best. She’s cried off the majority of her makeup, and her skin is just streaked and ghoulish. And he’s glad when he sees Jhiqui immediately jump to her feet to throw her arms around Missandei, speaking loudly and angrily in rapid-fire, self-righteous Dothraki, on purpose so the rest of them — besides Drogo — don’t know what is being said.

After Jhiqui lets her go, Missandei presses her palm to her forehead and tensely says that she feels pretty embarrassed. She tells them she messed up a lot. She feels stupid about not doing all the right wedding shit and also for driving away an elder — and also for the intense cryfest when she came out of the room. She tells them that she didn’t feel nervous at all — but then she saw how many people were there, and then she saw Grey. And then it was just waterworks.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Sandor says gruffly. “I actually thought all the mistakes were cute. And the crying was very, very sweet.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she mutters. “It was an ugly, snotty cry.”

He makes room for her on the chair, scooting over so that they can each have enough space for one ass cheek on the seat. He offers her his half-eaten plate of food — just as her face dips into his neck and buries itself there. He can feel the flutter of her lashes against his skin.

He almost expects someone to slap his hand away, as he automatically reaches up to cup her cheek. He murmurs, “Mine.”

He hears her quietly laugh. “Yours.”

“You know,” Daven says conversationally, gesturing to Kara. “My mom flipped out when she learned that Kara wasn’t planning on wearing a white dress. She threatened to boycott the wedding.”

“God, your mom is a pill,” Addam says.

Kara raises her hands up. “He said it, not me.”

They are finally alone when Grandma tells them goodnight, shaking her head in exasperation before she pointedly tells Grey to remember to lock the door when he leaves. They kind of make casual smalltalk with each other with the TV droning on in the background, as they track Grandma’s movements, as they listen for the faucet to stop running, for the lights to flip off, for the door to Grandma’s bedroom to close shut.

When the house is dark, with Momo 2.0 sleeping on the floor, Grey gently shifts her body and pulls
her onto his lap, compressing her tightly in a hug, trying to wrap her up, cover her up. The skirt of her traditional dress has a slit in it, but it’s still a lot of material and restricting.

She tenses up when she feels his hand sneaking underneath the hem of her dress, running up her warm legs. She leans forward to yank a discarded blanket from the other end the couch, draping it over her legs and his arm. Honestly, they are on the couch in the middle of the living room where anyone can walk in.

She kisses him anyway, with both of her hands framing his face, with her heart lodged in her throat — as if she hasn’t already kissed him billions of other times already. Naathi wedding ceremonies have no kissing element, no touching element, not that she regrets not being able to suck face with him in front of all of their guests.

He pulls away to thickly swallow, puffs of his breath skimming her face, his fingers are digging into her thigh. He says, “Can we?” as he pushes some of her hair off her face, as he tilts her chin so he can get a better look at her face against the blue flickering glow of the TV screen. “I really need it.” He presses another wet kiss against her lips, her thudding heart blocking the noise of the room, any possible coherent thought, and maybe good judgement. She grabs onto his ears to keep him in place as she kisses him in a way that would be really upsetting to her grandma, if her grandma saw them like this. She kisses him with his hand up her skirt, like she’s trying to eat his face, with her wet tongue sluttily in his mouth, stroking his.

She softly whimpers and every inch of skin on her body breaks out into goosebumps, when the pads of his fingers firmly press against the flimsy wall of her underwear, in between her legs.
In this chapter . . . they have sex.

Even as she frantically ushers him into her bedroom — the one without a lock because her grandma and grandpa did not believe in privacy — even as she tells him that they have already waited so long that they might as well wait until tomorrow night — she shuts the door on Momo 2.0’s face and mentally tells her puppy that Mommy and Daddy are about to have some alone time because they really need to bone.

“I’ve never had sex in my bedroom before,” she says quietly to him, as she tries to help him by unbuttoning and untying his traditional clothes.

“No, forget it,” he says, twisting his body away from her. “It was hell to put on. It’ll be hell to take off and then put back on again, and I can’t go back to Jaime’s rental naked.” His hands are at his waist, trying to blindly find the opening to his pants. He’s undoing it with one hand, the other hand reaching out to grope at her body, as she’s about to tell him that she really doesn’t mind if he has to go back to Jaime’s naked. But then she hears him mutter, “What were you saying about never getting fucked in your childhood bedroom?” under his breath. The way he’s looking at her, the darkness in his voice — it just makes her throb.

“Oh my God, shut up,” she says, yanking him to her face, making him stumble, the momentum making her butt hit the bed, jostling it against the wall. She kisses him roughly and painfully, with her nails clawing into his scalp, with her having to apply some serious effort toward not letting her teeth sink too hard into his bottom lip, lest it break skin. It’s like the first time she kissed him, lacking tenderness and finesse and romance. It was just fast and desperate and it set her nerve-endings on fire. It made her feel like if he wasn’t inside of her soon, she was going to die.

Her movements feel sluggish and slow, as she suddenly has the wherewithal to break the kiss, to shove him back a step.

“You’re sending me a lot of mixed messages,” he says, as his hand comes up to his mouth to touch his swollen lips, eyes heavy-lidded, as his mouth curves into a real smile. “Which way are we going with this?”

She reaches under her skirt in search of the band of her panties. She can tell he’s watching her movements intently as she pulls her underwear down her legs, as she steps out of them and throws them in his general direction, but narrowly misses his face. She hikes up the skirt, bunching the material around her waist, before she leans back against the side of the bed, with her feet more than shoulder width apart, the bunched up hem of her skirt just barely touching the top of her thighs.
He casts his eyes to the ceiling, shaking his head — like he can’t believe it. And then he bites his white teeth over his bottom lip and looks at her with a lot of tension and a lot of sex. And then he starts to get down to his knees.

She reaches out for him. She thinks that this bout of married sex should involve the both of them getting off at the same time. She pulls him close to her body with her hands buried in the shiny satin fabric of his garb, before he can get too far. She says, “No. Later, baby,” against his mouth, running her hand over his erection through his loosened pants. “Don’t be stupid.”

“I can’t read your fucking mind!” he hisses, annoyed that she called him stupid, pressing himself harder against her hand.

And then he smooths his palm down her naked skin, fingers digging into her thigh, just before he pushes her leg up, exposing her to him, ducking a bit to get a look. He sneaks a grin at her, and then hikes her leg over his hip, leaving it there, his hand sneaking in between her legs to just tease her, just to mess with her.

Her hands are frantically trying to move flaps of his clothes out of the way so he has proper access, so this fucking show can get on the road. She gets on her tiptoe, stretching herself as high as she can to line them up because of the height difference. She stumbles forward a little bit, losing her balance. The trip causes them to momentarily touch skin to skin, just a firm graze. He’s warm and erect, and she’s wet and overly sensitive. She buries her groan into his neck, just about losing her mind from the anticipation of what they’re about to do.

With both of his hands underneath her butt, with both of them still standing, leaning against her bed — he lifts her a little bit, trying to help them find each other.

The grunt that comes out of her when she sinks down on him is savage. And too loud. She knows it because his hand immediately clamps down on her mouth. Blood floods her face as her legs go to jelly. She doesn’t even care if her grandma hears them. She doesn’t even give a fuck. All she cares about is this feeling of fullness. She’s just about loses her balance, but he holds onto her tightly, squeezing her ass, keeping her upright.

“Jesus, fuck,” he grits out, pulling out and then immediately jamming himself back into her. She groans behind his hand, digging her nails into his shoulder blades. “Holy fuck I really need this after the day I have had.” He almost laughs at himself. “Oh, God, you fucking bitch. God, you make me need you so badly.”

The bed is hitting the wall too much and if her grandma is listening to this shit, they are going to get so many fucking disapproving glares in the morning.

So he yanks her body off of the bed, keeping himself inside of her as they generally just collapse messily onto the ground, his knees hitting the floor hard, her hand ripping a blanket off the bed in her surprise, his teeth biting lightly into the giving flesh of her shoulder as he keeps mindlessly shoving himself back into her body, just fucking her on the carpet, next to her suitcase — because it feels fucking fantastic.

His palm is still clamped over her face and he hates it because it’s a little dehumanizing and he also just wants to listen to her get all jacked, but she’s always a little bit too loud because she either cannot
or will not control herself. And he thinks that *this* is his *wife*.

She keeps punching him in the shoulder. It keeps slightly alarming him, causing him to either slow down on the sex or pause it — which makes her eyes fly open in alarm, as she punches him more passionately and violently and starts grinding herself against him, egging him back on. And he mutters, more to himself than her, that he honestly really can’t read her mind. And she really is full of mixed signals tonight. And then the thought — all coherent thoughts, really — just fucking shoots out of his brain because of the warm-hot gliding friction of all the fucking sex. All of the sex. God, they are going to have sex with each other for the rest of their lives.

“Goddammit,” he says quietly into her ear, as he presses his thumb against her clit, as he rolls and causes her to jerk a little bit, trying to sync it up with his thrusts. “I don’t think you even know how good you feel,” he quietly tells her. “You feel so fucking good I just want to kill you over it.”

She’s trying to talk behind his hand, her muffled nonsensical words devolving into a groan as her eyes roll back with his thrusts.

She pries his hand off her face, panting heavily.

He immediately shushes her, slowing down a little bit. It’s really the speed and the harshness that makes her semi-loud.

“I was trying to say that you don’t know how good *you* feel,” she says quietly. Then she hits him. “God, don’t slow down!”

She bites down on the soft part of his neck when she comes — just a thrashing, wild mess as she tries to muffle herself in his skin. And the pain of the bite spurs on his own orgasm — it blindsides him. He felt it building, but it still hits him out of nowhere. He loudly grunts — that makes her laugh through her gasps — and he shivers, just generally wanting to cry as he just loses himself inside of her. Her teeth let go of the skin on his neck as he rams a few more pumps into her — before he collapses on top of her in exhaustion, as she clenches her thighs around him.

They’re all post-coital and schmoopy, with her languidly stretching out underneath his body, still caged in by his arms, her legs still wrapped around him, him still inside of her. She lays a kiss on his cheek, rubbing her sensitive lips against his stubble, and tells him she’s been sweating all day, and not only does she look like a hot mess — she kind of smells like one, too. She asks him if he likes it, the smell of her body — with her voice low and rough. He gravelly and seriously tells her that he honestly can’t smell her body odor — she’s about to roll her eyes because he always attacks her sexy questions so straight on and it’s sometimes annoying — but then he whispers to her that the room smells like sex — like really dirty, secret sex.

She smiles at him so hard — as if what he just said was super romantic.

“You’re such a weird little girl,” he says to her.
“I’m a weird woman,” she says, correcting him.

“I’m glad this room finally saw some action,” he says, starting to extricate himself from her arms and her body. He pulls out of her smoothly and she makes a funny face when she feels a slippery trail of stuff just leaking out of her body, dripping onto the carpet underneath them. “Do you have to wear this again tomorrow?” he asks, referring to her dress.

“Probably.”

“Oh, well, shit.”

She feels his fingers swiping at the bare skin of her ass, his face frowning in concentration before he cuts his eyes away to search for some tissues or a sock or something to sop up the good time they just had, before it gets on the dress.

He belatedly remembers to ask her about birth control — she is on it again, yes? And the look on her face, the way her body freezes when she reluctantly tells him that she had packed condoms in her suitcase — telegraphs to him that she really isn’t on birth control at the moment.

She tells him that technically, she’s on day four of the oral contraceptive. It’s apparently a week before it’s fully in her system and ready to go, ready to punch his sperm in the face whenever one of them gets near her egg — or however it works. She tells him she’s sorry — but he was just so freaking cute and so fucking hot and she was losing her mind because she was so excited about getting fucked — about gloveless, skin to skin sex — that she actually managed to convince herself that four days is probably fine. God, she is a horrible person.

He’s frighteningly calm as he straightens up his clothes again, cinching the tie of his pants.

“Babe — Grey — are you freaking out? We’re probably okay, you know?”

“I’m not freaking out,” he mutters. “Why would I be freaking out? We’re married. I want to have a kid. Are you freaked out?”

She scrapes her teeth over her bottom lip, before she softly says, “No, I’m not freaked out.”


He wakes up violently and ready to throw a punch.

Because he was slapped in the throat.

He coughs loudly, with his fist to his mouth as he spots Jaime’s blond head, as Jaime grandly collapses onto the couch, narrowly missing Grey’s legs before he pulls them out of the way.

“You got in late last night. What were you guys up to? Holding hands?” Jaime is smiling widely, and it’s the most irritating fucking thing. Grey doesn’t understand why Jaime is already so fucking
annoying so early in the morning, not until Jaime swipes two of his fingers over the pulse point in Grey’s neck and says, “Nice hickey, bro.”

Grey’s hand immediately flies to the hickey, instinctively covering it. He remembers. His dick remembers. That bitch.

Today is the day that they’re going to freestyle a little bit. The reception at the hall is later in the day. This means their entire morning is free. And Jaime suggested to them months ago that it would be cool if there was a part of their wedding where like, all the white people can understand what is going on and what is being said. She could’ve slapped him in the face for that — but he was obviously soliciting that response — and also, it was already something she had been thinking about. She reconciles it within herself by saying that it’s cross-cultural, the mixing of two worlds. It would be cool to fold in some of that profuse sentimentality that white people like.

And okay, she likes it, too.

The dress she’s wearing is new — and cheap because holy lord baby Jesus — they have spent a pretty penny on so much of this shit. She is also back in her wheelhouse — she knows how to clean herself up. She knows how to put on her own makeup. She knows what the right procedures are because she’s making this up on the spot, and it’s kinda cool to make it up as they go along.

He rubs his face tiredly, and he asks Jaime why the fuck Jaime has notes on notecards.

“Because I want to stand-in as your dad and say a bunch of stuff about how I’m so proud of the man you have become and how it was all because of me and how I made you kill a puppy and sold you into slavery and stuff. I don’t want to forget the important details.”

Jaime suddenly recoils — because a fist flew out and smacked him hard in the shoulder. Grey looks up from the plate of eggs that Brienne had made him before she left to go meet up with Missandei — and he sees Drogo hovering over a grumbling Jaime. “Bieber,” he growls. “That’s not fucking funny.”

“Dude, fuck you,” Jaime mutters, holding onto his shoulder protectively. He also flips his note cards around. They can see his chicken scratch handwriting scribbled all over it, with stuff roughly crossed out here and there. “It’s actually a bunch of words about how awesome and wonderful Grey is. But fuck you. I’m annoyed now. I’m going to throw my speech into the fucking garbage. But joke’s still on you, Drogo. I have it all memorize. Go eat shit for breakfast.”

Jaime’s wedding gift to them is that he filed all of the necessary paperwork with the consulate to make sure that their marriage is valid. It was something Grey and Missandei could have done
themselves, but Grey wanted to put Jaime to work.

Grey also didn’t want to deal with the headache of his non-citizenship and his missing birth certificate — these things actually being in Jaime’s area of expertise. Jaime had told him not to even worry about it.

Missandei thought it’d be efficient and also a nice gesture to have Jaime officiate their wedding. It was something Grey didn’t even think very much about — until he saw Jaime shuffling some note cards around.

“Man, don’t make a big deal out of it,” he says.

“Dude, I know,” Jaime says, stretching a little bit, holding the note cards up over his head. “I know I’m not supposed to do anything. But I want to have something ready to say.” Jaime pauses, adjusting his hat a bit. “Are you guys gonna do vows? Are they gonna be in English mostly? Or are you just gonna show off and showcase all the languages you know?”

“Huh?” He squints through the sun, realizing that this is really half-baked. “I only know four languages.”

“Bro,” Jaime says patiently. “What do you want me to do exactly? Tell me what to do, and I will do it.”

“Jaime, I don’t know,” he responds, equally as patiently.

“Can I wing it?”

“Oh, God,” Tyrion cuts in. “Maybe one of you should ask Missandei and see what she wants.”

In her mind, it’s just going to be another relaxing few hours at the beach. They have food that her grandma has painstakingly prepared. They have so much booze. They have a grill that Brienne is babying a little too much. And they have the surf and the sand — and their friends and her favorite family members.

She got very little sleep last night. For a really awesome reason. She had very delicious sex last night — she keeps wanting to blurt out this factoid to people, to explain her good mood because people keep commenting on it. They only remember her haunted silence after the whole debacle with rent-a-dad. They have expressed surprise that she’s smiling so much and she’s so chipper this morning. They have been telling her she looks really pretty. She has to remember to simply say thank you — not to unhinge her jaw, groan at the memories, and say something to the effect of, she probably looks good because she was pounded into the floor last night. By some random hot guy she just married.

Her grandma has also been very positive and cheerful this morning, so Missandei is almost sure her grandma probably slept through all of the sex.

Missy’s body is exhausted though — and she doesn’t even realize she had fallen asleep in a lawn chair until someone kicks the lawn chair, jarring her awake.

“Hey, man,” he says, blocking the sun, just a dark shadow looming over her. He’s in a plain white t-
shirt and an old, well-worn pair of jeans. It has vestiges of the way he looked when they first met, when she was first falling for him. The way he currently looks makes her want to punch herself in the face.

“Hey, baby,” she says, immediately beaming up at him.

He manages to keep his dark face very blank though. “What’s up?”

“Nothing much,” she says around her smile. “You?”

“Oh you know, just doing me,” he says casually, holding a red cup, crossing his arms. “Just keep on keepin’ on. Did you have a good morning?”

“I had a pretty good morning. You?”

“It was alright. People keep annoying me with so many questions though.” He shrugs. “Did you have a nice night last night?”

Her smile gets impossibly wider — as she stares up into his blank, shadowed face. It’s hard to catch his eyes. She crosses her legs sitting in the lawn chair, squeezing her thighs together tightly over the memory of last night. She says to him, “I had a really, really, really great night.”

“Oh, interesting,” he says vaguely. “I like the new dress. Is it easy to put on and take off?”

“Baby!” she says, breaking character, reaching out for him.

He shoves the red plastic cup into her outstretched hand, grinning at her secretively. And she knows he’s given her alcohol right away, because she can smell it.

She takes a big whiff when it’s in front of her face and she gasps and says, “Oh, God. That is . . . special.”

“Bottoms up, wife.”
“Loser drinks! Loser drinks!” Addam hollers, with Pippa hanging like a monkey off his back, her arms around his neck. He’s urgently pointing his finger at Missandei. “Hello?”

Someone brought bocce ball to the beach. She’s still not so great at it. Jaime and Drogo are as annoyingly competitive as ever. Addam is as big of a narc as ever. And she’s sweating up a storm and swaying on her feet, helplessly looking around, trying to see who’s watching her, trying to see if she can get away with dumping out the shot into the sand. She sees Sandor, her bocce partner, easily down his because he’s like, a jillion pounds of muscle and a jillion feet tall.

She whimpers, getting a whiff of the shot. It is pure future headache.

As she pulls the shot to her face to drink it, it gets snatched out of her fingers. Then she feels his warm palm running down her back, pressing into her spine and guiding her into the shadow of his body as he tilts his head back and takes down the shot for her. She’s already a little bit drunk and already leaning hard into him — he smells like some foreign shampoo and some foreign laundry detergent that they don’t buy and his body is super warm and it’s great — and she’s staring up at his profile because she thinks it’s super dreamy. He’s super fucking dreamy.

“What!” Drogo calls out. “Nuh uh, I don’t think so. No substituting!”

“She’s half your size,” Grey says reasonably. “And she’s not very good at this game.”

“Seriously,” Sandor mutters, before laughing a little bit. “You’re killing it for us, M.”

He watches from afar as her drink sloshes over her hand with the movements, as she spreads her bare feet out shoulder-width in the sand and kind of haltingly shimmies her hips as she shows Brienne and Dany how the Naathi wedding dance she will do goes. He can’t hear what she’s saying to them, but it doesn’t matter. It’s enough for him, to see her cracking herself up, descending into peals of body-wracking laughter at her probably-stupid joke, as more booze drips over her hand, then into the sand before she messily gulps the rest of it down. Then she spikes her cup into the sand. Then she looks sheepish and bends down to pick it back up because she hates littering. Then she tries to get Brienne and Dany to stand up, too. Then she tries to teach them a little bit of the dance.

Of course, she has picked the two people with the most economy in movement. Of course. They clearly hate being put on the spot and being forced to dance, based on how they are not moving at all. And she just doesn’t care. Of course she doesn’t.

“You,” Jaime says, suddenly materializing out of nowhere. He might be a little bit drunk already too. “Always with the silence and the psycho-staring.”
He’s about to retort with something, but Jaime says, “God, I’m so happy for you.”

She watches Pia happily chomp down on a chicken wing, and Missy wonders why on Earth she even bothered or why she cares so much. So fucking annoying.

She tries to launch herself out of her lawn chair to confront Pia on her ever-changing diet — but Missandei falls over instead, her knees and hands burying down into the sand. Momo 2.0 barks in surprise, kicking sand around in the excitement.

“Whoa,” Brienne says, grabbing the hem of her dress, keeping the flap of the material over her ass. True friend. “Missy. You’re flashing everyone.”

“Not for the first time,” Clea says, snorting.

Missandei jumps and yelps a little bit, when Doreah roughly reaches out and slaps her butt. “So accidentally slutty all the time, this one!” she gushes. “Love it!”

Jaime and Pia team up and they crowd her, telling her that it doesn’t feel special — it doesn’t feel different from any ol’ day at the beach — if there’s not at least some ceremony. She kind of drunkenly tells them that she’s just happy. She’s having fun with all of her favorite people in the world, and the sky is very pretty and the weather is amazing. What else can they possibly want? God, just get out of her face and chill out.

He’s hiding in the bushes when she comes back from peeing — just scaring the shit out of her. She holds her hand to her chest, and she demands to know, “Why were you hiding in the fucking bushes, you creeper!”

His sigh is one of barely held-together patience. “I was literally just standing right here, in your line of sight, the whole fucking time,” he tells her. “I wasn’t hiding in the fucking bushes.”

“Seriously? I didn’t see you.”

“Because you were staring at the ground.”

“I didn’t want to trip and bite it!”

“Missandei! Jesus. Get over here.”

She blinks her eyes, stunned, when she looks up at his face. “Baby,” she whispers, as he brings his arm up toward her face, as he gives his thick and tortured look — the kind that’s always been a strong part of his game, his repertoire — the kind that just makes her go to goo inside because she’s
And then his hand clamps over her neck, not hard enough to choke, but with enough pressure to hold her. And then he says nothing — his jaw just clenches as he thinks of what to say — and then she feels the cords and cartilage in her neck compress as he firmly pulls her face to his.

His chokehold drops when their mouths touch.

He knows something bad is probably happening, when he sees Drogo and Addam ushering everyone into a big circle, and he sees that even Grandma is buying into it, putting down her fork and spatula, dusting her hands on her pants as she accepts a plastic cup of sparkling wine. He looks to Missandei and she appears as bewildered as he feels — as she lets herself gently get pushed by Amiri to the edge of the circle.

And then he feels heavy hands on his shoulders. He looks up.

“Hey, bud,” Sandor says.

“So,” Grey says lightly. “Did you guys make another slideshow or something?” But he is largely ignored by the crowd. They are focused on Jaime, who is apparently taking this officiant thing fairly seriously.

Jaime claps his hands together before he reaches into the back pocket of his shorts and pulls out his note cards.

She can see Dany quietly holding her grandma’s hand and translating into her grandma’s ear, and she is so grateful for that.

She looks to Jaime and sees how subdued and quiet he is from his normal demeanor, and it’s just almost unbearably sweet and cute — how seriously he has taken this. He tells everyone that he’s going to make it quick because he knows it’s hot outside and the best part of this day is that they get to all be together, that they all get to spend time together.

He tells everyone he’s known Missandei and Grey for the entirety of their ‘relationship’ — putting the air quotes around ‘relationship.’ It makes half of the circle laugh, and it makes the other half of the circle — mostly the kids and the elders — kind of pause in confusion. She sees Delia tugging at Moss’ sleeve, trying to get him to pick her up so she can see better.

She’s glad when she notices Peck and Brienne both holding up their phones, recording the whole thing. She’s glad because it all kind of hits her hard — the memories that Jaime is recounting — and
she starts shutting out some of the sounds and Jaime’s words because she doesn’t want to full-on breakdown again like she did yesterday. She’s going to look horrible in all of the pictures if she keeps this up. At least this way, with the recording, she can revisit it all later in the privacy of her own home.

Jaime, who is great, is about to lift up his cup and break the circle up when Clea — that horrible asshole — interrupts and ‘reminds’ Jaime that Grey and Missandei haven’t said their bits yet. The statement jars something within Pia — he regrets inviting Pia now — and Pia says that Jaime totally forgot to let them say their vows.

He’s more than a bit stunned when he sees her sneak out her phone and start scrolling through it. He incredulously asks her, “You wrote down stuff?”

She pauses in the scrolling, to look at him a little bashfully. And she tells him that it’s not a huge deal. She just jotted down some stuff here and there — just because. Sometimes she thinks of stuff and she just wants to put it down on paper so she doesn’t forget. “Don’t make me feel weird about it!” she says to him.

It makes him feel bad because he’s not at all prepared for this. He didn’t know that this was going to happen. He is going to fucking stink up this shit because he is a fucking emotionally stupid dumbass. He is pissed at Jaime for not giving him a heads up. But he is also sure that Jaime had no idea of the trajectory of this, so he’s not really that pissed at Jaime. He’s just pissed at the situation.

He’s so distracted by this that he almost doesn’t hear a huge chunk of what she’s saying to him, what she’s promising him. He sees her eyes welling up — and he sees her fighting with that and trying not to cry — and it just guts him. He sees the stretched knuckles of her hand, as she clamps her nervousness tightly around her phone. And he thinks that this has to be the most exquisite kind of torture. This has to be some sort of dream, and he’s going to wake up and lose all of this. It’s too good to be real.

And then he sees her face relax into ease, when she finishes talking, when she smiles up at him. Her mood does a one-eighty and she brightly says, “I will always love you! Like that Whitney song!” which elicits some wry chuckles and some groans from their friends and family.

“It’s actually a Dolly Parton song,” he mumbles.

Her jaw drops. “Did you just correct me?” she whispers in awe. “Just now, after what I’ve just said to you? The brain-dead balls on you!”

He honestly did not hear the tail end of her speech to him at all. He honestly is really freaked out. His hands are shaking and he has to clench them, into a fist, holding the flimsy cup so tightly that it warps. And he generally has to fight the very familiar urge to run.
“So, I’m sorry,” he says, turning to her. He has decided that the best thing would be to pretend no one is watching them and to pretend that they are just alone. “I’m not good with words. I’ve never been good with words.”

“I know,” she says supportively. “It’s okay.”

“Thanks for marrying me,” he mutters. “That’s very nice of you.”

He can see her bite back a grin. “You bet,” she says. “Don’t mention it.”

“I fucking love you,” he says. “You know that.”

“I do.” She nods, before she kind of giggles, spontaneously reaching out to grab onto his hand — which she notes, with surprise, is trembling. Her eyes open wider — thoughtfully — as she squeezes his fingers and encouragingly says, “Babe, don’t pop a blood vessel. You’re fine. This is great. You’re doing awesome. I already know how you feel about me. I know you hate spectacle. Let’s just call this good and go hang out and chill and get drunk some more.”

He puts his hand on top of her plastic cup, to stop her from raising it and getting everyone to hold up theirs in cheers — to stop her from giving him another out. Though, this is the very thing he loves about her, her general intuition and just how fucking well she knows him and knows how mental he gets and how great she is at calming him down. She’s sort of like a drug in that way. She is the best drug there is.

He sees and hears her stunned laugh — he hears Jaime and Drogo’s quick snort and cough of surprise — he realizes he is going off the rails and he doesn’t really know how to get back on track in a way that is not stupid and contrived. He loves her. There are only so many ways he can say that. It’s obvious. He would kill for her — he would die for her. He touches her neck as he says this to her. His hand encircles her throat again — gently, gently, reminding himself of what he has. And he remembers the first time he grabbed her throat, right before he went down on her. And he remembers how she was so open and trusting when it came to him and how this quality in her was so crazy and stunning to him, that such trust is so freely given and doesn’t need to be earned.

He tells her that he knows she doesn’t love it when he says he would die for her because it’s so dark and violent-sounding — and sometimes she doesn’t want to associate that kind of tragedy with love. So he gets that. But at his core, he supposes what he means is that he will fight for her and for them. He’s so sure of this now. He knows that he hasn’t always been good at doing this in the past, but he’s really done being a fucking coward about how much he loves her. And he has loved her for a long time.

He tells her that that’s the misconception everyone has about him — including her. They generally assume that she wore him down with her love, until he wised up and realized what he had in front of him. The truth is that he had always known what was in front of him. He has actually loved her for longer than she has loved him. She used to just want to get herself laid by him. God knows why. But it was different for him. When they were young, she used to haunt his dreams. She used to haunt his thoughts when he was awake. It used to make him angry because it felt like a joke, that this
impossible future was just dangled in front of his face just to torture him. And he used to just ream himself over his stupid sentimental thoughts about what could be, every time she threw herself at him. He used to tell himself that he couldn’t get too attached, because it was going to hurt so badly to inevitably watch her date someone else, to watch her love someone else.

He tells her he can’t believe they have this now. He tells her he sometimes can’t help but compare and contrast it all with the early years of his life. Everyone leaves. Except for her. He can’t believe it whenever he gets home and he sees her fucking around on her computer on the couch. He can’t believe it when he’s lying in bed and she crawling into it to sleep in it with him. He can’t believe she’s there and she’s present and she’s so giving. It feels stupid to voice out loud that she’s incredible — because that is clear. It doesn’t even matter that she’s just an okay cook and she’s messy as hell — though admittedly, he does see her efforts toward getting better at these things — but that’s beside the point. The point is he doesn’t care because she’s great and perfect. And he knows she doesn’t like it when he calls her perfect because she has issues with all of her little idiosyncrasies, but seriously — it would just kill him completely dead if one day they had a kid with all of her amazing little stupid quirks. That’s what he’s kind of excited for. That’s what he’s kind of looking forward to.

“I’ve said this to you before — when I was trying to convince you to marry me. I told you that you’re all the family that I really want. All of the side bullshit doesn’t even matter, if it means that at the end of it all, I get to have you.”

People are wise enough to give them a wide berth after that insane, not-PG speech. Addam has described Grey as very much like a wild stallion, easily spooked, but when tamed and broken — just a majestic and powerful creature.

Jhiqui has dryly remarked that Addam clearly knows very little about horses.

He’s quiet now — introspective and a little tender and probably embarrassed about how it all went down. And she just thinks it’s the fucking cutest thing in the world and she feels like she has to hold back all of the happy screaming she wants to do, as she lays her hands on his face, as she smooths away the dampness. She’s generally pretending that he’s just sweating like a motherfucker, not that he had actually gotten overly emotional and actually cried in front of people. She’s totally going to tease him about that later, but not now. Not in front of their friends. Not when it’s so immediate and fresh.

She’s soothingly running her thumb over his chin, his skin, as he quietly holds her for comfort — as he’s probably just mentally reliving what just happened in his head. She keeps pressing kisses against his lips — he keeps burying himself in his own head, so he’s unresponsive, much like their chaste post-vows kiss in front of everyone. He’s stiff and weird and just so heartbreakingly awesome sometimes.

She notices that there’s a slightly dark patch on his skin.

“Is that a hickey? Did I do that?”

He sighs, pulling her in even closer. “Yeah. It is. Yeah. You did.”
He and Missandei awkwardly collapse together — she has glommed onto him — on the spot of sand next to Drogo, who looks at him, so amused, huffing out a short laugh, clapping a hand down on Grey’s back. Grey groans, rolls his eyes — probably at himself — and as Missandei presses her mouth to his ear and rakes her nails over his head, he says, “Just give me more alcohol. Fuck. I need it.”

“The man wants some booze,” Daven says, grinning, reaching over to flick open the cooler next to him. “And booze he shall get.”

After Daven rips off the cap with a bottle opener and passes the beer over to Grey by way of Brienne, Pia flounces over with a plate full of meat and animal byproducts, and she gingerly settles herself into a low-rider lawn chair that Mossador chivalrously gives up for her. “That was so wonderful!” she gushes to Grey, who generally wants for the ground to open up and just swallow him whole. He can’t even remember everything he said because it kind of was a blur of insanity, but he remembers enough. “I really felt how much you love her. And when you started crying — oh my God — everyone started crying! You know how sometimes all it takes is just one person to set off a chain reaction? Oh my God, it was so sweet!”

He is glaring at her.

“Pia,” Jaime says, interrupting. “Fuck, how many times have I told you to learn how to read the room.”

“Thanks for hanging with my grams,” Missandei says. “That was really cool of you. She has a hard time sometimes because of the language barrier.”

“It was no problem,” Dany says smoothly. “She’s a funny old bitty. She’s sharp as heck. She completely caught me when I hesitated and didn’t translate the oral sex part of Grey’s vows — she was shaking me and asking what was said.”

Missandei slaps her forehead with her hand. “Oh God. Please tell me you lied straight into her face.”

“I mostly pretended I didn’t hear her question.” Dany pauses. “I bet all of the kids have a lot of questions for their folks now, though. I think your husband has been unduly influenced by Jaime Lannister.”

Missandei’s laugh comes out as a snort, as her face and body pitches forward in surprise. She looks at Dany. And then she fondly says, “Drogo is right! Sometimes you are funny!”

“Bud,” Drogo says, smiling, “for the record, I’m still a little pissed that you chose Jaime over me.”

“Goddamn, I didn’t choose Jaime over you,” Grey says. “It only appears that way through my
actions and short-sighted decision-making based on the simple fact that Jaime is a lawyer.” He waits, to see if Drogo will laugh over that — Drogo does. “I’m sorry, D.”

“Nah, it’s cool. I’m joking. I’m not really pissed. I know these things are difficult. I’m just glad to be here.”

“I’m glad you are here, too.”

“It would be cooler if you had picked me as your favorite instead of some obnoxious white guy. But whatever. I’m used to unrequited love from you.”

Grey shoves Drogo. “Would you stop?” Drogo is rolling onto his back, on the sand, laughing up at the sky. “I can’t tell when you’re joking and when you’re serious about this. I feel terrible.”

“You remember when we first met?” Drogo muses out loud, changing the subject.

Grey’s mouth curves into a half-smile, over the memory. “Yeah,” he says.

“You were freezing your ass off because you left your jacket at home, and I was like, well, that sucks. But I’m not giving up my coat to you, guy I just met.”

She gets a text from the cleaning lady that the rental is ready for them to inhabit — Missy had asked the owner if she could get into the rental early, if possible.

Everyone is breaking in the middle of the day for a siesta, or, in her case, a sex break. She’s already exhausted though, as she, Grey, Amiri, and Mars help her grandma wrap up the leftover food and shove it into a fridge that is already stuffed to the gills.

For this reason, she is dragging a heavy disposable foil pan full of grilled meats and vegetables along with her suitcase to her grandfather’s truck. She didn’t really want the food — but her grandma insisted. She opens the door and picks up Momo 2.0 because the truck is too high off the ground for her — before Missy gingerly heaves herself into the driver’s seat. She can see him carefully arranging their stuff in the back.

She feels a little silly and dumb and not at all sexy — but she supposed that it’s only fair, given what he has put himself through today — as she reclines on the large bed, as she tries to awkwardly figure out how to display her body in a way that will be most pleasing to him. She feels silly making a big deal out of this, with the new underwear and with the fresh coat of powder on her shiny, sweaty face. She’s pretty sure that he’s happy enough when she’s just full-on naked.

But whatever. It is kind of a special occasion.
He says a whole lot of nothing when he opens the door to the bedroom and sees her waiting for him in bed with new lingerie on. She almost thinks that he’s totally missing the fucking gesture and she’s about to complain about it in order to cover up how she generally feels a little mortified and so try-hard — when he mutely starts toeing off his shoes and pulling off his shirt in one clean motion. His movements are precise and quick, but not frantic, as his pants drop to the ground, as he blankly stares at her body, his face tilted up so he can look down his nose at her — assessing her before he climbs onto the bed.

Her heart is pounding when he gets in between her legs, when he plainly says, “It’s later,” before he grabs her and slides her down a little bit, pushing her legs out wider.

Tears and heat break out of her eyes when she feels his knuckles skimming over her damp underwear. “It seems kind of lame to just take this off you when you only just put it on,” he says. “It’s pretty. You look . . . you know. You know how you fucking look because that’s why you bought this shit. To mess with me. Jesus Christ. Can I take a picture of you before I fucking take it all off?”

She realizes he’s actually serious, when she sees him reaching for his phone. “Oh God. Okay, yeah, sure,” she chokes out.
Drogo loses his shit in this chapter!

As he kisses her, as he looms over her, as he kneads her body with his hands, pinching and rubbing this fire into her skin — as he starts to push her legs farther apart, she clamps her own hand down on his wrist and she says no. He looks surprised — almost disturbed.

She grunts as she looks his body up and down, as she reaches out to squeeze his arms, his chest, his stomach, his hips, his ass — just anywhere but his dick because she might fucking bite it off if she gets her grubby hands on it. She makes another guttural noise when she looks at him because he is so fucking beautiful to her. She sucks in a breath, and she tells him she wants to be inside of him.

He looks at her like she has grown a second head.

And then she realizes what she just said. “Oh shit,” she says. “I said that backwards. Or did I?”

“Uh, I dunno. Did you?”

“Okay, so don’t be alarmed —”

“I love it when you start sentences like that.”

She’s thought about this a lot. Obviously. Or maybe not obviously. Okay, no. Obviously.

She was always a pretty young thing that had to be protected and safeguarded from the seediness of life — the seediness being exemplified in some horny male who will try to take from her. She’s probably spent too much of her life trying to prove her grandparents and brothers wrong in a very misguided way. She probably had sex before she was ready — because of this. She is probably still prone to chasing love, through sex.

In this way, with him, though — it doesn’t seem at all like something sinister. It actually doesn’t feel bad at all. It actually feels really, really good. It’s affirmation.

He tells her that he has a good feeling about today — and tomorrow. He tells her that right now — he just has a good feeling about life.
She has done an informal poll. She’s talked to her girl friends. Nick is weird about blow jobs, too. It reportedly embarrasses him. Doreah cannot do it with the lights on — because of a whole host of issues with her body. Jaime is really down with period sex, a fact that kind of surprises Brienne. Clea’s ex used to treat her like some sort of leper whenever he found a trace of pink on his dick. She used to make excuses for him and called him a hypochondriac, instead of what he actually was — which was an asshole. Dany has been with some vampire — not Drogo — who hollered at her every month. He tracked her cycle because he was psycho — but also really fantastic at oral.

Sex is a moving target for almost everyone. Missy is sure of this now. And here — she’s actually pep-talking herself — not him. She’s reminding herself to just chill out and allow herself to just have some fun on her own terms.

He asks her what her fear is.

“That it will be awkward, and it will hurt you.”

“So what if it hurts? If it hurts, I’ll be like, ‘Hey, babe. It hurts.’ And you’d presumably stop. Then you’d try the next thing. That’s how sex works.” He has a relaxed, almost sleepy gaze to him. “And by the way,” he drawls. “My pain tolerance is insane.”

It feels like her fucking brain is melting out of her skull — she’s mentally screaming at herself — as her slippery fingers touch down. And nothing crazy happens. He doesn’t get triggered, and he doesn’t start angrily screaming at her. She doesn’t start spontaneously crying. She thought she would be at least a little bit embarrassed by this — but no. Not at all. His body is just this fascinating, very cool, just beautiful thing. He takes really good care of it. It’s like a machine. A machine that is really good at fucking. Sometimes she wonders what sex will be like when they are old and gray and not hot anymore. Will she feel this way about him when his ass is wrinkly and saggy? Will he still feel the same about about her?

She tells him what she’s thinking. And he laughs. He’s just about face down into the bed, and he’s laughing into the blankets. And he says, “I hope so.”

It just took time to build up confidence. And she gets it now. She gets why he likes to fuck her with his mouth. She has always understood it in this cerebral way — it makes him feel like such a man — but now, she feels like she’s in his fucking head. She actually gets it.

The bed loudly rattles when he groans and viciously punches the headboard. The explosion of violent sound does amazing things to her ego. And it just spurs her on because she’s so fucking thirsty now — she wants his blood. He keeps saying, “Oh my God,” and “What the fuck is this shit!” in disbelief. He’s making all sorts of sounds that she has never heard from him before — and she’s fighting to commit everything to memory — and she just wants to cry through the sex fog. She keeps needing to release tension every now and then, by dropping her face to sink her teeth into his sweaty skin. It makes him jump in pain — he keeps asking her to stop biting his ass so hard — but she just can’t bring herself to. She is just hopeless. She’s just living off of the way he whines that
he’s too sensitive — just as she brutally squeezes him.

When he turns his head to look at her, his face is flushed — hard to tell because of his skin color — but she knows. He looks at her, stunned and exhausted, panting. His face is just this incredible thing — just reflecting such need and want — she just loves him. She wishes everyone could see him like this — emotional, needy, passionate, human, and strong. But she supposes that it would be very inappropriate, for anyone besides her to know this side of him.

They are waiting around like a couple of jackasses in Naathi formal wear, as every single set of people who walk through the hall doors gets a picture taken with them.

“Smell my fingers,” she suddenly says in a lull, with the photographer taking a smoke break, holding her hand out underneath Grey’s nose. She’s messing with him. He’s trying not to laugh and give her the satisfaction. Her hand has been washed, and it actually smells perfumed and flowery.

He lightly slaps her wrist away from his face. He says, “Real mature,” but he can’t help but crack a tiny smile. She pretty much lives for these moments, the moments he can’t hold together his grave seriousness anymore because she’s like, so hilarious.

“I am king,” she says, echoing her victorious post-sex declaration to him.

“Yeah,” he says back automatically, grinning at her fondly. “You fucking are.”

She cuts eye contact because he’s too cute and she can’t handle it. She sighs instead, feigning exasperation. She says, “God, baby. This is so boring. I’m so hot and uncomfortable. Will you fan me? I don’t want to look shiny in the pictures.”

“Yeah, I need for my wife to look hot twenty-four-seven,” he says dryly, looking her get-up up and down — it’s a new dress. Strapless. Gold. Lots of gold. Gold like in their eyes. Gold like it’s good luck. So much glitter. Her grandma picked it out. He’s such an asshole when it comes to clothes. She loves it.

There’s no fan in the entrance of the hall — and it’s a tight space just crammed with flower wreaths and also a really ghetto-fab backdrop of an unidentified maybe-Naath beach, replete with palm trees, sand, waves, and an oversaturated sunset. It’s gaudy and tacky as hell — that is the Naathi way. She lightly punches the plastic fake palm tree that is held down by bags of sand right next to her, testing its sturdiness. It’s not sturdy at all. And she doesn’t know why she’s so worried about being shiny in the pictures — but she still holds up her arms anyway, as he takes the gossip magazine she found in the women’s restroom and fans her, trying to also dry her damp underarms. She’s about to talk about the sex again — they already talked about it in the bedroom and then again in the car — but she wants to talk about how fucking amazing the sex was again, and how they might replicate it later.

“Oh, hello, Auntie Sylvie!” Missandei says perkily, as the doors flap open again and more people walk through it. “I love your dress!”
Every time they come close to getting something to eat, her grandma’s nails claw into their arms, and she yanks them toward another distant relative or family friend to meet and to pay their respects to. He generally plays dumb when people talk about him in front of his face, assuming that he doesn’t understand Low Valyrian. It’s all benign stuff — people usually directing their comments to Missandei, telling her that they look like a handsome couple or that they wish them the best of luck. One of her auntsies said something about his ass — because she’s already drunk or just loose-lipped or one the crazy ones that Missandei was talking about — and Missandei had to cut that short and loudly say that he actually understands and speaks Low Valyrian.

He feels like a doll or a pet. He thinks about how Momo 2.0 is faring at the rental house, all by herself. He took her on a quick run to tucker her out, so that hopefully she’ll just sleep through most of the evening. He thinks about how sleep-deprived he and Missandei are, because of this wedding, because they spent the afternoon messing around with each other in bed instead of napping — and he clenches his fist tightly into a ball to stop himself from reaching out to shove his hand into her dress, run it all over her body in front of everyone. He thinks about how easy it is to do these things now, how relatively unencumbered he is by sex. He thinks about how fun sex is and how good it feels. And it’s just crazy. It’s a minor miracle. It’s all her fault. She’s a hero. She’s so fucking amazing.

He catches her attention, with his hand on her shoulder, with his mouth hovering close to her ear. He whispers what he’s thinking to her — in Summer Tongue for good measure, so no one can eavesdrop. It makes her groan, and then she laughs — as she spins around underneath his hand and tilts her body into his.

Brienne comes up to them with a plate loaded with a mountain of food and tells them that she will pretend to be in conversation with them, to prevent other people from coming up and inundating them with well-wishes and life stories — so that they can scarf down some calories.

“Oh my God,” Missandei mutters, shoving a roll into her mouth, ripping off half of it with her teeth. “You angel,” she says, with her mouth full. “Oh my God,” Missy mutters again. “This is so yummy.”

“It’s just bread,” Grey says, before spearing a piece of meat with a fork, already chewing on something. “But fuck me, this lamb is delicious.” He actually hands over his fork, giving it to Missandei. “Eat this. Fuck. That bitch was actually worth the trouble.” He’s referring to their caterer, who is actually a dude.

“Slow down, guys,” Brienne says. “You’re going to choke.”

“Babe,” Missy says, addressing him. “Do you want me to make you a mini sandwich with a roll and some potatoes? Oh my God, I’m going to gain weight, I just know it.”

He watches as she melodramatically whispers no, reaching her arms out to him as she gets pulled away, mid-bite, by some of her grandma’s posse. He just grins and waves bye to her.
Brienne clears her throat. “Grey, I don’t want to alarm you — and this could totally be nothing — but I think Drogo has been drinking.”

Even though his hackles are immediately raised, his voice is calm and casual when he says, “Drogo still has a drink every now and then.”

“Sure,” Brienne says.

She gets shoved into the dressing room in the back and is told it’s time to undergo yet another costume change, as dictated by one of her aunties. There are a bunch of women and girls in the room, just chilling, just being voyeurs. And Missandei decides to stop being so uptight and Western and starts just getting naked in front of everyone — because that is why everyone is looking at her expectantly. Her auntie Morne helpfully reaches out to help her wrestle some of the material off of her body.

The final dress looks like a traditional white people wedding dress. To the nth power. It’s nothing she would’ve picked out for herself.

“You look like a princess!” Pippa squeals dreamily, as she and a bunch of Missandei’s nieces jump up and down, fluffing up the material at her feet.

It’s actually really excruciating and he almost feels embarrassment for them, as he presses his hand to his mouth, covering it — and watches the synchronized dancing.

Missandei and Jhiqui and the others are actually great at it. It’s actually Brienne and Dany that he feels secondhand embarrassment for. They got roped into this somehow — to fill up space perhaps — and that is why his hand is covering his mouth. They look so miserable and so stiff that it’s really, really hilarious.

He stumbles forward when Jaime’s hand slams into his back, using it as an anchor as Jaime leans into him, whooping and catcalling loudly, raising his recording phone up high in the air. “This is amazing!” Jaime bellows. “This is the fucking best thing I have ever seen in my entire life! You are doing so good, baby! Not at all weird-looking and awkward! It’s like you’ve practiced this at least one other time in your life!”

“I like how you’re recording your own heckling,” Grey deadpans.

“She can’t hear me over the music,” Jaime says reasonably. “I’m gonna replay this back to her later. She needs the commentary in order to understand what is going on. Obviously.”
“Oh shit,” Addam says suddenly, his attention shifting, interrupting their conversation about Addam’s job. Grey follows his gaze to the dance floor, where Jaime is spinning Pippa around by the arms. “She’s going to puke.”

Not even five seconds later, Addam grimaces as he watches his child unleash her dinner onto the dance floor. He swears under his breath and sighs, as if collecting himself. He says, “Don’t have children. Don’t have Jaimes,” before he hightails it over to the dance floor, to deal with a crying Pippa, a stunned Jaime, and a slimy pink smear of vomit running down the front of her dress.

He feels her lightly encircling her arms around his waist from behind, as she says, “Gotcha!” awkwardly orienting him toward the dance floor. He’s stumbling with her pushes, and he’s also stepping on the hem of her ridiculous dress — but they make it there in one piece.

As they artlessly and slowly sway side-to-side with the music, as he looks at her face before she hides it again by pressing her cheek to his shoulder — her face made blotchy and schizophrenic by disco lights — he whispers to her that he’s not entirely sure how they arrived here. It’s all so surreal.

She sighs dreamily and tells him that it’s so great.

The songs are maudlin Naathi covers of popular Western songs. He gently asks her if she’d like to plug in her wedding mixes at some point — get the party started and all — and he feels her laugh pressed against his chest. She tells him that she actually doesn’t want to plug in her mixes. For one, she doesn’t want to disrupt the DJ and his art. That’s a dastardly thing to do. Secondly, when she was creating all of her wedding mixes, she was honestly imagining them playing at her hypothetical wedding to Neal. And that made-up wedding is nothing like their current actual wedding. And her hypothetical ill-conceived husband is nothing like him. She whispers to him that their actual wedding is so perfect — she sounds so earnest and genuine about it — and he’s looking around at their too-drunk guests and the insane crazy lights and listening to the too-loud insane crazy music — and he feels the crunch of the a shit-ton of tulle underneath his hands — and a part of him wants to kind of laugh over it. Another part of him feels so fucking very emotional in his general agreement with her.

The song is too short, so they keep going for more songs. They find that people are hesitant to interrupt them when they’re on the dance floor. She reports that her feet are very sore and very tired in the heels, so he holds her tightly and lifts her up a bit, carrying some of her weight. They kind of aimlessly ramble on, picking up the hanging threads of conversations that they are always having. She tells him that she is really looking forward to telling her parents that the river of money that has been flowing through their house is about to dry up to half its original size. He tells her that he will have an updated resume and cover letter for her to read over and give him notes on, when they get home. She nags at him to file that naturalization paperwork already. He promises her that he will.

She quietly muses that once everything settles down — maybe once he gets a new job and they see how their finances are doing — maybe they will try for a baby.

He makes a stupid comment about how they can practice making baby right away.
“Grey,” she says primly. “That was a dad-joke. You just made a lame dad joke.”

She can actually feel Grey rolling his eyes, when the heavy chair slams into the ground and startles everyone. The DJ — that hilarious motherfucker — actually lowers the volume, so the shouting can be heard, and shifts the music to this aggressive wordless techno beat, like he’s keen on partnering up with Drogo on this.

Grey’s hand tightens around her and he pulls her closer, as they generally watch Drogo have a complete meltdown. He’s loud and yelling almost incoherently — the bulk of his words directed at Dany, who is stiff and standing with half of her face oriented away. She’s telling him to stop, that he’s embarrassing himself and this is not the way to behave. He’s screaming about how disengaged she is and how cold she is and how she can just easily move on from them without a second thought, as if he didn’t even mean anything, as if he’s not even worth anything.

The dramatics don’t last long. As Drogo pauses to take a breath and reload, Daven has shoved his way through the crowd of people and is pushing Drogo into a swatch of darkness, out the back door of the hall.
Grey reluctantly follows her out the door — all the while thinking that her problem is that she’s too fucking nice sometimes. He follows her out the door and into the back lot with the intent of being there to shield her from whatever emotional fallout is happening — he doesn’t want her to inadvertently get her feelings hurt on her wedding night. She’s too nice and Drogo sometimes can’t control his emotions or the words that come out in the heat of the moment.

His good intention flies right out of his head at the sight of Drogo sitting on the curb. Daven is just a tall and slouched shadow looming over him. The first thing that shoots out of Grey’s mouth — just automatically, without any forethought — is a rough and condemning, “Why did you drink? Are you stupid?”

“Babe,” Missandei says, grabbing his hand and pulling him back, to prevent him from advancing on Drogo. “Stop it, grouchy. That’s not going to help.”

“God,” Drogo mutters, stretching his face down with his palms, directing his comment to Grey. “Just leave me alone, and go back to your wedding. I really am not in a place to listen to you make this about you and your disappointment in me right now.”

Missandei looks at him warily and with a bit of distrust, when he asks that she and Daven go back inside to just give him a moment alone with Drogo. Grey resists rolling his eyes and muttering a joke about her dramatic nature. Instead, he touches her face, and he tells her it’ll be fine. They are just going to talk. She sounds a little bit wounded, when she tells him that she has stuff to say to Drogo, too, though. Like, nice supportive things. She tells them it was gonna be a really good pep talk.

He tells her to just say it Daven instead, as he gestures for her and Dav to leave him and Drogo the hell alone for a moment.

“Baaaby, that’s not the same at all,” she says in whiny protest — before sneering at herself in reflex, as she registers the tone of her voice. He can see conflicting thoughts flicker across her face — he half-expects her to fight him on this — but in the end, after only a few seconds, she sighs. She says, “Fine.”

“I’m sure it was going to be very a nice pep talk,” Daven says graciously, giving her his arm.

“Oh you’re gonna hear it,” she says lightly. “So you can be the judge.”

He and Drogo silently watch as obscenely tall Daven carefully leads her in her ridiculous princess get-up back into the building.
“Jaime is probably really jealous he can’t also be out here to ream you right now,” Grey starts conversationally, gingerly dropping himself down next to Drogo on the curb.

“Brienne is probably holding him back and preventing him from bursting out here and being a white knight hero,” Drogo adds.

“Most def. God, it must be so hard being Jaime, having all the people around you stopping you from being super amazing.”

“Yeah,” Drogo says, leaning back on his hands, palms digging into the garden bed behind them. “It must be hard to be a white guy with all of the answers and to have no one ever listen to you regarding all the correct shit you are always saying — on the basis of your skin color.”

“I really feel for him sometimes. Sometimes, I want to like, cry over all of the injustices he suffers. I mean, how much disrespect can one human withstand in a lifetime?Honestly, how much?”

Drogo laughs. “Are we gonna do this for the rest of the night?”

Grey smiles. “I mean, I can. I can seriously make fun of Bieber forever.”

“Oh, I know. I remember college and how we used to just get stoned because we were bored. And how we used to spend hours making fun of Jaime, because we were bored, stoned, and didn’t know how else to talk to each other.”

“Those were fun times.”

Drogo nods. “Definitely.”

“But life changes.”

After a short pause, Drogo says, “It does.”

He clears his throat before clarifying. He lightly tells Drogo that life has actually changed for the better. He finds that the words catch in his throat — they feel awkward and inelegant. He thinks about how all he’s been doing lately is verbalizing all of these sappy and emotional thoughts that he usually keeps hidden and locked away. He thinks that by now, he should be used to the mortifying openness of such things, but of course — it is still hard.

He thinks about how his friendship with Drogo is so starkly different from his friendship with Jaime — and he tries to pick out why. Maybe it’s because he and Jaime lived together and saw each other every day. Maybe it’s because Jaime’s past allowed for him to relate to Grey in a way that Drogo can’t. Or maybe it’s because Jaime has spent years in therapy and is practiced in the art of unburdening himself by articulating his excruciatingly embarrassing feelings. And when Jaime tells him things, it creates these feelings of . . . fondness inside.

“I’ve been where you’re at,” Grey says, shifting his tone. “I mean, you’ve been very loud and angry about it — and I’m not a loud person. For a long time, I mostly just avoided talking to her about anything real, and I just let stuff fester and stew, which really sucked and it completely blew up in my face. So I’m saying, I think I know how you feel.”
“And look at you now,” Drogo says, voice pitched low and a little bitter. “All married and happy.”

“Sure,” Grey says. “Married and happy.”

Drogo grunts. “So, what is the moral of your story? Go marry Dany and then be happy?”

“Look, I’m not here to preach at you. I don’t know the intricacies of your life —”

“And why don’t you?” Drogo cuts in.

Heat immediately floods his face. Awkward silence starts to lay over their conversation — his mind is only just trying to figure out what Drogo means — but he also knows exactly what Drogo means and it is shitty. It is a shitty situation.

He says, “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want your apology.” Drogo sighs. “I also don’t want to fucking make your wedding all about me. So we can just forget about this. I’m just drunk and dramatic and stupid right now. I’m just being fucking emo over some girl, and it’s making me a bitch with other shit.” After expelling another sigh, Drogo presses his hands to his knees and he raises himself back up to his feet. He blankly says, “I feel better now. Let’s go back inside,” as he holds his hand out to Grey.

She knows that he expects for her to interrogate him on all of the details, because she’s such a gossip fiend and she needs to know everyone’s business. So she decides to surprise him by asking him none of the details. She mentally files it away and will remember to ask him about it later, when they are alone.

Now, she just presses her mouth against his damp cheek, a little clammy from being outside, and she tells him it’s time to cut the cake. She tells him that she tried to cut it without him, but her grandma said doing so would doom their marriage forever. It seems like everything they do has the potential of dooming their marriage forever. It seems like she just can never do anything right.

She says it all with a light tone — purposely trying to combat and lift up whatever dark mood he’s fallen into — she lightly leans into him as she picks up the shiny knife.

She feels his hand touch the back of her neck. She feels him hovering close by — a little hesitant about something — she knows it’s not her. She knows it has to be Drogo.

She squeezes his hand tightly, briefly, as a bunch of camera bulbs go off and a bunch of light beams from smart phones blind them. She has to squint and guess where the cake is. And then his warm palm drops on her wrist before he confidently maneuvers it over the frosting and sinks it down into cake.

The rest of the night kind of passes by at a chaotic pace for him. He keeps getting fed alcohol. He keeps his eye out for Drogo, who is never alone — who is always either with Addam or with Daven
or with Jaime. And Grey keeps getting shuffled from table to table, as the darkness and the lights keep swirling around him. It’s dizzying.

The past keeps getting rehashed. Mars and Moss slur at him and tell him about how they felt and what they thought — when they first met him. They actually didn’t think much of him other than observing his general coolness because they actually thought Missandei was dating Jaime because Jaime is white. They kind of laugh self-consciously over the mistake. Grey has to push past this lingering sense of guilt over all the ways he’s come up short — to force himself to pay attention when Moss and Mars get emotional and passionately start to tell him that they know he will take really good care of their baby sister and that they think of him as a brother now. They tell him that grandma feels the same way — in terms of him being family. She’s just . . . always distracted by all the things she wants to criticize, so she forgets to verbalize it sometimes.

He still doesn’t know how to properly convey gratitude. He still is exhausted and riddled with anxiety when faced with people’s high expectations.

But his easy place — the brainless safe place — is always going to be Missandei. So while he can’t really express reciprocation to Moss and Mars — his concept of family is so loaded and complicated that he doesn’t know if he can say that he looks at them as brothers. He remembers his brothers. He doesn’t think it is so easy to adopt new brothers. He has this wariness in erasing the past, and he fears that is what he will do, if he supplants his own shitty memories with these new, great memories. But he does love her and he will care for her — in an oppressive, all-encompassing way. That will never stop.

So he tells them this. And his response is satisfactory to them.

“Cheer up, boo,” Jaime says, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Your bitchface is very strong right now, and it’s scaring the children.”

“What? No it’s not.”

“So, it’s not. Kids are very self-involved,” Jaime concedes. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Everything is fine.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Jaime mutters, casting his eyes far off to the dance floor, getting distracted by lights and some interesting dance moves on Addam and Pippa’s part. “Try to look happier.”

“Why?”

“Honestly? Because it’s your wedding. People are constantly taking pictures of you and Missy — and you guys aren’t looking super photogenic as it is.” Jaime snickers at that, brushing his fingers over the material of Grey’s shirt. “Do you want to have a shitty stink face on top of it? You want Missy to see your scowl when she flips through her wedding album years from now? I know she already has to look at it every day, but it’s her wedding night, man. Come on.”

“We don’t have a wedding album. We’re not printing out these shitty pictures that strangers are taking of us.”

“I mean Facebook albums or whatever the fuck, dude,” Jaime says in exasperation. “God, you really
are annoyingly obtuse on purpose sometimes. I just mean backburner your Drogo shit. And try to have some fun for a few hours. Jesus Christ, man.”

At some point during the long night — Missandei just gave up the good fight. He thinks it’s really rich that Jaime came up to lecture him about appearances when Grey’s wife, his ride or die bitch, is currently leaning all up on him and snoring loudly with her mouth open. She’s been sleep-deprived for an entire week, and it looks like it’s finally caught up to her. He keeps telling people that he can force her to wake up and stop being such a ding-dong, but people keep expressing such sympathy and telling him to just let her sleep.

He has to constantly apologize on her behalf, as drunk guests slowly bid their farewell and one last round of raucous well-wishes on their marriage. They keep making jokes about how he will have his hands full with that one — pointedly nodding at her unconscious head against his shoulder. And he has to keep pretending that he’s hearing every joke for the first time, clapping hands, shaking them.

“This was the best wedding ever,” Jaime says, leaning forward to grab Grey’s head, lightly jostling Missandei’s unconscious form. Jaime presses his forehead against Grey’s, grinning widely. He simply says, “I love you. Have a good rest of your night. See you tomorrow.”

Jaime steps to the side to allow Brienne space. And it is monumentally awkward, as it always is. She stutters and says, “Oh, um. It’s so hard to, um, hug you with Missandei there. Oh, man.” She kind of bends her knees a bit to get down to his slouching seated position, and she gives him a side-hug, which he returns wordlessly.

“Babe!” Jaime says, his amusement cracking. “Sometimes it looks like you are doing this shit on purpose! No one person can be this awkward.”

She’s blushing furiously. “It’s not on purpose!” she says defensively. “Why would I put myself through this torture on purpose?”

“So it’s torture hugging me?” Grey says lightly.

She looks startled. “Oh my gosh! No! You’re sturdier than you look. And you smell nice. It’s not torture!”

“Oh my God, stop,” Tyrion breaks in from behind her. “I just can’t watch this anymore.”

“That’s funny,” Drogo says lightly. “Because I can watch this all night.”

“Wake up. Come on, wake up.”

Missandei startles into awakeness — immediately reaching up to touch her face — to touch the clamminess and maybe to wipe at the drool. She blearily and self-consciously looks around and sees that the hall has mostly emptied out — there are only a few of the catering staff members, tearing down the tables and clearing plates around her and Grey. They are sitting on a table. They have to
The mood between them has been quiet and a little somber — every since Drogo’s meltdown. She’s already in bed when he re-enters the bedroom. He plainly tells her that their dog pooped as well as peed on every fucking plant she encountered. That is why it took forever. And then he says, “Hey, I’m sorry I’m such a downer right now.”

“It’s okay,” she says, watching him as he disappears out of the room again. She can hear the faucet turn on. She can hear him brushing his teeth.

“So, do you want to have sex?” she whispers, brushing her hand over his t-shirt, over his sternum.

“Yeah.”

She does a doubletake in the dark. “For real? I was kind of joking.”

“You don’t want to have sex?” he asks curiously. “Then why did you ask?”

“No, I do,” she says quickly. “But I didn’t think you were in the mood. So that’s why it was sort of a joke.”

The room is very dark — Myr lacks the kind of invasive infrastructure they are used to in King’s Landing. There are not as many streetlights. It’s harder to drive in the dark. The pitch black of night is thicker here. She can only hear his breathy laugh. She can’t see his face, but she can imagine the crinkles around his eyes as he suppresses his smile.

“Full-on naked or just half-assed naked?” he asks.

“Full-on, babe. Come on. It’s our wedding night.”

Their knuckles gently collide in the dark as they help each other take off the sparse items of clothing they are wearing. She kind of shivers — even though it’s not cold at all — when he pulls the blanket
off of her and glides his hands over her bare skin. She tells him, “I want to be on top.”

He says, “I’m okay with that,” before he cups a breast — squeezing lightly and carefully — and gently nudges and maneuvers her on his body.

There’s no preamble or any cool foreplay. She just searches for him — finds him — positions him — and then sinks down on him — a little extra friction from the lack of foreplay — but tonight, she mostly just needs the closeness and the intimacy. She curls forward, covering him, trapping their body heat together. She kisses him deeply and slowly, with him inside of her, with his hands kneading the small of her back. She keeps the kiss going — her jaw slackening a little bit though — as she lifts up and drags herself against him, feeling the friction softening as her arousal and her general love for him kind of glows. Against his lips, she asks him, “Do you like this? Is this good for you?” It’s a little bit of light teasing — just a bait. It’s also a little gentle reminder. Sometimes he’s too quiet and too subtle in his responses — sometimes she needs to know he is actually into it.

“Hell yes,” he says, biting down on her bottom lip lightly. “This is really good.”

She pushes down and seats him back fully inside of her again. She exhales out a dreamy sigh against his mouth.

Sticky sweat and some tear tracks have dried on her face and made it tacky, kind of gluing her cheek to his chest. She curves over to press her lips against his skin, kind of smiling, kind of yawning.

“I don’t think I’ve been a good friend to Drogo,” he finally says, cupping her bare bottom under the covers, pulling her tighter against his sticky body. This is the first coherent sentence either of them have put out in a while.

“What makes you say that?”

“He’s just . . . been going through stuff. Just a lot of shit. For a long time now. And tonight was . . . probably the first time I really noticed. And that was only because he was really obvious and explicit about it.” He pauses. “I feel like an asshole.”

“Baby,” she whispers. “You’re not an asshole.”

“He’s a better friend to me than I am to him,” he adds, quietly rejecting her reassurance. “When I was detoxing, he drove hours overnight just to come hang out with me — and no one asked him to. When you and I were broken up, he — again — drove hours overnight to come hang out with me — and no one asked him to. Even when things weren’t crazy, when things were chill and relaxed, he’s always been the one taking time out of his busy life to chase me down and try to catch up with me. What have I done for him lately? Other than ignore him when I got distracted with my own shit? Other than just lecture and bitch him out over all of the mistakes that I think he’s making in life? Other than team up with Jaime so that we can both tell him he’s fucking up his life?”

“Babe, I don’t like it when you talk about yourself like that.”

His voice takes on a hard edge. “It’s true, isn’t it?”

“No. It’s your perception,” she says. “You aren’t a horrible friend. Though honestly, you probably are not as engaged of a friend as Drogo or Jaime. But you aren’t horrible.”
It makes him laugh out loud, which, he knows, completely surprises her. She freezes up a little bit in his arms, and he takes the opportunity to roll into her, to press her into the mattress. He blindly seeks out her hand in the dark. He holds it to his mouth as he says, “Thank you for your honesty.”
She wakes up before he does. He’s an incredibly light sleeper, always on the cusp of consciousness — another one of the millions of things about him that make her incredibly sad when she lets herself think about them with any depth. It’s rare that she can wake up without also waking him up. He usually has to be pretty hungover for it to happen. And he probably is — pretty hungover. She can smell the sour scent of stale beer coming off of his body.

“I thought you wanted to sleep in,” he mutters suddenly, his eyes still closed.

It makes her smile. He’s so creepy sometimes. And she can’t stop herself — she angles her face forward to press her nose into his cheek, to sniff more of the beer smell, to kind of bask in his warmth. She shifts her hand underneath the sheets and runs her fingers up his bare chest. His expression scrunches up lightly — almost like he is upset.

“Remember back in the day when you wouldn’t sleep in bed with me?” she says softly, propping her head up with her hand, gazing down at his tense-looking face.

“Remember back in the day when you wouldn’t stop trying to get me to sleep in bed with you?” he throws back.

He looks resolute — like he is determined to sleep in. She’s remembering her younger self, just dripping with desperation and, honestly, sexual frustration — when she closed her eyes, told herself to be brave, and used the power of her needy voice to ask him to crawl into bed with her. She’s also remembering the feeling of abject humiliation washing over her, when he looked back at her condemningly and told her no.

It’s kind of like, a twinging, almost pleasant pain now — to recall these memories as she lies in bed naked with him.

“Remember back in the day when you acted like you didn’t want to get all up in this business but you actually really did?” she whispers.

“Yeah, I do remember that.” He pops one eye open and a grin slowly spreads over his face. His warm hand underneath the sheets ripple the surface of the blanket. She follows the motion and unconsciously licks her dry lips — retroactively realizing how that must look to him.

She clutches onto his forearm, underneath the blanket, and sinks her head back into the pillows as he rubs his way in between her legs, as he roughly cups, parts her, and swipes his fingers through her. It’s slick, and it’s smooth — she gasps out this grunt and bites her nails into his arm as she anchors
his hand against her body, as she grinds out a little bit more pressure.

She can see his smile widening. Blood is whooshing through her ears as he dips a finger inside and says, “Motherfucking shit, cancel all your plans this morning.”

His phone is blowing up. They keep hearing it chime in messages, buzzing and rattling on the ground, against the wall on the far side of the room. He keeps cursing at it in irritation, and she keeps having to stop herself from scratching his body, as she begs him to just please do a fucking better job of ignoring the phone, as she simultaneously begs him in a more abstract way.

A muffled scream of frustration pushes out of her mouth when he pulls completely out of her. She feels her body caving inward, reeling from the loss. She reaches out blindly to grab at him, his skin is soft and smooth — and it actually stings her heart a little bit, when he hits her hand off his body.

His dick looks angry, erect, and wet. She is blatantly staring. It is the thing in between them. She raises her eyes up to look at his face. It also looks angry — and singularly focused. Her gaze goes back to his lap — her entire body tingles. She says, “I don’t know how you can keep doing this.”

His smile is humorless. “It used to be the only thing I could let myself do, when it came to you,” he says, keeping his words even and vague — but they both know what he’s talking about. “Roll over. On your hands and knees.”

Her jaw unhinges and her eyes roll back in her head — her arms feel weak and wobbly, shaky as she cries out and presses herself harder, backwards, against his teeth.

And then it’s just cold air and his absence.

She’s not looking at his face. She’s staring at the headboard and a wall. She scoffs in disbelief. She says, “Fuck you.”

“Do you want to stop?”

He has to constantly grind out some noise to help relieve the tension in his body, so he doesn’t go fucking insane with the hot and wet in and out of him and her body. His sounds keep getting drowned out by her harsh crying and all of the fucking pleading — and that is also a thing that is just driving him absolutely nuts — it hurts his heart so much to listen to it, as it simultaneously gives him life.

There is so much of her ass — he keeps palming it. There is so much skin-to-skin contact — because he has plastered his front to her back. There is so much grinding friction — and that is the thing is that is just killing him. There is also the sharp hiss that shoots out of her mouth every time he does something right — and he’s constantly trying to find all the right things to keep that going —
his hand roughly squeezing her breast, pinching her nipple, his other hand pressing down on her clit, his fucking cock just pushing and pulling like it was fucking made for her.

“Baby,” she gasps. “Baby, fuck, babe. Almost. Please, fuck! Don’t do it again this time. God, please. Can we just fucking finish?” She groans with the stroke, as he hits a new depth of deepness inside of her.

God, she feels too good. He doesn’t think he can stop this time. He doesn’t think he can deny them both this. God, he is losing his fucking mind because it’s all just too fucking perfect.

The sound of his phone buzzing in the distance is enough to rattle him out of the sex brain. He shakes his head and he doesn’t give himself another stroke because he knows it will be the fucking end.

The way he shoves her away from his body is for self-preservation reasons. He’s trying to prolong the sex because he’s not ready for it to end. He’s trying to torture the both of them so he can hold onto this feeling of what it all means and what it costs — for them to be married. He honestly doesn’t even know what the fuck is going on in his brain. She just makes him want to lose his fucking mind all the time.

But he immediately regrets how it looks, how it must feel for her — when she loses her balance and hits the mattress — and everything just plummets for him, when she turns around and he sees the shocked look on her face.

Her face gets smashed into his arm, and she almost chokes on her own spit and snot and tears because his hug is so tight. “Oh my God, baby, don’t cry,” he mumbles. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry, Missandei.”

She clutches onto him tightly, returning the hug. And she can’t stop crying even though she knows it hurts him when she cries.

“It’s okay,” he says soothingly, squeezing her tighter. “Baby. I’m so fucking sorry. Are you okay?” He doesn’t even let her answer. She just suffocates as he presses a hard kiss against her mouth. “God, I’m such a dumbass,” he mutters darkly when he pulls away, holding onto her face, doing a visual examination of it.

Weakly, she finally says, “I love it when sex games take a really weird, sad turn.” It’s a silly joke. And she immediately re-buries her face into his neck. She’s trying to lighten the mood — even as her face screws up with fresh tears.

He gets out of bed, still naked, and hurriedly scurries over to the wall to silence his fucking phone. He catches a glimpse of the messages on the screen before he shuts off his phone — Jaime — of fucking course it is.

Her arms are reaching out for him when he returns to bed.
She’s lying on her back, face up to the ceiling. An occasional sniff comes out every now and then, as she tells him that that it was so weird and so surreal because it was unexpectedly emotional, when she felt his hands hit her body and push her away — like, literally. It was a literal manifestation of that dark fear she has when it comes to him. It was like, a literal manifestation of all of their past baggage that they have mostly moved past.

“But it’s still shocking, you know?” she says quietly. “To get shoved off someone you love in the middle of sex.” She sniffs. “It’s like, am I just an ugly monster that you don’t want to stick your dick inside of anymore? Already?”

“Missandei, I actually have the opposite —”

“I mean, obviously that’s not the issue, and that’s not what’s going on,” she says, cutting him off. “I know you love me, and you want to put it in me all the time. But, you know, we all have insecurities and stuff sometimes.”

She tells him she doesn’t want to hear his reassurance or his explanations — because she already knows what they are, and she already knows everything that is true about them. She tells him she completely understands it all. But she’s still a bit stung by it, and she’s still processing. But she doesn’t want his assurances because she wants to work this out for herself and to soothe herself. She doesn’t want to be the kind of woman that needs a man to tell her she’s beautiful in order for it to be a valid statement.

He feels like her self-sufficiency is the thing that’s making his guilt dig its heels in deeper.

“I want to finish having sex,” she whispers to him, tearing up again. “I want it to be vanilla sex, though, where you’re on top, and we just stare at each other and feel awkward because it’s so emotional.” She forces out a laugh.

“This is awesome,” he says, with bitterness and sarcasm lacing his voice. He’s glaring down at his penis. His very flaccid, very worthless penis. “I love how I’m just so upset over this, and it is ruining everything. It’s just so classic.”

“Yeah, totally keep berating yourself and your penis. That always helps,” she says in response.

“Oh, great,” he mutters. “You want to talk to me about what will help my dick.”

“Shut up. I am the fucking savior of your dick. I can say whatever I want to it.”

“Well, you sound like the despot of my dick.”

As he pushes into her — it feels different this time, naturally. This time, he keeps framing her face and he keeps forcing her to look at him, and if he’s not allowed to give her explanations or reassurances on how much he physically needs her sometimes, he can tell her that he fucking loves her emotionally, over and over again. And he does. He wants to fucking cry over it, too.
He understands dark fears — these ever-present fears that they are never really free of — fears that are held at bay when they are at their strongest mentally. His fear is that he will never be good enough. But he also knows that it’s not true — he is good enough. He has to be. Because she needs for him to be.

So he cups her face — he feels her legs squeezing him tighter — and he brushes his lips against her mouth. Instead of saying something about how he is undeserving of her — a habit that is ingrained in him — he says, “I love everything about you.”

“Everything?” she says skeptically.

“Everything.”

His sticky hand brushes up against her stomach, making her giggle into the pillow in reflex. She whispers to him that sex is great. She’s hovering in that hazy middle area between awake and asleep. Their legs are tangled together, and he’s muttering that maybe they can go back to sleep and get up in a bit to take Momo 2.0 out to potty, maybe? That’s when her phone rings.

“Drogo,” she says, before she holds the glowing screen up to her ear. “One guess who’s the mastermind behind this.”

“Dude, you give him power when you call him a mastermind,” Grey says. “He already has enough power.”

He is cradling her back and muttering complaints about Jaime when she accepts the call and says, “Hey, what’s up, D?”

She despondently watches him through her hand mirror as she applies mascara, as he shoves his head through the neck hole of his t-shirt, stretching it out in his irritation. And she generally pretends she’s listening as she actually tunes him out, as he relays all of the details back to her — about how he had actually kept things open and vague on purpose, when he told Jaime that they’d all meet up today. He never gave Jaime a time or a place or an activity. But of course Jaime sent him a million text messages asking him when they’d be ready to meet up.

“He always pulls this shit,” he grumbles, stepping into his shoes.

“So why don’t you talk to him and ask him to be more considerate with your time, if it bothers you so much?”

He looks at her quizzically. Obviously because she offered up a reasonable, emotionally mature suggestion that involves his favorite activity — talking about his feelings.

“What?” he says.

“Like, talk to him,” she repeats. “And ask him to knock this shit off, if it bothers you so much.”

“It doesn’t bother me that much,” he says stiffly.
She rolls her eyes. “And that’s why I’ve been listening to you bitch about it for the last fifteen minutes.”

“Missandei,” he says, pausing for emphasis, staring at her with his laces still untied. “That’s your fucking job in life now. To listen to me bitch about stupid shit. Forever.”

And then he cracks a smile.

“You’re late.”

Grey pushes past Jaime. “Sorry.”

She lingers in the doorway, giving Jaime a hug. She lowly whispers into Jaime’s ear that Grey is a little moody this morning. Jaime betrays her and loudly responds with, “No shit, he’s moody. When is he not moody?”

She looks at Jaime searchingly. She says, “Why are you moody?”

“Oh my God,” Tyrion says in a deadpan from the living room. He looks really funny sitting next to Sandor. “We have been having so much fun this morning. We are so glad you guys are now here to have fun with us.”

Dany insists on taking her own rental car to the docks, presumably so she can make a quick getaway if she needs to — if she just gets tired and wants to go back to her hotel to rest. Jhiqui had pointed out — perhaps not very helpfully — that a car parked at the waterfront is pretty useless when one is marooned on an island miles away.

Dany vaguely says that when there is a will, there is a way.

“What? Are you a champion swimmer or something?” Doreah asks.

“Yes,” Dany says, her face serious.

“Wait, what? For real?”

“Yes.”

“No, seriously,” Doreah insists. “For real?”

“Yes.”

After one spastic moment of incomprehension, Doreah shifts her attention to Missandei — always a translator for other people — and asks, “Is she for real?”

Missy softly laughs. “I guess?” she says. Turning to Dany, who has to be doing this on purpose — or maybe she isn’t — Missy scopes out Dany’s body — not for the first time, probably not for the last time — and from the very little bit she knows about competitive swimming, she thinks that Dany is just too fucking diminutive for it, but maybe Missy is wrong because Dany is like, good at
everything. Missandei asks, “Are you a champion swimmer? Did you qualify for the Olympics or something?”

Dany shakes her head, her glossy blond hair swirling like spun white gold in the sunlight. “No, not exactly the Olympics.”

“Dany!” Jhiqui shrieks. “Are you fucking for real!”

“Yes,” Dany says, her mouth finally betraying her — by twitching and lifting at the corners. “I am for real.”

“You ass!” Jhiqui cries, raising her hand before swatting at Dany’s butt. That’s the action that knocks Dany over the edge — her shoulders start heaving in silent laughter as her face breaks out a grin.

“Waaait,” Pia says, whining. “So is she a champion swimmer or what! I still don’t get it! Guys!”

On the boat, over the roar of the engine, Pia astutely makes the observation that boys are dramatic as hell. It’s an observation that makes Brienne furtively look around at the boat’s other passengers, before she faces Pia again, before she vigorously nods.

They have managed to stumble on some sort of horrific party boat — way to go, Jaime — complete with a bottle blond boat captain who is really flirty and really shirtless and super tan.

When he hears that there is a bride on the boat, he pumps up the music — it’s Pitbull — how did he fucking know? And he has Missy tilt her head back so that he can pour a shot of horrible tequila down her throat — amid the squeals and the whooping of only a select few, only a minority.

She catches Grey's intense staring when she raises her head back up. She rolls her eyes before she blows him a kiss. She watches as he rolls his eyes back at her, as he lightly shakes his head before he breaks his stare. Before he smiles to himself.

Jhiqui drops her shoes on the sand and declares that they have to celebrate getting to the secluded beach island in one piece with a short, music-less dance break. Jhiqui starts punching the air with her fists and wiggling around to an invisible and silent beat. It makes Missandei muffle a laugh — as she watches Jhiqui simultaneously scan the immediate area before settling her gaze on Grey.

“Oh, that’s right,” Jhiqui says in mock awe, slowing to a stop, before a smile spreads over her face. She clears her throat. She beckons Grey toward her by giving him the come-hither signal with her hand. “Come on,” she says. “Let’s see that beautiful booty bounce.”

“No.”

Missy raises her hand and presses her palm hard over her mouth. Because he sounds so bitchy and angry for no reason, and it’s so freaking cute.

“Why not!” Jhiqui says, making the decision to raise her voice to a shouting decibel.

“Because I don’t want to,” he says tightly.
“You’re such a stick in the mud sometimes,” Jhiqui says. “Or most of the time. Probably ninety-nine percent of the time.” And then Jhiqui descends into a breathy series of chuckles, as she reaches over and lightly shoves Missandei. “Stop! Your face is making me laugh!”

Grey is responding to all of this with a blank stare.

“Oh my God!” Jhiqui shouts. “I am joking around! God! You don’t have to dance if you don’t want to, I guess! Sheesh! God! I just wanted to see your talent! God! Sorry I’m an ardent fan of the beauty of your art!”

“Dude, stop messing with him,” Jaime interjects. “I don’t get why this is funny.”

“It’s not supposed to be!” Jhiqui declares. “I really want to see him dance! He dances like a fucking angel!”

“What?” Jaime says. “No, he doesn’t.”

“Bro,” Jhiqui returns slowly, drawing out the syllables. “Do you really not know that your boo can break it down?”

“What?” Jaime repeats. “No, he can’t. Look at how stiff he is right now. He barely swings his arms when he walks.”

He watches as the ladies jostle one another, helping each other strip off their clothes in a manner that causes Addam to laugh in disbelief and make a very quiet, very cliched joke about having seen this very sight in a dream once. To Grey, the view is not at all titillating — for various reasons — mostly because he’s so fucking miserable because shit is so awkward with his friends — also because it’s actually really awkward watching people take off their clothes unless it’s an on-purpose strip show, of which he’s only been to one. Wait. That was awkward, too. It was Addam’s fault, and it was an awful experience because all he could think of was sex trafficking.

To him, the contrast has been stark. He’s the kind of person that already has difficulties telegraphing his happiness to other people. When he is even mildly uncomfortable — his ability to appear like he is having fun plummets down to looks-like-he-hates-everything or looks-like-he-wants-to-die.

Usually, Missandei, Jaime, or Drogo serve as a distraction, or as counterweights to buoy up his discomfort. Currently, his wife is busy actually having fun with her friends, and he is learning that when Jaime and Drogo poop out on their duties — shit gets real bleak.

He is also relearning things he already knows. He knows that Sandor just defaults to ignoring. He knows that Tyrion just starts drinking. He knows that Nick clams up into terrified silence. He knows that Addam gets sullen and all asshurt even when shit has nothing to do with him. He knows that Daven deflects and tries to constantly change the subject. He knows that Peck — shit, he actually doesn’t know Peck that well at all, but Peck seems quiet. He knows that Jaime refuses to ever let anyone move on from collective pain. Jaime has to always call attention to the elephant in the room with his grueling, dark jokes.

And he knows that Drogo gets angry. It’s a red hot anger, and Drogo is like a bomb or a live wire or a landmine or the countless number of other explosive things that can kill a person with one wrong move.
Their only saving grace is in the center. It is Pippa. They can’t snipe at each other with a child present.

“Daddy, am I going to see porpoises?”

“Sweet baby, what are porpoises? Are they the same as dolphins?”

“Daddy, I don’t know?”

“Okay, well, the answer is no. You’re probably not going to see them.”

“Why not?”

“Pips, honey, I don’t know very much about animals.”

“I know a little bit about porpoises,” Peck interjects carefully. “I interned at an aquarium one summer. They are not the same as dolphins. But they look similar, don’t they?”

Pippa nods. “They’re fish-mammals.”

“They sure are.”

“So,” Jaime says, interrupting him mid-bite. “What is your favorite part about today?”

“Probably the aggressive awkwardness,” Grey supplies, talking through his chewing. “What’s yours?”

“Probably the part where everyone hates me because I’m an insufferable jackass.”

That makes Grey snort out a laugh.

“What’s your favorite part of today, Drogo?” Jaime says.

Drogo sighs. “Probably how sad I feel.”

Jaime clears his throat. “Goddamn.”

Grey reaches out and lightly clashes his knuckles against Drogo’s. “Switch,” he says, pushing his burger into Drogo’s free hand so that he can pick up Drogo’s pulled pork bullshit. He already knows it’s going to suck.

“Guys,” Drogo says after ripping off a bite of the burger. “I think I’m an alcoholic.”
Drogo is in AA

He shrugs out of his light jacket when he enters the restaurant, hitching it over his shoulder as he pushes his way past the front desk and the young girl who is trying to make eye contact with him so that she can do her job. He mutters — mostly to air — that he sees his friend and vaguely gestures into the dining room. He weaves his way in between tables, chairs, and patrons until he can see Jaime’s tanned face, his wide toothy smile, and the emblem on his obnoxious navy hat. It says ILLEGAL on it.

Grey leans over and flicks the bill, knocking the hat off Jaime’s head. Jaime scrambles — catching it in mid-air with one hand.

“Aren’t you getting too old to still be wearing this shit?”

“Never too old to look this good, man,” Jaime says, replacing the hat on his head, scanning his eyes up and down Grey’s dress shirt and the sports jacket that he has draped across the back of his chair. “At least I don’t need my wife to dress me.”

“Whoa,” Grey says, holding up a hand. “I take offense. I’m paid to have a sense of style. I know more about clothes than Missandei. If anything, I dress her.”

“God, you’re so Kanye.”

“I know, right?” he mutters, reaching forward to swipe up a piece of bread, ripping it open and roughly buttering it.

“Where is Drogo?”

“I dunno. Why don’t you text him five thousand times?” He stuffs the roll into his mouth — he’s starving. He has started training again. Missandei hates it. He keeps telling her his body will break down any day now — he needs to use it while he still has it. It’s an oversimplification of course, but he was halfway out the door this morning when they started bickering about it, and he really just needed to win the argument.

“Speak of the devil,” Jaime calls out.

Grey twists his neck around and spots Drogo lumbering toward them, shoulders a little slouched. “He appears,” Drogo calls back.

This is their first-ever boys club meeting. That’s what Jaime’s calling it until he can think of a better name. Naturally, the whole thing feels forced and thus, very awkward and contrived. But without Jaime around to eagerly enforce this sort of thing without any sort of shame or hang ups — they
probably would be making much more meager progress on it all.

“So,” Jaime says, spearing his fork into some lettuce leaves on his plate. “What was it like?”

“There were a lot of white people there,” Drogo says stiffly, picking at his own salad. “They were all really, really nice.” He pauses — reaching out to touch his water glass — before deciding that he doesn’t want to drink and drops his hand. “They were nice,” he repeats, before sighing. “I’m not sure AA is for me.”

“Yeah?” Jaime says, prompting Drogo for elaboration.

“Yeah,” Drogo echoes. “I mean, the way it’s set up is kinda monotheistic. And you know — Dothrakis — you know — we — we’re kind of open. And so that aspect of stuff — I can see it becoming a barrier if I were to get in deeper into it. And I mean — going back to how everyone was white there — I feel like — I’ve been thinking that a lot of why I drink is kind of cultural. And I wouldn’t know how to talk about that — with certain people. And you know how that sort of thing can go. I feel like if I were to bring it up, what people will tell me is that addiction ain’t about race. Addiction is addiction. But I’m telling you — there are disparities. And I’ve lived my life a certain way. I’ve seen certain things. I believe certain things to be true. And I feel, you know, really sensitive about stuff these days — and you know when I get sensitive I get angry. I would get angry if someone said to me that addiction isn’t at all about race. But I don’t want to be so angry anymore. So I don’t know, man.” Drogo rubs his face and sighs into his palm.

“Have you looked into like, AA-type meetings for your people?” Jaime asks.

“Man, my people have a hard enough time admitting that alcoholism is even a problem we have. We don’t even have a word for it in Dothraki. We just call it drinking too much.” Drogo flicks his eyes up to the ceiling. “I talked to my mom — and I had a really hard time explaining what I was thinking and feeling to her. She also has a lot of issues with it, because of Bharbo.”

“What about AA meetings for Black people?” Jaime says, glancing quickly at Grey for confirmation or approval — which makes Grey want to laughingly swat at Jaime’s face a little bit. “I know, for a fact, that they exist. That’s an okay middle ground?”


Drogo rents commercial kitchen space so that he can do prep work for his food cart. There are all sorts of regulations that dictate that he cannot prepare food out of his home kitchen. He preps his stuff during off-peak restaurant hours — that is, really early in the morning or really late at night after closing, depending on how they want to look at it. For this reason, Drogo generally has to go to bed pretty early.

This is why they are eating dinner at 5:30, right in the middle of the happy hour rush.

Jaime, who blessedly has not really suffered from any sort of substance addiction other than the benders he went on in his early 20s, when he was just a fucking mess of a human being, generally eyes the drinks coming out of the bar with this open and kind of endearing hostility. But Grey knows better. It’s not the mere presence. It’s the social pressure. It’s the psychological conditioning. It’s the depression.
He really doesn’t have much to say that is useful, when Drogo asks him how he kicked his habit and if it was hard. Grey doesn’t know the terminology for this. He hasn’t ever really articulated it to anyone. He tells Drogo that of course it was very hard, but he had to make a change because — at the time — he thought he had lost her, and after losing her, there was really nowhere to go besides trying to get her back.

He thinks about it from time to time — how he continues to cope. Actually — he generally thinks about it every time before he starts a long run — because he knows that he replaced one compulsion with another compulsion. Missandei may hate his constant running because it makes him tired and cranky all the time — but without it — well, he doesn’t really know how he’d cope without it.

“Don’t forget sex,” Jaime adds. “You also use sex to cope with a drug-free life.”

He really does reach over to hit Jaime this time. Because it kind of embarrasses him that this is being brought up in front of Drogo.

“What does that even mean?” Drogo says, lightly laughing. “Are you a sex addict now?”

“No,” he mumbles sullenly, cutting eye contact.

“You don’t have to talk about it.”

“Sorry, boo,” Jaime says, reaching over to swipe at his hot cheek. “I didn’t realize it was still such a sore subject.”

“It’s not. I’m just awkward.”

It’s pretty juvenile, but he is an idiot so it’s fine. He’s a weirdo so he has to give Jaime permission to hand over all the dirty details — because he honestly cannot even muster up the ability and the courage to verbalize it himself. He supposes that this is why Jaime is always blurring out random personal factoids about him that has him cringing sometimes — because without his mouthpiece, no one besides Missandei would know jackshit about him. And that’s the thing. The thing is that he actually wants for Drogo to know things about him — and vice versa. And fucking Jaime is so great at talking — he communicates for a living — and he has also spent years in therapy learning how to articulate and parse out his feelings and thoughts.

It’s surreal to listen to and to watch Jaime tell his story — and to have Jaime occasionally look over to confirm that Jaime is being accurate — even in his editorializing.

He kind of cannot look at Drogo when Jaime actually uses the phrase erectile dysfunction — and uses it really breezily and really blandly, too.

At the end of it all, Drogo kind of looks down at his hands. And then he says, “Wow.”

“And so ends the first meeting of the boys club,” Jaime says, hands shoved in his pockets, fishing
around for his car keys. “Man, sobriety can be fun, right D?”

Drogo points his grin at the asphalt. “So fun.”

“I mean, you can drive yourself home right now and everything.”

“It’s so novel.”

“Tell Dany we said hi?”

“She won’t care, but sure.”

Jaime snorts lightly. “I really don’t like her sometimes.”

“It’s okay. We know. She doesn’t like you sometimes either.”

Jaime’s laugh sounds surprised — and also delighted. He throws his arms around Drogo, knocks him back half a step, and lifts both feet up in the air, forcing Drogo to carry his weight. “You’re so sturdy,” Jaime says, as Drogo returns the hug.

She collapses on top of him, sweaty and panting and laughing out these breathy puffs of humid air that flows into his chest. He’s still inside of her, softening. He’s still a little bit dazed — he’s still catching his breath as he feels and hears the rumble of her groan, still thick and sexy, as her teeth latch onto the skin of his neck — as she bites down, trembling a bit from control — from stopping herself from just full-on ripping into his skin.

She laughs again, muffling the joyful sound of it into the crook of his shoulder as she shimmies up his body a little, causing him to slip a little bit out of her. He holds her in place, presses her laugh deeper into him. He loves it when she’s happy. He loves that he makes her happy.

“Jaime said that I use sex as a coping mechanism,” he blurts out, hand blindly reaching behind her to pull the sheet and blanket over her naked body. It’s been getting colder.

“Well, if Jaime said it, then it must be true,” she says dryly, voice husky and a little hoarse.

“You don’t think so?”

Her lips skim over his cheek. “Babe. I’m getting laid on a regular basis. You’re getting laid on a regular basis. Beyond that, who cares?”

“And what will happen when we’re old and decrepit?” He also worries about what will happen when he can’t run anymore.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she says. “We might have other things in common besides boning. But really, who can say?”

He keeps her legs wrapped around him tightly as he flips her over, as he slides her ass diagonally so that it’s off the bed. He hates an excessively dirty bed. She hates when he yanks himself out of her arms to do laundry. This is another way they have learned to cope — or compromise. There are lots of words for the same thing. He plucks a tissue from their night stand and he says, “Bye,” before pulling out of her and damming up the secretion with the tissue. This part — he wryly thinks to
himself — is also real sexy.

He can hear her shuffling off of the bed and hopping after him, as he heads to the bathroom. She shoves past him, “Me first,” making a beeline for the toilet.

“What do we have in common?” he asks, as he looks over her smooth naked skin, tracking over the temporary mars on it — flushed blotches from when it got heated, some light bite marks on her breasts.

Missandei kind of glowers impatiently up at him from her seat on the toilet. She mutters, “I’m going to kill Jaime.”

He can kinda feel himself smiling at that.

“He plants these ideas into your head. He makes you think about this silly stuff, and I don’t like it.” She reaches her arm out — he feels her blunt fingernails lightly running a line up the back of his thigh, heading to his ass, which she squeezes tightly. “Don’t you know I’m only with you for your body?” she says, voice dripping with a put-upon coyness. And then she drops it. Her voice dulls and is serious and normal when she says, “I’m not going to sit here and list off random shit we have in common. Most of it is abstract and values-based and psychological anyways. Though I guess we both have a healthy appreciation for dogs. We both like dogs. And we both are body conscious. We probably both have borderline eating disorders.” She ends it on a sarcastic note. “Is this what makes a strong marriage?” Then she flushes the toilet and says, “Switch?”

Another private thing about Missandei — something that probably no one else in the entire world knows but him — she likes to watch him pee. It’s not at all sexual as it just a natural curiosity because his body is so different from her body. He’s told her that sometimes it’s hard for him to pee after sex. He has told her that his plumbing needs time to rewire itself, go from fucking-mode to pissing-mode. He has gathered that is not at all the case for women.

She likes to watch the grimace on his face when he forces it, when he forcefully pees. He likes this aspect of their relationship — he likes that it’s a secret. He likes that it’s a little bizarre. He likes that there is someone on this planet who generally knows every single fucking thing about him — and not begrudgingly. He likes that she eagerly sucks up all the information.

She pulls her coat tighter around her body — it’s one that Grey procured for her, and she likes to say procured and not something like ‘bought’ or ‘gifted’ because she knows that her baby is a nutjob and procured is really the most accurate word. She’s actually been getting compliments on it all day from her coworkers. Stella asked her where she got it. Missandei had to sheepishly admit that she doesn’t really know where exactly this coat came from — because her husband got it for her.

And then there was her awkward downplaying, when her colleagues kind of gushed at the amazingness of his feat. Missandei told them it really isn’t all that amazing. He’s a freaking unsentimental weirdo who probably picked off this reject coat from somewhere at work. And he probably only did it because it was convenient and because he probably got tired of constantly telling her that her other winter coat is shitty and cheap — even though she paid an ass-ton for it. He was probably tired of constantly pointing out the pilling every time she wore it.

Truth is — she loves the new coat. She fucking loves him. The intensity of which is just too much to
voice out loud — and to other people. This aspect of her personality is very different from how she used to be — when she was younger and prone to screaming her love for some boy from the rooftops. He’s influenced her. Or rather, he’s made love feel really, really precious.

“Oh my God!” Pia squeals, making Doreah wince next to her. “That is new! Oh my God! I love it! Oh my God! Where did you get it? I want it!”

“Sorry. I don’t know where you can get it. Grey stole this one from work. Maybe it’s in one of the stores? You should call him and ask. And maybe while you have him on the phone, just — you know — catch him up on everything that’s going on in your life and stuff.”

Doreah snorts. And Pia’s smile widens. “Ha!” she says. “I’m not falling for that one again.”

His eyes are closed, his body lying prostrate on the mat, and a cool mist of lavender scented water gets sprayed on his bare feet — really something he can fucking do without — but he will spare Brienne the embarrassment of speaking up about it. He figures she already has to deal with that sort of public embarrassment enough from Jaime.

He’s actually come to really enjoy yoga. He’s come to really enjoy its benefits on his body.

She asks him if he wants to go grab a bite after class — even though it’s dark and it’s late. Usually, they don’t linger very much after class. But there’s something a little tense in her voice and in her mood today, so he casually says yes and tells her he’s going to text Missandei to let her know that he’ll be home later and that he also doesn’t need to be fed.

At the restaurant — this nondescript neighborhood pasta and pizza joint — Brienne rolls her mug of tea in between her two hands. They’ve been blandly talking about work — which has apparently been steady and normal for her. The holidays tend to be slow. His work is the very opposite, in that the holidays tend to be insane. He’s been pulling in long hours. That — on top of the training — has been a little hard for him and Missandei. He tells Brienne that honestly, it’s been pretty good. She’s really patient. But obviously, it’s not ideal. And it won’t last forever.

Brienne asks him how the job hunt is going. It makes him groan and tell her that it’s not going at all. It’s stagnant because the last thing he wants to do when he gets home is spend more time on the fucking computer applying to shit. When he gets home, he just wants to be with her. Or he just wants to pass out and fall asleep.

“What the fuck!” he says automatically, just reeling from being blindsided. He shakes his head.

“Sorry,” he says. And after a pause, he adds, “What happened?” And he winces over that. Obviously he can figure out what happened. They had sex. And then she probably didn’t have her period a month or so later. That’s probably what happened.

“Um —”

“Is everything okay?” Though, what he really wants to ask her is if he’s honestly really the best person for Brienne to talk to about this. He is actually pretty sure Missandei is doing jack at home right now. She is probably burrowed with Momo 2.0 on the couch and watching a stupid reality show. He can like, call her right now and have her come and replace him at this table.
As if reading his mind, Brienne softly says, “You’re his best friend.”

“He hasn’t said anything to me.”

“It just happened. Like, a couple days ago. He’s been busy with work this week. And —” she pauses, “he’s kind of freaked out and being weird about it.”

“It’s Jaime,” he says, feeling really lame at how not-useful he is in these kinds of situations. And then, to cut to the chase, he asks, “What do you want to ask me or talk to me about?”

She straightens in her seat, perhaps not anticipating his bluntness. There’s still a flush on her cheeks from the yoga. She says, “There’s nothing I really want to discuss, honestly. I just didn’t want to go home right away because I don’t want to watch him be quiet and standoffish. And I know that you and Missandei have really run the gauntlet in terms of baby stuff, so I figured you’d get it. And meh.” She shrugs. “I just felt like chilling.”

His mouth curves into a smile. “You just felt like chilling,” he lightly repeats.

“Yep,” she says, popping the P.

He kind of laughs. “Okay,” he says. “We can chill.”
Grey finds that the upheaval in his professional life is coming at a really inopportune time. Jaime has been stressing out over baby-gate in his household — which has exhibited in really transparent distraction techniques. Jaime’s been louder and more forcefully cheerful whenever they’ve hung out, which has been a little bit more frequently lately because Jaime has been giving Brienne space to figure her shit out — Jaime’s actual words.

Drogo’s been preoccupied with the legacy of his father’s alcoholism and with figuring out what his life is going to look like without alcohol. He has also been fixated on his family and friends and Dany and in making the rounds and apologizing to all of them for shit that is a million years old and relatively insignificant, but shit that still weighs on Drogo all the same. It’s part of the process and the “journey” — and as Drogo tells it — it’s currently an entire fake it until he makes it sort of thing. Maybe he will magically get over his dependency on alcohol if he goes through the motions.

In comparison to Jaime and Drogo’s significant life obstacles or life changes — Grey’s thing seems rather insignificant. So he feels abstractly unfulfilled in his job — but that’s something that’s been going on for the better part of nearly a decade now — or even longer if he wants to count the years he put in, in the shoe department. So his mentor is getting edged out and is being forced into early retirement — but Grey already knew he wasn’t going to work under Barristan forever. So Grey is probably on the chopping block because his mentor is gone and the last quarter was middling, which was a concerning precursor to this quarter’s numbers — but Grey already knows this quarter is going to piss off a lot of people. There have been a lot of leadership changes in the last few months. With new leadership comes new faces. With new leadership also comes uncertainty. Tanja pulled him aside the other day and made him go to lunch with her. She told him she was considering a job offer and wanted to bounce it off his brain. He told her a bunch of things she already knew — he recapped back her options — he knows that he is really an unsatisfying person to spitball out problems with because all he can ever do in these situations is tell people what they already know. Nevertheless, she seemed placated by him.

Talking to Tanja about her fears and concerns makes him feel anxious about his own life. He mostly
worries about how he is going to pay for everything in his life. He reverts back to his natural tendency, which he thinks is to just overcome and to tolerate and to withstand. Sometimes when there’s a lull in his day — and there have been more and more lulls in his days — he sits down and does these paranoid financial calculations on what life would be like on just Missandei’s salary because a part of him is kind of sure he will never find another job ever again because he’s so fucking weird and he interviews terribly — and he finds that life will be strained under just Missandei’s salary. Their wedding really destroyed a big chunk of their savings. Her grandmother’s healthcare is an ongoing expense. Her sister and brother’s educations are depleting a lot of their disposable income. They are fucked. They are completely fucked. He doesn’t need a spreadsheet to tell him that they are fucked because he is a failure. They can’t afford to have a child with him being such a fucking deadbeat either.

He feels like he wants to talk to his fucking wife about his shit because it seems like these moments are why she exists as she does, but his issue here is that he has spent years downplaying her work drama and telling her to stop being so emotionally invested in a job. Talking about his own melodrama seems hypocritical and that makes him feel self-conscious.

So instead, he generally marches around their excessively expensive house wondering just why the hell he thought it was such a fucking great idea to spend an assload of money on a place just so they can buy more shit to store in it. He generally tears through his bags and their closet trying to locate his running belt. He wants it so he can clip Momo 2.0 into it with a carabiner, freeing up his hands. He can’t remember when he last saw it. He usually is really great with keeping track of his things, but he has made all of these adjustments for Missandei’s sake — because she doesn’t love that he is an anal retentive neat freak. He might’ve let her fold up their clothes and put them away shoddily without comment. He might’ve even congratulated himself on his patience.

And now he is losing his mind because she has probably tucked his running belt in a corner somewhere instead of hanging it up on the closet wall near the rest of his running shit, where it should obviously be.

She sees that he has cleaned and reorganized their bathroom when she arrives home late after work and heads into the bedroom to change out of her skirt and blazer combo. She sees that the mirrors are spotless, the tubes of toothpaste have been edited down to two, the drawers are now subdivided into compartments housing her fashion jewelry, perfume samples, and even her multitude of hair ties. She sees that her hair products have been removed from the countertop and they now reside in a tub underneath the sink. She looks at the new houseplant sitting innocuously between the sinks.

She knows that he is most definitely freaking out about something.

Dinner ends up being a stirfry of freezer vegetables and scrambled eggs over rice. They kind of collaborate together on it — and it tastes bland and lightly of freezer burn. Missandei has a habit of buying food in bulk when it’s on sale and then stuffing the food in the freezer or pantry before forgetting it and then finding it again well after its expiration date. She has told him that the habit is the result of being the grandchild of immigrants who have had to feed a sizable family their entire
adult lives. Buying bags and bags of frozen corn is kind of a blind habit that she has trouble weaning herself off of. It’s not a practice that is very advantageous for her, because for years, she only had herself — sometimes Jhiqui — to feed. Food waste is a real problem of Missandei’s. And her food hoarding is entirely the opposite of his style, which is to efficiently buy just the amount that he needs for himself, at retail. He is not a bargain hunter at all.

“How was your day?” she asks, swirling her spoon around in the terrible but edible dinner they have made together.

“Fine,” he says. “Yours?”

“Really? Your day was fine?” she says, ignoring his polite question. “I saw that you cleaned the bathroom.” She pauses. “Thank you, by the way. But did something inspire that?”

“Do you know where my running belt is?”

She looks at him quizzically. He’s frowning. “No idea. Did you lose it?”

“I used it like, the day before we left for our wedding,” he says pointedly. “I didn’t lose it. I don’t misplace stuff.”

“Okay,” she says. She can tell that, clearly, this is bothering him. “I’m sorry you can’t find it.” She resists sighing out loud and rolling her eyes. “Probably because I misplaced it somewhere — probably. Do you want me to order a new one? We can have it delivered by tomorrow?”

“We can’t always just buy new shit all the time because we can’t keep track of our old shit,” he says, his voice sharp now.

She’s frowning at him now, too. She says, “Check your tone, Grey.”

He knows that she’s a better, nicer person than he is because she doesn’t throw back all of his inconsistencies in his face. She doesn’t leave him to flail because he has left her to flail — told her to just move past the things that were bothering her — in the past. Instead, she actually pulls him onto the couch and has him cuddle with the dog and patiently listens as he expends effort and unloads all of the paranoid bullshit that is in his brain. He tells her about work and about how they’re about to be fucking poor soon because he’s about to get fucking fired. He tells her it’s simultaneously unfair but also fair because the company doesn’t actually owe him anything — but he feels upset about it, all the same. He tells her he feels upended and like he’s not in control of his own life. It’s one thing to leave on his own terms, but it’s another to not be wanted anymore.

“Grey,” she interrupts, shaking her head against her hand, from where it’s propped up against the back of the couch. “The way you word things kills me sometimes. You’re always wanted.”

“We’re fucked,” he says, with an absolute seriousness. “We have been living beyond our means.”

“Um, we actually have not been,” she says. “I feel like we’ve been doing a good job of balancing everything. And I make money, too! Don’t discount that. I know I don’t make nowhere near as much as you, but that’s only because I’m a woman.” She waits, watching his face. He does not laugh. Because he is terrible right now. So she clears her throat. She says, “We can shift some stuff around. I’ve been dragging my feet on telling my folks that it’s gonna stop raining Bennies on them
soon — and this is a good reason to start that conversation. And I’m not sure you’re right about getting let go — you’re so fucking smart and talented and great at your job —”

“You actually don’t know that,” he says, apparently bent on protesting this. “You don’t see what I do, day in and day out. You just assume that I am good at my job because you love me, and you don’t want to think of yourself as being in love with an imbecile who sucks at his fucking job.”

“I feel like I actually do know that you’re good at your job? People have said things to me.”

“People say all sorts of —”

“Baby,” she says, interrupting. “I’m not going to argue this really stupid point with you. You’re being really fatalistic about this.”

“That’s because I am a fucking failure!”

She raises up her other hand and she holds it up to his face. She says, “You are like, so sexy right now. Never stop being this insecure and melodramatic, okay?”

Her favorite version of herself is actually not the one with all of the sarcastic one-liners. It’s actually not the one that bickers with him and responds to his hardship with combativeness. But sometimes, those things are the only things that he responds to. And she keeps letting herself get triggered by defensiveness and how he keeps shutting down her reassurances.

They silently stand on their back porch as they watch the furry little figure of 2.0 hopping around in the dark, trying to find a potty spot. Grey has been trying to train the dog to go in one area and one area only. He plans to make it some sort of litterbox sandy area where nothing grows because nothing grows underneath her toxic pee anyway — but like with everything else — his expectations are immense and their dog kind of likes to spread out her contributions all over the yard. He kind of freaks out over that, agonizing over whether 2.0 is peeing on the azaleas just to fuck with him or what. Missy has assured him that the dog is not trying to fuck with him. The dog loves him so much and doesn’t even have the capacity for that kind of strategic thinking. The dog is just being a dog.

Missandei keeps imagining what it would be like to raise a child with him — in these kind of moments — and she generally thinks that it would be a lot of fun times.

Which is not a joke. She actually does think that his ongoing battle with the dog’s apparent lack of discipline is something that is really amusing and cute to watch. He’s like, a full-grown, intelligent adult. Who keeps getting thwarted by the cutest little puffball in the world.

It’s hard for him to be crabby and an asshole when he’s inside of her — he tends to get emotional and most of the time — nearly all the time — he is sweet. This is why she starts something after they brush their teeth — even though it’s a weeknight and they have spent the better part of the evening talking about money issues. She runs her hand underneath his shirt and she kisses him with intent — which he understands right away. He grunts and then starts shuffling out of his underwear. It makes
her want to laugh because he’s really gonna skip foreplay tonight. He’s really gonna just go for it.

She groans when he’s all the way in there, after a few rough ins and outs. She rolls over, pulling him with her so that she’s on her back, he’s on top, and the blankets are cinched tightly around their bodies.

He says, “I’m sorry for being an asshole.”

She says, “I love you anyway.” She chuckles against his cheek before she kisses him there, running her lips against his stubble. She says, “We’ll be okay, you know? We’ll be okay because we’re together, and we’re happy.”

“I just don’t want to let you down.”

“It’s impossible for you to let me down,” she says, hugging him tight. “Don’t worry about me. We’re just going to take it one day at a time. And maybe I will ask for a raise. I’ve been kind of meaning to.”

“You should. You’re awesome.”

She smiles. “Okay, I will.” She hitches her right leg up higher and digs her heel into his thigh. She loves how thick and heavy he feels on top of her. She says, “You’re really awesome, too.”

His fears, more or less, get confirmed when he arrives at work. When he gets there, the mood is off — the building is quiet. And there’s a meeting request in his inbox from Jonah, a guy that he never has meetings with.

She is cryptic when she explains why she is wiping out the rest of her day and rescheduling meetings. She tells Alex that there’s a bit of a situation that she has to take care of, as she hooks the strap of her purse over her arm and closes the lid to her laptop.

The train ride to get to his area of the city is a short ten minutes.

She sees his back, still in his coat, hunched over the bar top like such a corporate cliche. She sneaks up and slides her arms around him from behind — she feels him stiffen, most likely instinctively. He loosens up a little when he recognizes the touch of her.

She gives him a real kiss, in public, and he sighs and indulges her in it. He actually clutches tightly onto her, and it makes this warmth spread out from inside. She wants there to be some way for her to impart the sureness she feels about him. She is sure that he will be okay. She is sure that he will thrive, regardless of his circumstances. Because it is just who he is. She feels like she knows this with her entire soul.

“Thanks for coming,” he says when they pull apart.
She grins. Because she’s thinking about a sex joke. But she can tell from his expression that now is not really the time for jokes. She slides into the bar stool next to him — she gives the bartender a short greeting and a smile — and then back to Grey, she asks, “What are you drinking?”

“Honestly? Just a soda. I was waiting for you.”

She finds that oddly and unbearably sweet.

“Holy shit, never complain to me ever again,” she says, after he tells her about the severance package they are offering him to get him to leave quietly and swiftly. “Baby, we’re rich again. I was just starting to think about what it’d be like to be poor, and then I find out we’re still rich!”

“We’re not rich,” he says dryly. “It’s 27 weeks.”

“Twenty-seven weeks of free money that you don’t have to work for!” she says excitedly. “That’s half a year. And depending on what the package says, you can probably also claim unemployment benefits. And I can check with my HR tomorrow and get you on my insurance so that you aren’t fucked if you accidentally trip and fall and get hit by a car during one of your runs. Grey! This is great! You can practically sit on your ass and do nothing for at least six months — maybe an entire year — if you felt like it.”

Missandei actually ends up getting real hammered — she empathy-drinks, to compensate for his depressed mood and his resistance to drinking in his depressed state. She’s really inexplicably happy. He asks why she’s so happy now that he is jobless. She tells him it’s because she’s with the love of her life, they’re both young, they’re both healthy, and really, she wants for nothing more — so of course she’s happy. He generally just looks back at her — feels kind of bashful and silly — and his heart just beats insistently in his chest. She keeps telling him that they will be okay. He has noticed that she has adopted this collectivist language. They will be okay, not just him. They will get through this, not just him.

Her outlook on the whole thing is bizarrely sunny. She smiles at him goofyly, already reeking of booze, and she asks him what he can imagine himself doing now — now that the sky is without limits.

Of course, his natural tendency is to say that the sky is limited. It is so limited. It is a ceiling. He will have to fire off a bunch of resumes and try to get another job in the same sort of sameness as quickly as possible.

She asks, “Why do you have to do that?”

He says, “Because.”

She twirls her hand. “Why, though?”

“Because,” he repeats.
“Can I give you advice?” she slurs, swaying in her seat, clutching onto the bar top. It makes him grin—because she’s going to be so hungover and bitchy tomorrow—and also because she typically does not wait for him to give his permission before she launches into her advice-giving.

“Yeah,” he says.

“I left a job—my old job—a few years back,” she says.

“Yeah, I remember,” he says, feeling terrible already—over whatever she’s about to say. He generally hates to remember that period in their lives.

“I know it’s not quite the same, but I mean, I was really miserable at the PR firm. I just hated it, but I stayed in it for years because I felt like I had all of these responsibilities—like my grandma’s care. And I felt all of this pressure to get the very best job that paid me the most money because my family had worked so hard and had given up so much so that I could go to school. Oh my God, I am crying.” Missandei kind of nervously laughs out her disbelief, as she reaches up to gently touch the pads of her fingers to her eyelashes. “I just love my family so much, you know? I just didn’t want to let them down.” She takes her damp cocktail napkin and starts dabbing her eyes with it, as she says, “But then we broke up. Um, that was really hard. It really, um, was painful. And I’m not saying this to hurt your feelings because I’m really actually glad that we broke up and you know that I fucking love you immensely. And we’re married now, so don’t worry about it, God.”

He kind of pushes out a laugh, mostly for her benefit.

“I was so sad and depressed after we broke up that I just couldn’t even give a shit about things I didn’t give many shits about to begin with. The job just became something unbearable. It was like—why bust ass over something that I basically loathed doing? To make money? But what is the point in making money when you’re so unhappy? That’s what Mars told me, when I called him up sobbing and telling him I was sorry for being a fucking failure. Baby, I’ve said all the same things you’ve said in the last day. And what Mars basically told me was—well, to calm the fuck down. Which, I think, is something I’ve said to you in the last day also. And then he also told me that my happiness matters to him and that we don’t need much money at all to live. And he told me to come home because he’d take care of me.” She sniffs. “Obviously I didn’t come home because he was being weird and patriarchal—but it was sweet as fuck anyway. And you and I are married, so I’m saying it to you—and it better not be weird and patriarchal—but babe, I’ve got you. I will take care of you. I’ll take care of the bills. Me and your fucking severance package, oh my God. But just take your time—figure out things—take a lot of time figuring things out. Jesus Christ, I don’t think you have ever not-worked a day in your life. You didn’t even have a childhood. You kind of deserve a break, in a really big way.”

He doesn’t really know what to say to her—so he says a lot of nothing. He’s acutely aware that they are in public. If they were alone, obviously they would be having sex right about now because he is sometimes only capable of responding to these epic gestures physically.

There is just a really long, drawn out pause after her impromptu, drunken speech, one in which he just thinks that he’s a real lucky son of a bitch. He thinks that this bodes well for the future of their marriage, if she insists on being like this—this person.

He’s actually glad that they are in a bar. It is forcing him to sit still with his discomfort over what she
is saying and also with what she is promising. He keeps getting smacked in the face with the nature of forever and what it actually looks like, when it’s not an intangible and romanticized concept. It means stuff like this — her eagerness to subsidized his ass while he figures out some professional satisfaction issues. It is so fucking crazy.

He says, “I don’t know what to say, beyond all of the obvious things.”

“What are the obvious things?” she says as she sips from her foggy cocktail glass, her eyes mostly dry now.

“I love you. I don’t think I deserve this or you. I feel awkward because I know I’m not supposed to still be thinking that way, but I still do sometimes. I don’t know how to respond to people I don’t deserve. I feel a lot of pressure to not mess up and lose esteem in your eyes and make you regret being with me. I don’t feel like it makes sense to just sit around, trying to find my purpose. I mean, I might not be made that way. I just work because, well, everyone has to work. And what if I never figure that out? And you lose patience with me? And um — just a lot of stuff like that.”

“I can’t promise I won’t lose patience with you,” she says, snickering. “Because come on — you’re a little — you know — you’re a little — ahh! What is the polite euphemism for what you are, baby?”

He cracks a smile. “I’m particular.”

“Yes, you’re particular,” she says breathlessly.
Grey is househusband

News of Grey’s unemployment spreads pretty fast — and within a week, he actually gets these soft job leads, first from Addam, then from Dany, then from some rando on LinkedIn, then from Tanja, who is thick in the honeymoon period of her new job. Missandei more or less wants to elbow all of these people into silence, tell them that her man is actually off-limits to work. She’s scared that if he comes across an offer than sounds enticing enough, he will scrap all of his good intentions to relax the fuck out for once in his life and re-enter the rat race too soon.

“I have a friend who almost got a divorce in the year that her husband was out of work,” Doreah says conversationally over dinner, inspiring a chuckle from Clea who is sitting next to her. “Apparently he just became this unbearable asshole and was all depressed about it. He picked fights all the time. So yeah.”

“Grey is already an unbearable asshole, though,” Jhiqui cracks. “And Missy is attracted to that.”

Missandei rolls her eyes, even as this grin sneaks out of her face.

“How is he dealing with being a house-husband, anyway?” Dany asks.

“Uh, obviously he’s really great at it,” Missandei says. “He gets up and makes me a healthy breakfast. He kind of lays out outfits for me each morning, and not in a creepy ‘Let Daddy dress you’ kind of way. But in that helpful, ‘Oh, this is clean and I know you’re on your period, so dark pants!’ kind of way. He sends me off to work with these awesome lunches. Like, he made this fish and asparagus terrine in some aspic jelly yesterday. Just because he was bored. The house smells like lemons all the time now. My bed always smells like it’s just been washed.”

“Oh my God, I love fresh linen smell!” Clea gushes. “I’m just too lazy to actually wash my friggin’ sheets.”

“He sounds like he’s losing his mind,” Dany observes dryly.

“Oh, most definitely,” Missandei says cheerfully. “Slowly but surely. And how is Drogo?”

Dany lightly shrugs. “He’s been trying really hard, actually. He’s been sweet.” Dany looks over to Jhiqui. “And how is Nick?”

“Same ol’,” Jhiqui says. “We’re both fucking getting owned so hard by a toddler constantly. How’s Tank?”

“He’s good!”

“Guys,” Clea says, interrupting. “FYI, Kevin — my invisible, imaginary, fake boyfriend — is doing really well, too.”
While he’s always been prudent with money, he also didn’t sweat over money that much — not in the way she did — because he only ever had himself to account for. After he got news that he was being laid off, Missandei watched as his casual spending immediately whittled down to nothing. He won’t even buy himself a pack of gum because he is so ridiculous. He has started obsessively tracking every bit of their finances on a spreadsheet, creating these projections for the next year based on a bunch of hypotheticals. He runs best-case scenario projections, median projections, and — just for fun, she supposes — he also runs worse-case scenario projections. And then he drags his laptop over to her and walks her through everything that he has learned. He actually keeps murmuring to her that they are going to be okay — the numbers on the sheet tell him that, even in a worse-case situation, they are going to be okay.

Sometimes she is exasperated with him — because she already knows that they are going to be okay. She’s been telling him that they’re going to be okay. He just won’t hear her. He only semi-believes numbers on a spreadsheet. Other times, she finds that he is just so cute and adorable and sad — and she just wants to cuddle up with him and compliment him on making the shit out of a spreadsheet.

Missandei doesn’t have the same capacity to talk about money the way that Grey can talk about money. She supposes that he used to talk about money for upwards of ten hours a day at work. With her, he wants to talk about bank accounts. He wants to compare banks. He wants to compare rates. He wants to talk about credit cards. He wants to set budgets. In order to set budgets, he needs to know every-fucking-thing, from how much her grandma’s insurance premiums are to how much she spends on tampons each month. She knows that he is just manic and fucking insane in the brain because not having an office to go to everyday is this intense shock for him. He’s a workaholic. It’s just going to take him time to relax into freedom.

And that’s how she sees this. It is freedom.

He says, “I think we should open up a checking account together for shared costs, keep our own individual retirement accounts — I have to roll over my 401K. I think I should max out my IRA and your IRA with some of the severance so that we can get the tax break, but I’m trying to get them to split the payment out in two, since it’s about the end of the year and we’re going to hop a bracket if the lump gets paid out all this month. Maybe we should also keep a set of separate checking accounts for discretionary funds.”


Instead of commenting on that, because surely that will set off a long diatribe about how they are totally not rich, she asks, “Discretionary funds?”

“You know,” he says, staring at her now. “For hookers and blow.”

“Honey, whatever you want. I can’t listen to this anymore. Just do whatever you want with our money. I trust you not to blow it all on hookers and blow.”

He sighs. “Missandei, come on. I want you to know what’s going on with our money. I want your input.”

She sighs, too. “Can’t I just hand over my paycheck, and you do all this ninja shit you want to do with it? I don’t know stuff about money like you do, and I also don’t care like you do, babe.” This is worse than the time they sat in their lawyer’s office going over all of their finances in preparation for the prenup and the will and the life insurance policies. That was really fucking boring, too.

He slowly shakes his head. “It blows my mind that you don’t care.”
“Because it’s so **boring.**”

“What if I suddenly die tomorrow, and you have no idea how to access any of this money?”

She scoffs and stares back at him in disbelief. Because he is so reasonable and not at all fucking bonkers. She says, “Uh, write down some directions and email it to me, I guess?”

“**Missandei —**”

“**Grey!**” she snaps. “I don’t know what to tell you! I really don’t want to learn this stuff! I really don’t want to know what mutual fund A shares and front-end loads are all about! I really don’t know why you want to put stuff into a regular IRA instead of a Roth tax shelter. I just don’t care! I just want to give you money and have you manage it for the both of us. Because you actually like this stuff, you weirdo.”

When he steps up to the front desk at Missandei’s office, he’s mildly surprised to see this look of recognition dawn across the face of the receptionist. It’s surprising because he’s never been here before. He’s never met any of her coworkers before. He met her boss once, when they awkwardly ran into her at the grocery store with her kids, but that is it.

The receptionist smiles at him and says, “You’re Missandei’s husband.”

“Um, yes,” he says tepidly, stepping up to fill in the sign-in sheet. “How did you know?”

“You look like the picture on her desk,” the receptionist — her nameplate says **Kim** — says cheerfully, picking up the phone, presumably to call Missandei. “And you’re her desktop background. And she also told me you were coming in today.”

He is pretty relieved to see that her workspace is actually not psychotically plastered with hundreds of photos of his face. There is just one small framed photo of them in the corner. The rest is covered in paper and a chaotic and semi-organized mess of post-it notes with words and doodles scrawled all over them. Her desk is exactly what he expects it to look like.

They have an open office — not cubicles — and everyone is dressed really casually. And there’s this sitting area in the middle of room, presumably for meetings. It is nothing at all like what he has known — but then, he has worked at one company for the better part of nine to twelve years — depending on when he’s supposed to start counting.

She seems pretty excited to introduce him to everyone — she grabs his hand and drags him over to desk after desk, completely interrupting people in their work just to introduce him. Rather than respond with detached politeness, everyone seems really keen on meeting him. It’s a small fifteen-person company. And he suspects that Missandei talks about him a lot. He generally feels guilty and weird about getting in the way of people’s work — and he generally tries not to let the social anxiety overtake him.

“And, of course, last but not least — Grey, this is Bingo. Bingo, Grey. Work husband, meet real husband.”
A guy in a teal polo spins around in his chair to face Grey before getting out of it. Bingo is not at all what he imagined in his head, based on the stories she has told him. Grey actually imagined a dude that looked like a tall, brown supermodel. Real Bingo is actually about Missandei’s height, normal-looking and with a mop of dark curly hair. Missandei has told him, over and over again, that Bingo is really fricking hilarious and a real creative superstar. Real Bingo does look like a guy who is hilarious and creative — which is very unlike Grey, a humorless guy who can bang out a really great report and analyze the shit out of some numbers.

Except not anymore.

Just a humorless, jobless guy then.

“Hey,” Bingo says, firmly grabbing Grey’s hand. “Great to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Ah, same,” Grey says.

“So, week one,” Missandei says, leaning over to try to get her mouth on some of his sandwich. Her salad plate is balancing in her lap. They are sitting on the curb just a few feet away from garbage cans. He insisted on eating at a food truck — because they can’t afford to always be eating out — and again, she is refraining from all of her hilarious sex jokes because he’s been extra tense lately — and also from pointing out that it’s not really that cost efficient to eat at food trucks. Her teeth latch onto a corner of his sandwich as he patiently holds it out for her. She bites off a section and, through her full mouth, she says, “How does it feel?”

He sucks up some soda through his straw. And then he says, “I am . . . so fucking bored. The house is so fucking clean. Momo 2.0’s hair is so fucking beautiful and smells like vanilla. I spent two hours at the gym this morning because I was killing time until it was time to meet you for lunch. I’m going to be so fit and so hot in a month. You won’t be able to tear your eyes off me. I’ve been watching a lot of PBS because I downgraded our cable plan drastically. And by that, I mean I canceled that fucker after an hour on the phone trying to get to the right department. And that was like, a highlight of my day yesterday because it took up an hour. I want to slit my wrists and just fucking end it all.”

She laughs and sneaks her hand in between their bodies to pat his stomach. “Oh, babe. Somehow, I can’t seem to feel that sorry for you.”

“I’m thinking about becoming a Starbucks barista. Or an Uber driver.”

She looks at him. “Are you serious?”

“No.” He shrugs, pausing for a quick moment. “Maybe.”

“If that’s really what you want to do right now — I guess there’s no reason why you can’t be an Uber driver,” she says carefully. “You can drive me to work every morning and then start your Uber route or whatever downtown.”

“Oh my God,” he mutters, ripping off another bite of his sandwich. He chews through it as he gently pulls her closer to him, by the side of her butt. “You are the best,” he says, kissing the side of her head after he swallows his bite.
Her grandma naturally has a lot of awesome thoughts and insights on Grey’s lack of job. First, her grandma wants to know what happened — and what happened is kind of too complicated to explain in a way that is easily digestible for Grandma. Based on Missandei’s first-pass explanation, the lady generally assumes Grey is incompetent and he was fired for his incompetency, which is something that Missandei has to quickly refute and clarify. He was not fired. He was downsized. He was laid off. His position was eliminated, and it will not be backfilled. Also, there’s a new VP and sometimes new leadership that comes in just want to clean house and staff departments with their own people. It’s a fairly standard practice in the industry that Grey is in and with the kind of work he does.

This is virtually impossible to explain to a brilliant woman who unfortunately was only afforded the equivalent of an eighth grade education. So in the end, Missandei and her grandma settle on an ambiguity. Missandei keeps feeling defensive of him though. Her grandma keeps wondering why Missandei is so touchy about terminology. People get fired all the time.

It blows her grandma’s mind when Missy tells her that Grey will probably not go find another job right away — on purpose. Her grandma tells Missandei a really long-winded story about how the daughter of her friend Aarti married a man who was fired from his job. He started drinking heavily and then he refused to find another job. He just sat at home with his friends while Aarti’s daughter worked two jobs to provide for their two young kids. Her grandma tells Missandei that men need to be distracted with work or else they will be distracted with alcohol or other women.

Which is just about what she expects her grandma to say. None of that anecdote reaches Missy’s heart, and Missandei is actually pretty proud of herself for not getting triggered and not letting the conversation get heated.

But then the topic shifts to babies. This is kind of a new thing. It’s a thing that became a thing the moment they got married and having vigorous sex with each other stopped being so sinful. It became virtuous. Missandei’s grandma wants to know if Missandei is aware that she is old as hell, and she needs to have a baby before she dies from old age or before he gets fed up with her and starts looking at younger, more fertile women.

Missy tells her grandma that she totally knows all of these things already.

He has the time, so he finally sends in his naturalization paperwork, texting Jaime after the fact. Jaime sends him a bunch of random emojis, which, Grey thinks, are meant to convey Jaime’s overall excitement. It’s also the middle of the workday, which, Grey supposes, is why Jaime doesn’t have the bandwidth to text him back something coherent.

The biggest upside to being a jobless trophy husband is that he has a lot of time to hang out with Momo 2.0. He was always guilt-ridden all those mornings he had to shut the door on her face as he left for work. Now, they get to hang out all day. They do errands together in the car. They run together. They do short hikes together. They sometimes watch TV together, though he’d really like to limit his TV time. He kind of thinks that it would be nice to work somewhere where he can bring her to work maybe on some days. It would be kind of nice to work at a dog-friendly place.
He stops this train of thinking. Because that is a stupid reason to take a job or not take a job.

Neither of them particularly like roleplaying during sex. Grey actually hates it because he hates the performance and the pretend aspect of it. Missandei isn’t really into it because there’s always a weird power dynamic to the roleplaying, like secretary and boss or pizza delivery boy and hungry sorority girl.

But — they have not had sex since the day he found out he was laid off — on account of him being wildly depressed and upset about things. So, for the sake of their relationship and also for the fact that she has been just fucking amazing as hell, he pretends that he doesn’t feel unattractive and dull and unremarkable. He pretends that he isn’t a failure-loser. He pretends that he is someone in command of his life and confident, and he just takes her hand and shoves it down his sweats.

Her eyes widen. She says, “Oh, shit.” And then her hand grabs hold, smoothing these light touches over him. She says, “Subtle. I like it.”

He’s extra sensitive — emotionally — about a lot of stuff, so they both have to tread carefully in order for his penis to cooperate. He kind of awkwardly gives her some quick notes as she smoothly pulls her shirt off, arching her back unconsciously. That’s helping things — he tells her that. He tells her that he doesn’t want to force himself to take charge because it feels stupid and dumb to be forceful in bed to compensate for not being forceful in life — and he doesn’t want her to take charge and boss him around in bed, either. Because that will kill his sex drive real hard right now. Maybe they can have just perfectly boring, egalitarian sex.

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“Whatever you want, babe,” she murmurs, stalking up to him in their bedroom. She’s still in her underwear and bra. Her hand falls on his chest. “I’ll take it whichever way I can get it. I’ve missed sex.” And then the corner of her mouth twitches, as she climbs onto the bed, straddling him. “Do you need a safe word? Just in case it gets . . . unegalitarian? Should it be pineapple?”

He lightly slaps her in the butt. He dryly says, “You’re hilarious.”

The sex lasts for a long time because he’s energetic, because he has shifted his marathon training to the middle of the day instead of in the evenings. He’s been bored, so he’s had a lot of time to cook food and then also eat that food — so he is adequately nourished and is replenishing all of the calories he burns with good stuff instead of with sugar and fat. These are some of the unexpected upsides of his free time. And she tells him so, rolling around nakedly in bed, pulling at his body with her hands, pressing her mouth against his sweaty pulse point throbbing in his neck.

They’ve had a lot of time to talk. They’re talking in bed right now. He spends his days being able to think and observe and read, so he has all of these thoughts bottled up by the time she gets home.
They’ve been chatting a lot. A lot of the time, they actually talk about his unemployment. She tells him about how everyone has been bugging her about her reproductivity, which she finds to be overly intrusive and really no one else’s business. She also tells him that everyone keeps subtly reminding her some variation of men needing to feel like men — giving her advice on how to handle his unemployment so that he isn’t emasculated now that she is the sole breadwinner. People keep talking about him like they actually know him.

“It’s actually surprised me,” he admits. “How I feel about being unemployed. I used to think it’d be a breeze and I didn’t care if I got fired — but then, I didn’t think I’d actually get laid off. I didn’t realize just how much of my identity revolves around work.”

“See, that’s why I don’t want you to go back to work right away,” she whispers. “You may be very bored and a little depressed, but you’ve also been doing such a great job of taking care of yourself and your body. And I love it.” She loves that he’s been treating himself like he assumes he’s going to be around for a long, long time. It matters to her because this is a guy who used to run himself into the ground in every aspect of life because he was bent on dying young.

He reaches down, lightly squeezes her breast. “You love that I’ve been taking care of myself or you love my body?” He grins.

She groans. She groans as she shimmies up the pillows and disconnects them. She groans partly because she hasn’t got some in a while, and he’s just so hot — but also because he is currently the fucking stuff dreams are made of. She says, “Do you wanna flip over for me?”

“Yeah,” he said, obediently twisting onto his back. “Anything for you.”

She looks up at the ceiling because he is just too much. His greedy hands are on her hips. And then she says, “Oh my God,” as she feels him maneuver her around so that she’s right on top, right at the right spot. And then this exhausted-sounding sigh slips out of her as he firmly pushes her down. He feels a little cold at first, going back inside her — and it makes her body involuntarily shiver. She feels like her brain is in a cloud — a foggy sexy cloud — as she falls forward and starts furiously making out with him, as her lower body takes on a life of its own and just starts messily grinding against him because it feels so good.
She kinda gets cold feet with the whole Uber thing when she reads an article about how racism is proliferated via ridesharing apps — which is not at all surprising. The study would not have even made her look twice while scrolling through her news feed in the morning — the only difference here is him and his very recent-random aspirations of becoming an Uber driver or Starbucks barista.

He told her he knocked barista off his list fairly quickly when he realized that being one requires some sort of set schedule. The flexible hours of being an Uber driver is appealing.

“This study is about how Black riders are discriminated against though,” he mumbles, as he sits on the couch and leans down over Momo 2.0, who is squirming around on her back as Grey rubs her body and presses kisses into the side of her furry face. “But I’ll be the one driving. I’ll be the one discriminating. Ain’t that right, baby girl? Imma be canceling so many rides on white people, just you wait.” His voice is soft and uncharacteristically adorable and sing-songy. He’s also talking to the dog, not Missandei.

“Oh right,” Missandei says sarcastically. “Because racism only flows one way, and I apparently don’t know how to comprehend the things I read!”

Grey shoots Missandei this mixed look of exasperation and also amusement. Then leaning back down over the dog, he says, “Baby, will you tell Mama that she is tripping so hard right now?”

“Oh no, you better look at me when you’re talking about me. Don’t use our dog to deflect.”

“She’s so mad, baby,” he whispers, softly rubbing noses with 2.0. “Just pretend she’s not there.”

She’s sitting on the edge of their tub, her hair already tied up in a scarf and contained, vigorously rubbing lotion into her arms and legs as they get ready for bed, wearing what he qualifies as a tiny slip of fabric. She’s still really preoccupied with all the racial microaggressions and all of the overt racism he will probably deal with as an Uber driver. He’s really preoccupied with her long bare legs, the way her top slopes over her braless chest, the way her agitated lotioning is making everything jiggle nicely.

He reaches to cup her chin. He raises it up so he can look at her face. He runs his fingertips across her cheek. He tells himself that this one is his — she belongs to him. He says, “Missandei, you’re so fucking beautiful.”

For moment — she’s under the spell. Her gaze blanks out and her eyelashes flutter and her breath skims over his skin.

Then she knocks herself out of it. She says, “Are you out of your fucking mind, right now!”
sounding mightily unimpressed. “What is it about this conversation is making you think that I’m down to pound!”

He strategically refrains from laughing. He says, “Um.”

“Baby,” he says, grabbing her hand underneath the sheets in bed, his voice cracking from taking this fucking conversation seriously. She’s acting like he’s never worked a job as a Black man a day in his life. She’s acting like she forgot that he grew up as the only Black kid around a lot of white people. She’s acting like she forgot he used to sell women’s shoes, that he used to deal with customers not wanting him to help them because they were afraid he’d infect them with his low IQ or would sexually assault them next to the size eights. She’s acting like she forgot he worked in corporate for the better part of a decade with a bunch of rich white guys who came from rich white families.

He says, “Jesus fucking Christ, I’ve had this fucking amazing face my whole life. I can handle Uber, baby.” He sneaks his fingers underneath the hem of her shorts. “It’s harder to get a handle on you, though,” he says, lightly tickling her thighs. “How can I get you to relax your ass?

“How can I get you to relax your ass?”

He smiles. “Can I get a little something-something going with you?”

“Grey!” She trying to block his squirming fingers — giggling. “Stop! Does it seem like I’m done talking about this yet? This isn’t as cute as you think it is!”

“Yeah it is,” he says confidently, rolling over on top of her, cinching her thighs shut between his knees, yanking off his shirt. “You think I’m so cute. You think I smell good. You worry about my well-being. You don’t want my feelings to get hurt. You want to have sex with me.”

“I really like how your husband went from designer suits and an expense account — to bum taxi driver in a dirty t-shirt. It’s as if the last ten years didn’t even happen. It’s as if all of the work I put into mentoring him doesn’t even matter.”

Barristan says all of this pointedly to Missandei, primly folding down his paper napkin in half. And Grey is actually sitting right next to her. They are having dinner at Barristan and Grace’s. Grey’s lightly picking at his shirt and muttering that it’s actually clean — it just doesn’t look like it. She’s been awkwardly trying to mediate — all the while a little nervous because she has not yet admitted that it’s kinda her fault that Grey is a bum taxi driver.

“You did say to slow down and stop to smell the roses and all of that,” Grey says to Barristan smoothly.

“I said to slow down and spend more time with your family,” Barristan corrects, his tone clipped. “I didn’t say to have a ridiculous third-life crisis and become a goddamn hobo.”

“Barristan,” Grace admonishes.
Grey tries to cover up his laugh with a cough — and it’s not fooling anyone at all.

“What do you think you are doing with your life, son?”

She feels kinda bad that he got told so hard by Barristan, so she keeps his hand tightly sandwiched between both hers on the drive home, weaving their fingers together as he navigates them to the highway with just his other hand on the wheel.

“Do you remember the first time I ever drove you anywhere?” he murmurs quietly, over the near-silent sound of the electric engine.

She tries to remember. She remembers coming back home from Myr after summer break — when he, Jaime, and Drogo were in the Summer Isles and she and Grey had all of those long conversations just to get to know each other and just to fortify that hopeless and embarrassing crush she had on him — and she remembers how she felt about him then. She says, “It was when you picked me up from the airport in Drogo’s car. And we went to go grab a bite right after. We bought a bunch of sausage buns and you made me eat my buns outside the car because you didn’t want to get Drogo’s car dirty. Which I thought was really funny because that car was already really dirty.”

He softly laughs at the recap. He says, “I had actually forgotten about that — that I made you eat outside of the car. But no — that wasn’t the first time. The first time was on your twenty-first nameday. You were too drunk to drive yourself home, and Drogo and Jhiqui ditched us — so I took you home.”

“Ah,” she says, as the foggy memory materializes. “Why do you bring it up?”

“I was just remembering how cautious I had to be around you because I was so attracted to you — and how hard it was to constantly check myself and to not let myself ever touch you or get too attached to you.” He laughs to himself again — softly in the dark right before a strip of light from a passing street lamp momentarily illuminates his face. Then he says, “Do you remember the first time we had sex?”

“Oh God, yes,” she says. “Also in a car.”

“Yeah, in car,” he echoes. “I have a lot of nice memories of being with you — in a car. I remember sex with you in a car. I remember our first date in a car. I remember long road trips with your head in my lap and my hand down your shirt. I remember stopping at drive-thrus and you talking over me. I remember getting our dog together. I remember sitting with you in your grandpa’s truck right before we got married.” He pauses. “Driving around and thinking about being in a car with you is fun for me.”

“Brienne and I are having unprotected sex,” Jaime announces over lunch at his house, right before he cracks open his can of soda.

“You’re so weird,” Drogo grumbles. “Next time just say that you’re trying to have a baby like a
fucking normal person, okay?” And then — as something pops into his head, Drogo starts chuckling. He says, “Dany and I are also having unprotected sex, actually. But that’s only ’cause she can’t get pregnant so it’s super convenient.”

Jaime laughs. Then he and Drogo turn their attention to Grey.

He holds his hands up. “We can’t afford to have a baby right now, so the sex has been very protected.”

“What happens if she gets pregnant like next month?” Drogo asks Jaime.

“She’s not,” Jaime volleys back, oddly confident about it. “And I don’t know — we start preparing for a baby then, I guess. Though I kinda talked to my sister about it. She says there’s really no way to prepare. It just happens, and then you just do your thang.”

“Huh,” Drogo says, raising his can of soda to his mouth. “Okay. Your sister really said, ‘Do your thang’?”

“I may have embellished there a little.”

Missandei generally never buys girl scout cookies coming out of the grocery store because she doesn’t need the extra calories, but when she spots a tiny, chubby-cheeked girl with brown skin and a riot of curls, Missy’s legs automatically take her over to the table.

The little girl’s voice is soft and childlike and also robotic because she’s reciting her line as she says, “Would you like to buy girl scout cookies?”

Missy says, “Hey, sweetie,” to the girl, simultaneously glancing at her parents. “What flavors do you have?”

He says, “Oh, what,” as he catches the box of cookies that she chucks at him when she arrives home. He automatically cracks open the box as Momo 2.0 causes a commotion and runs over to Missandei to greet her. He shoves a thin mint cookie into his mouth as he walks over to give her a kiss on the cheek, before walking out to the car to get the rest of the groceries. He looks over at the stash in her arms. He says, “Damn, you bought a lot of cookies.”

She says, “Oh my gosh, babe, the little girl selling these cookies was so cute! She swindled me hard.”

“Oh, cool,” he says absently, chewing through his cookie before he walks out the front door.
She smiles brightly and hands him a cup of coffee and a pastry when he arrives in front of her office building. She also climbs into the passenger seat and plops down, talking a mile-a-minute before he even gets a chance to say hello to her.

Pia almost doesn’t get how Uber works — or she does and she doesn’t care. These days, Pia does event marketing — these big trade shows for her company — and it involves some time meeting with vendors or meeting at different venues. This is why she has started handing him money — which he suspects is her own money and not company money — overpaying him every time he drives her somewhere in the middle of the day. He tells her that she should just go through the app. She tells him that if she goes through the app, there’s no guarantee she’ll actually get him, and she wants to ride with him so that they can catch up and chat — and it’s fun! She gets to see him so much more often now that he’s an Uber driver. She tells him it’s just easier if she texts him to ask where he’s at. And it’s easier just to pay him with cash.

He says, “Pia, you are just giving me money to drive you around for a few hours.”

“Yeah,” she says, clearly not understanding his problem. “That’s how Uber works, isn’t it?”

“Christ,” he mutters. “Where do you need to go?”

Pia also frequently buys him lunch. She obviously feels sorry for him and thinks that he is in real dire straits because he’s all of a sudden the hired help. And that is pretty much an accurate representation of where he’s at, so he doesn’t feel that much self-consciousness, letting her buy him lunch all the time. Anyway — he feels like he’s paying her back in part by listening to all of her Pia shit while they eat together. He keeps getting long-winded updates on her Peck situation. He keeps getting told long stories about her coworkers, particularly one who has been mean-girling her. He keeps fielding these overly intrusive questions she keeps asking about him and Missandei.

“When are you guys gonna have a baby!” Pia scream-asks, already squealing from excitement at the very idea.

“I dunno,” he says, right before he takes a big bite of his burrito. “When the time is right, I guess. I’m still not altogether sure Missandei actually wants to have children at all. She goes back and forth on it a lot.”

“You guys totally have to have kids!” Pia declares. “Your baby would be the freaking cutest baby ever! I want to babysit already! Your baby would have these big brown eyes and curly hair, and the baby would come out already so tan!” She pauses. “Is that bad to say?”

He shrugs. “It’s accurate.”

“You guys are so lucky,” Pia says, twirling her straw around the ice in her iced tea. “You guys are so in love and you’re married and you have a house and a dog — I want that so badly.”

Pia and Peck have been together for almost four years, which — Pia has told Grey — is a long time,
especially during the prime of her life. And yet, they are no closer to marriage than they were when they first started dating — this is also according to Pia. This is an ongoing source of anxiety for her. He keeps having to hear about it. The story never changes much from day to day. She keeps telling him she wants the husband, the yard, the house, the children, the dog — all that stuff. She keeps telling him that she doesn’t know what Peck’s problem is. She has been hinting that they should get married for a while now. He has not picked up on any of the hints. He keeps saying that he’s happy where they are at.

Perhaps very stupidly, Grey asks, “Have you guys actually sat down and had a real conversation about your relationship and marriage?”

Which makes Pia scrunch up her face in distaste — but he can tell she’s really hiding fear. She reluctantly says, “No.” And then she says, “What if I bring it up and it turns out that he doesn’t want to marry me? Then what happens? It means the last four years of my life were totally wasted.”

Gently, he says, “Isn’t it better to know?”

She shrugs. And then, lowering her face a little, she says, “Wanna know a secret?”

He really doesn’t. But she’s apparently his friend now, so he says, “Sure.”

“I have all of this money saved up — you know — for a wedding. Because the bride’s side of the family is supposed to take care of the wedding — and my parents are, you know, they’re not in the picture.” She raises her head. “I might have a bunch of money saved up for a wedding that may never happen.”

And then she spontaneously starts to cry — just right in front of his face. And it’s so shocking to him because typically women don’t cry in front of him. No one besides Missandei typically cries in front of him. He is utterly frozen. He doesn’t even know what to do or say. He cannot lie to her and tell her that it’s gonna work out and Peck is probably going to marry her. He doesn’t know that.

The only thing he can say is, “You know, you can have all of the other stuff — without a husband. You can have a house and a yard and a dog and even a kid.”

Her red-tinged face scrunches up. It’s so weird to be sitting in the middle of the lunch rush with a crying white woman in a maroon blazer. Pia says, “I’m not that kind of woman. I’ve never been the cool independent woman who is fulfilled by her career. For as long as I’ve known — I’ve just wanted to get married and have kids. Is that sad?”

She reapplies her makeup in his car, using his visor mirror. She does it when they are parked in the loading area outside of her office building because he told her to fucking wait until they are parked so she doesn’t stab her eye out with a mascara wand while they are driving. Missandei always puts her makeup on in the car, whenever they are running late somewhere, and he hates it. Pia at least listens to him. It takes only five minutes — and after her face is back on, she shows it to him. She asks, “How do I look?”

He says, “Fine.” And then he clears his throat and corrects himself. He says, “You look nice.”

She smiles at him shyly. She says, “Thank you.” And then spontaneously, she throws her arms around him, around his shoulders. She squeezes him tightly. He kind of returns the hug and pats her
on the back.

When she pulls away, she says, “Thanks so much for listening today.”

Missy watches him finish up cooking dinner after she gets home from work. He casually hands her this glass of red wine as he kisses her on the cheek — as he smells of garlic and onions — before he turns back to the stove and tells her that dinner will be ready in about ten minutes. It’s his cue for her to run upstairs and change out of her work clothes.

She doesn’t run upstairs to change. Because she doesn’t want to miss a moment of this. She is fully aware that he is kind of the best fucking person she knows. He is good at everything. He is even good at being unemployed. She knows that if the roles were reversed, she would take much longer to make lemonade out of lemons. She would be pretty depressed. She also wouldn’t be cleaning the entire fucking house every day. She also wouldn’t be hitting the gym hard. She wouldn’t be training for a marathon. She wouldn’t be daylighting as an Uber driver because she was bored. She would probably be sitting on her ass for hours a day, watching movies and just wallowing in her shit. He is the very fucking best.

To him, she says, “We are going to have sex tonight.”

He says, “Yeah, man. I see how you’ve been looking at me.”

That makes her laugh.
He finds that nearly everything in his life has changed now that he doesn’t have a job. Some things have changed drastically, such as his daily schedule and his sense of self. Other things have changed minutely — such as the kind of cleaning supplies that he uses now that he has less money and a lot more time to fuck around with a rag on his hands and knees.

And then there is sex.

He’s been trying to keep himself even keeled for Missandei’s sake — because she worries about him. But he often has these moments of quiet where he just stops and thinks about how hopeless he feels about his future job prospects. Sometimes he feels like he spent the last decade just wasting his life. He feels like he realized too late that he did not like the work he did that much and that it actually might matter to him — whether he likes what he does or not. He more or less blames this on all of the people in his life, mostly Missandei, mostly Jaime, mostly Drogo, mostly their emotional investment in him.

The idea of starting over in a new field when he has no other skill set seems impossible. The idea of not even knowing what new thing he would want to do seems impossible. He is going to be an Uber driver forever. She is going to be a successful woman who is married to a deadbeat anchor. He keeps remembering that terrible period in his life when they were having a hard time restarting their relationship, and he keeps remembering her truthful and condemning words to him — that they were just good at dragging each other down.

His mind keeps having a hard time pushing out that kind of chatter. He keeps thinking he will never have a real job again. No one will hire him ever again. He chose the wrong career path. He was stupid and young and didn’t have foresight. He was really focused on practicality and money. He was focused on stability and predictability because it just made sense at the time. He did not know that he was going to fall for a woman who was going to dig into his fucking brain and rewire his thinking. All of this stupidly uneasy, unknown shit would probably not be hitting him when he’s in his thirties if he had just loosened up earlier and let Missandei get into his pants earlier. If he had allowed himself to be with her earlier, he might’ve figured out the rest of this shit while there was still time to explore career options, without this weight of a family and a mortgage hanging over his head.

“Baby,” she whispers, gently rolling him all the way on his back. Her clothes are off because he took them off, and sex has hugely been hit and miss lately. Sometimes it’s really good — really great. Other times, like now — it’s embarrassingly stagnant.

He says, “Sorry,” as he stares up at the ceiling.

“Maybe I came at him too aggressively,” she says conversationally, referring to his wet, soft dick, which has been doing a shit-ton of nothing in her very giving, very patient mouth. “Maybe he knew how much I wanted him, and he was like, ‘No. Uh uh. You thirsty bitch.’” She’s obviously trying to keep it light and low-pressure.

“Is it a cliche if I tell you that it’s really not you, it’s me?” he mutters.

“Maybe,” she says, climbing up his body now. “But tell me anyways.”
He smiles. He touches her face. He says, “It’s not you. You’re fucking hot and gorgeous. And I’m —”

“Also really hot?”

He makes a face. He says, “Sure.”

“Babe,” she says, pressing her hands into his shoulders. “Can I change the subject for a sec?”

“Okay?”

“Okay,” she echoes, pausing for a bit. “Can I get oral? I mean, since we’re both conveniently naked and all.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” she pants out, smoothing her sweaty hand down his shoulder. “You are so good at this. Ba-By.”

She lightly squeezes her thighs around his head. He kind of chuckles, throwing off the steady rhythm. He knows her body really well at this point. He knows the kind of touches she likes and the kind of speed she needs. The taste of her is numbing on his tongue and the sounds and words coming out of her rigid body really builds up his ego. He kind of loves her. He kind of more than loves her.

She so slick and wet and swollen and pillowy as he pushes two fingers inside of her, hunting around for the soft, spongy bit. Her nails bite into his shoulder when he finds it. He hears her say, “Fuck, that’s so good. Oh my God, baby.”

He pauses from going down on her — because he has a thought that he wants to share and he also just wants to fuck with her. He says, “Alexa, turn the volume down.” He’s talking to their home-bot, referring to the sex playlist that Missandei — hilariously — had made at one point.

“What the fuck, man?” Missandei says, groaning out her displeasure when he lifts his face up from her pelvis.

He smiles up at her. He observes out loud that, in the eight or so years of their sexual relationship, neither of them have ever really asked the other for oral. There was the whole period where she was harassing him to let her put his dick in her face, but that was a different kind of situation. The whole thing is kind of stunning, when he thinks about it.

She kind of sighs out this laugh. She says, “Well, you were kind of giving away oral like it was candy, back in the day. Didn’t really have to ask. Plus I was twenty-three! I was a kid who was self-conscious about my body! I didn’t know how to ask!”

He raises a brow. “And now?”

“Now I have no shame,” she cracks. When she sees that he’s not laughing, the smile drops off her face and more seriously, she says, “The frequency of oral has gone down since we figured out — you know.” She raises her hands and makes a really, really crude gesture at him. “Penis-in-vagina sex.”
“I see,” he says blankly — kind of impressed by how eloquent and classy his lady is sometimes.

“Babe, is there a problem?” she asks bluntly, gently nudging his cheek with her thigh.

“No,” he assures her, smoothing his hands up and down her legs. “There’s no problem. I was just thinking.”

“Okay.”

As he turns his attention back to oral — as he intimately and gently stretches her skin to get a better look at the state of things down there since they’ve been chatting — she kinda answers his question for him. She says, “Yeah, dude. You’re starting back at square one.”

Before Brienne shows up and blessedly steals all the attention away from Missandei and the mess of her life, Missy gets interrogated by her closest lady friends.

Jhiqui and Dany double down on all of these targeted questions. Dany is focused on work and keeps asking Missandei about timelines — how long is Grey going to have before he needs to get serious about looking for work? What if he grows accustomed to this easy life and never finds a job ever again? Is Missandei prepared to lay down the law and have a frank discussion with him about this?

Missandei is not really like Dany — that is, intensely results-driven. She keeps vaguely saying that stuff will happen when they happen. She’s not worried about it. Though to be honest, she is a little bit worried about it — but it’ll be fine!

Jhiqui keeps sharing her own experiences. She left the workforce — but the difference is that she was pregnant with her child and her husband also makes a lot of money, whereas Grey is not at all with child and Missandei is also not really ballin’. Jhiqui says that she knows that it’s stressful to constantly have to budget — which Missy thinks is a little out of touch. Jhiqui still lives in a McMansion and goes to a high-end salon to get her hair color retouched every month.

They’ve all also been avidly following Pia’s social media posts, for instance, and they really want to know why Missandei’s husband’s glowering face has been featured so prominently on Pia’s Instagram feed lately. Missandei said it’s no big deal. He’s Pia’s Uber driver. Sort of. It’s actually a bit of a bizarre situation, but he seems to like it, so it’s cool.

Doreah has already given Missandei some side-eye over that. Doreah has already said that if her man started hanging out with another woman — a woman who is not married — for hours nearly every day — she would not be okay with that. Doreah has mostly refrained from mentioning that Grey has actually gotten himself in a bit of a sticky situation before, with another woman. And history tends to be circular. Doreah is good enough at not directly pressing on an old wound that it’s hard for Missandei to find legit reasons to slap her friend in the face over the reminder.

Heatedly, Missandei says, “They’re obviously just friends. I trust him. Pia is my friend, too. The insinuation here is ugly.” And — growing frustrated with this conversation — she harshly says, “As y’all have kindly reminded me, he also has no income and no job. It’s not like he’s a catch right now. Who would want him besides me?”

“Whoa,” Jhiqui says. “That’s the most critical thing you’ve said about him in a really long time.”
“Whatever!” Missandei says, waving them off. “I’m chill! I’m cool! I’m a non-judgmental wife! He’s figuring his shit out while I’m working ten-hour days to pay for our lives. No big deal! I’m totally fine!”

“What if he never finds a job?” Jhiqui asks.

“He will get another job eventually!” Missandei cries out.

“Must be great and fun, huh?” Dany asks, casually examining her nails. “All that pressure to be the supportive woman, the nurturing woman, the woman that stands by her man. I went through that with Drogo when we first got together. He handled his joblessness with a lot of grace and dignity.” She pauses. “No, I’m just kidding. Of course he didn’t handle it with grace and dignity.”

When Brienne finally shows up to dinner — Missy is so relieved. The first words out of her mouth are, “Oh my God, Brienne! Are you pregnant yet?”

Missandei actually sounds a little bit irritated with him, when he talks to her on the phone early in the day to tell her that he will be a little late coming home because Pia has an appointment after work. He tells her he’s going to be late as a courtesy. He’s not asking her permission. Yet — from the clipped way she talks about dinner — from the way she asks him about how dinner is going to be procured — from the way he refrains from sighing and saying something asinine about how he’s so sorry he can’t fucking feed her a three-course dinner every night — from the way she tightly tells him not to worry about it because she will stop off somewhere on the way home — from the way he lightly argues with her and tells her he’ll take care of dinner — from the way she tells him she had to get off the phone because she has to go back to work, like she is throwing the fact that she is working back in his face — well . . .

Well later, he is not in the greatest of moods when Pia asks him, “How did you decide that you were going to propose to Missy — and what made you realize you wanted to marry her?”

He pushes out, “I don’t even fucking remember right now.”

Which makes Pia — as sensitive as she can be sometimes — recoil. She kind of clams up immediately and acts like her feelings are hurt.

So he adjusts his tone. He softens, and he says, “I proposed to her on a whim — because we were broken up and I wanted her back so badly. It was actually a stupid, inconsiderate way to propose to her.”

Pia forgives and forgets as quickly as she gets her feelings hurt. She leans towards him — she has apparently never heard this story before — and she eagerly says, “But she said yes?”

He grimaces. “Not right away. I actually had to keep bugging her about it. I kept asking. And I just eventually wore her down. This is actually a terrible story. You should not use me as a model for any of this.”

“But you never gave up on her,” Pia says softly.

“She never gave up on me,” he corrects.

“One of my friends is telling me to just stick it out with Peck, because it is a barren wasteland out
there.” Pia pauses. “Okay, it’s Clea. Clea is the friend I’m talking about. She keeps saying that the single guys in this city are always looking for someone better than the person they’re with. They’re always looking to upgrade. At least Peck is loyal and he’s dependable and he’s consistent. She keeps saying that at least I have a built-in buddy to do stuff like go to the movies with.”

“Sure,” Grey says, based on the very little bit of information he has picked up about Peck, in the multiple years that they have been acquaintances.

“I keep going back to your wedding vows, though, to Missandei.”

He grimaces. “Oh, God. They were insane.”

“They were great,” she corrects. And then she takes in this shaky, halting breath. She says, “I really want someone to feel that way — about me. And I don’t think I have that. With Peck, I mean. I don’t think I’m ever going to have that — with Peck.”

She thought that he’d actually be around when she had this conversation with her parents — even for no other reason than to lend some moral support. But he’s out and the house is quiet, and she’s trying not to cry from guilt into screen of the tablet, as her parents’ alarmed faces tell her that they did not anticipate this. They are unprepared. They have been putting money toward climbing out of this hole of bad financial investments — a statement that her mother carelessly throws out, one that causes her father to stiffen. Their business. Missandei does not take the bait, and she does not ask for details.

Her mother tells her that if she had known that this was coming — she keeps things vague because she cannot really fully articulate out Missandei’s withdrawal of support — then her mother wouldn’t have had Adara go to school in Westeros. It’s too expensive.

Missandei tells her parents that there are maybe student loan options. And she’s still covering some of tuition — just not everything. She says money has been tight in her household. She refrains from pointing out that she never actually said she’d cover all of college, for the entire time it takes them to finish college. That was kind of an assumption they had made on their end.

Then her parents ask about Kamil and whether this also affects his education. Missandei kind of thought the answer is self-evident and obvious — but they are making her say it anyway. She says that it does.

She kind of texts Mars to vent a little bit about their mom and dad — namely how fucking unappreciative their parents are. She leaves Moss out of the texting because he’s still really mired in all of his divorce stuff, so she doesn’t think he needs to get bogged down with her stupid stuff.

Marselen is actually not into it either. He kind of snaps at her over text message. He kind of rolls his eyes at her, through the phone, from miles and miles away. He tells her he really doesn’t know how she manages to be surprised by this. Their parents are selfish assholes and they always have been. He sarcastically and patronizingly writes, “Welcome to reality, kid.”
They have a fight when he gets home from driving Pia back to her apartment. The fight happens after he kind of bombards her with questions about Momo 2.0 — whether she’s been fed yet, whether she’s been walked, how much she was fed because he’s always convinced that Missandei overfeeds their dog. The fight comes directly on the heels of her telling him that there’s a salad and flatbread in the fridge for him — and him telling her that he’s already eaten dinner — with Pia. He’s about to explain that he had dinner with Pia and he’s later coming home because they had a heavy conversation and she started bawling when she realized that she was going to break up with Peck. It felt kind of heartless and cold to tell her that he couldn’t have dinner with her after that. He did keep dinner short so that he could get home at a reasonable hour so that he could see Missandei before she went to bed.

He cannot explain any of these nuances because Missandei starts pushing so much attitude at him, from the moment he walks in the door.

It’s when he finally cuts through the subtext and straight up asks, “What is your problem?” that she starts raising her voice and asking him where the hell he’s been all night.

He says, “I told you. Pia had —”

“No, I remember what you told me. That you’d be a little late. It is almost nine.”

“Sorry,” he says. “I didn’t realize you were waiting for me.”

“If you’re going to be a lot late, then just say that!” she says. “Don’t lie to me and tell me a little late —”

“Hey,” he cuts in. “I did not intentionally lie to you. When I said a little bit — I thought I meant it.”

“Okay, I guess I should get over it because you intended on not being a liar.”

He is getting touchy by her excessive use of the word lie. He says, “Did you need something from me? Was there something you really needed me home for?”

“No,” she says stiffly, crossing her arms.

“So what’s the fucking big deal?”

After a night of sleeping with their backs facing each other, he wakes up just sick of this shit. He apologizes to her as he walks past the shower stall in their bathroom and starts pulling some clothes off of hangers. He apologizes for being late — for not telling her he was going to be extra late — for
being cranky — and for not spending very much time with her lately.

Missandei takes the blouse and jeans from him, and she mutters, “It’s so weird that I don’t find it weird that you dress me in the morning,” before she sighs and says, “I’m sorry, too. I was overly sensitive and probably kind of just itching for a fight by the time you got home.” And then she admits, “I think I’m a little jealous of you and Pia.”

His response to that is an incredulous, “What in the actual fuck?”

He drives her to work. It’s not something he does every day because traffic is a mess and to go through it both ways during rush hour is a royal waste of time — but he puts up with traffic this morning because he just wants the extra time to catch up with her and to talk to her. She eats apple wedges and some cubes of cheese for breakfast in the passenger seat of their car. And she tells him that she likes that he’s been relaxing and doing his thing — but she kind of feels jealous that Pia gets to pal around with him all day. There are just so many snaps and so many ‘grams and like, he never takes that many pictures together with her in the course of a day.

With seriousness in his voice, Grey tells her, “It is terrible. I hate getting my picture taken all the time.”

She tells him that her friends have been all up in her grillz about all sorts of annoying shit. And she is sick of them being so loud and opinionated about her life.

To which he says, “That’s the kind of friends you picked for yourself, though. It’s like all the times I complain about Jaime being inconsiderate and pushy. It’s like, there are positives and negatives when you have strong personalities in your life.”

She tells him she talked to her parents yesterday. That conversation pretty much put her in a really bad mood. She tells him she feels so guilty over money stuff. What if her sister has to drop out of school because she can’t afford books and then becomes a fucking cashier at some Pay & Save back on Naath?

He tells her that he feels guilt that she feels guilt over money stuff. He says, “Maybe I should just go get another fucking job already.”

She frowns. She says, “No. Don’t go back to work because you feel like you have to. I don’t want you to. You still have time.”

“Babe, I’m not sure driving Pia’s ass around town for three hours a day is really bringing me any clarity.” He touches her knee. “Aren’t you tired of having a deadbeat husband yet?”

“No,” she mumbles. “I love my deadbeat husband.”

“You will tell me though, right?” he says quickly. “You’ll tell me when you’re sick and tired of my aimless bullshit and you need me to go back to work, right?”

“I think I will,” she says.
When he arrives at her building, he puts the car in park, grabs the back of her neck, and pulls her in for a dirty, lengthy, not-fit-for-public-consumption kiss with lots of tongue. What he loves about her is how quickly she forgets herself — how her arms wind around his neck, how she tries to overcome the awkward space in the car by pressing her chest against his chest. When he pulls away, he says, “It’s Friday.”

“Fuck yeah it is,” she says breathlessly, dipping back in for another wet kiss.

“Do you have plans tonight?” he asks against her mouth.

“You mean like — plans-plans?”

He pulls back and looks at her quizzically. He refrains from asking her what the difference is between just plain plans and plans-plans. He says, “Yeah, I mean that.”

“I’m free tonight.”

“Let go out. Let’s do something fun.”

“You mean like, a date night?”

“Yeah.”
Grey is great at girl-talk. Also takes his lady for a night out on the town.

Before lunchtime, her day was actually going great. She was ticking items off her to-do list by the fistful. She got good feedback from her boss on a project. They are coming in below budget and on time to boot. She doesn’t have to hop on a plane and put in face-time with the client like she was anticipating. She’s been cracking the hell out of Bingo all morning with her quips because she’s hilarious. On top of it all, her raise is about to go through, and her hair is really on point. She’s really feeling herself.

Her stomach rumbles just as her phone buzzes on her desk. She doesn’t recognize the number, but she does recognize the area code. She holds up a finger to Bingo and Kathy, to let them know to give her a quick moment. She answers the call and says, “Hello, this is Missandei.”

To be honest, it actually does not occur to him at all that he was asking his wife out on a date — on account of them being fucking married. It doesn’t exist as a thing of importance until Pia takes a break from her agonizing worries about needing to break up with Peck and her future as a spinster — and spends the extra energy totally fucking with his head.

She actually asks him what his weekend plans are. He gives her mundane lists of chores and errands he has to do. He tells her about how he’s reorganizing his and Missandei’s finances — a topic Pia clearly has zero interest in, but she politely hums along at salient points anyway. And then he mentions that he and Missandei are gonna go out tonight.

“Ooh! Date night! What are you guys gonna do!”

“That’s funny,” he says, making a smooth right turn around a corner. “That’s what she called it, too. I dunno. Probably go grab dinner somewhere. Maybe catch a movie.”

“Seriously?”

“What?”

“That’s so boring!”

“What? No, it’s not. We do this kind of thing all the time.”
“That’s what I’m saying!” she says emphatically. “That’s why you need to make it special and do something new and romantic! This is how you keep a relationship alive! This is how you keep things from going stale!” She nods — and then she suddenly looks sad when he glances at her. She says, “Trust me. You should do something to make her feel special.”

He is kind of flabbergasted. He says, “I make her feel special everyday.”

After she gets off the phone with Kamil — after having missed her entire lunch break to the phone call — she smiles up at Bingo who had grabbed her a cookie from a cafe before greedily shoving the empty, fatty calories into her face.

Her phone is hot and smeared with her sweat and fingerprints when she pulls it away enough to see that a message from Grey had come in while she was on the phone. She scrunches up her nose as she reads his message. She raises her arm and absentely hits Bingo in the shoulder, to get his attention. She says, “Dude, check out what Grey just texted me.”

“The fuck, man!” he growls, reaching out to snatch his phone back from Pia’s hands. She had swiped it off from where it was clicked on a magnetic phone holder — his Google Maps was open, and he was tinkering with it so his phone was unlocked — and Pia started messing with it. He’s always super paranoid about people touching his phone and going through it — for security and privacy reasons, but also because there are naked and semi-naked pictures of Missandei on it.

He reads the text Pia just sent out loud. “I would cross a hundred oceans to be with you. I would climb the tallest fucking mountain — Pia — goddammit, does this sound like me?”

He’s so cranky and feels like a real dillweed when he gets home. He barely beats her there, and it gives him time to cuddle with the dog and tell her that her dad is a fucking dillweed. He had texted Missandei again and told her that he wasn’t the one that sent her that most recent text message. Pia had stolen his phone.

Missandei had cryptically responded back almost immediately, asking him if it was supposed to be some sort of funny prank or what? He told her it was kinda serious — and also a long story. He’ll tell her later.

She’s panting and out of breath when she arrives home, as if she had run from her car all the way to the kitchen — which is strange. She uses a hand to balance on the counter and pulls off a heel. She tells him that she had a real shit day. Her little brother called her to basically lay on the guilt and ask for money for college — and her parents completely put that kid up to it. It was a whole fucking thing. She tells Grey that she is so pissed at her parents.
He actually tells her that this isn’t really news — he actually speaks out in defense of her because he feels protective. However, it comes out entirely cranky and bitchy, when he points out to her that her parents have been fucking doing this shit to her for years.

Missandei straightens at that, kind of puffing out her chest and readying herself to deal with him, like he’s also a person in her life that she has to contend with. She says, “Okay? What am I supposed to say in response to that? Do you want me to stop complaining to you about this shit, then?”

“No, I’m saying that your parents fucking kill me, babe.”

“They’re killing me! Dammit!” She sighs. “Do you still feel like going out tonight?”

He feels especially tender and vulnerable because after Pia fucking mind-fucked him, he spent a nervous half an hour trying to make reservations at a restaurant that is new to them and isn’t obscenely expensive. It’s not that Pia is right because obviously Pia is wrong. It’s that she does have a point — he is terrible at big gestures, and he’s bad at being romantic. Missandei has been working her tail off to cover them while he goes through this transition period.

He has clearly set certain low expectations with her, though. Because when he asks her what she thinks about going to that one fresh pasta restaurant that Jaime was raving about — she makes a face and tells him that it’s so far away. And it’s fancy enough that she’d have to get dressed up. She tells him she’s just tired as hell. Maybe they should just go to their neighborhood pizza joint.

This honestly hurts his feelings — that she is not recognizing his super romantic gesture. And he’s still the kind of person that double-downs on irritability when he feels vulnerable — like a real asshole. He starts picking tiny little fights with her.

Like, he casually reminds her that it’s date night. She laughs and asks him what he actually knows about date night. He’s never actually taken her out on a date before.

He immediately and automatically refutes this and tells her she’s full of shit. She’s surprised by the harshness of his words. And then she squares her shoulders and points out to him that he’s actually never taken her out on an official date before, not once in the entire time they’ve been together. She points out that he came close to it once, when they got back together after he kicked his addiction — he had asked her out then — but then there was Jhiqui’s wedding and that disrupted things. They never did that fucking conventional dating shit with each other. There was just a lot of friendship. Then a lot of fucking. If anything, it was a friends with benefits deal at the beginning of their relationship.

“What are the kids calling it these days?” she asks rhetorically. “Hanging out? We were hanging out, dude. Not dating.”

“We go out and eat dinner together all the time,” he says. “We go to shows all the time. We do shit together all the time.”

“Yeah, but I usually plan those things,” she says.

“No fucking way,” he throws back. “Just the other week, you said you were feeling some cupcakes. And then I was like, ‘Oh, there’s a new bakery on Fifth and Union.’ And you were like, ‘Oh, cool, baby. Maybe we should go sometime.’ And then I took your ass there and bought you half a dozen
“cupcakes.”

Her jaw drops. “That’s a date to you?”

“It isn’t to you?” he asks incredulously.

She momentarily draws her lips into a tight little point as she stares back at him, evidently really unimpressed. He can see that she thinks better of whatever is in her head, because what she actually says is, “Baby, this argument is really stupid. All I asked you was what I’m supposed to wear tonight. Are we going to the pasta restaurant clear on the other side of the city or are we going to the pizza joint? Do I dress up? Or do I wear jeans?”

“Wear whatever the fuck you want!” he says in agitation. “You can dress yourself, can’t you?”

“Actually, you’ve been dressing me for the last month!” she snaps. “We’ve had a really odd dynamic lately!”

He says nothing in response to that.

She sighs loudly — exaggeratedly. She even throws her arms up in the air. She declares, “Oh my God, you are so lucky to be married to me!” right before she spins around starts stomping up the stairs.

She actually stomps back down the stairs frighteningly fast, wearing a super short, skin-tight white dress. The only difference on her face is that she smeared a dark red lipstick on. He knows this dress in the sense that he’s scanned over it a lot over the years because it resides in their closet — but he doesn’t think he’s actually seen her wear it. She has a lot of sentimental value tied to certain articles of clothing that she no longer wears because they are no longer very age-appropriate — clothes from her college days.

She looks him up and down in his get-up — his very casual shirt jacket and jeans. Then she says, “Ready to go?”

She wore the dress to fuck with him. Because she’s almost completely sure he’s going to take her to the pizza joint and glue his eyes to sports highlights the entire night while she sits primly across from him in a booth, waging this internal battle with herself over how many bites of pizza she can have.

She feels his warm palm and fingers press into her butt, under this pretense of guiding her into the garage where the car is parked.

His voice is low and tight as he says, “You look good.”

“Yeah?” she says. “No shit, man. I know I look good.”

“Oh, okay,” he says sarcastically. “I will stop telling you shit you already know then.”
“Your indignant self-righteousness would land better if you weren’t groping my ass, man.”

Grey pretty much wants to text Pia in the middle of dinner to tell her to go fucking fuck herself because she gives fucking terrible advice. He watches as Missandei knife-and-forks a ravioli and carefully lets a buttery pool of egg yolk seep out. She cuts it up some more and eats delicate little bite-sized pieces of it, as to not smear her lipstick — so she tells him. He has already lightly made fun of her supposed eating disorder, and she has already aggressively threatened to get fat and stick him with an angry, fat wife.

She takes breaks in between bites to sip from a glass of wine, a Sangiovese. He’s asked her about work. She told him it’s the same ol’. She asked him about his day with Pia. He tells her that it was fine — Pia is still gearing up to break up with Peck, so that topic kind of dominates the entire drive.

They both make these really bland, sweeping statements about relationships and breakups. Relationships can be hard. Breaking up with someone can be hard.

Though, Missandei kind of swirls her wine around in her glass during this moment, lightly shrugging. She says, “I mean, I imagine so. I’ve never actually broken up with anyone before. I tend to hold on tightly, beyond the expiration date.” She gives him a hard stare. “You know. Like I’m doing right now with you.”

Upon her words, this ball of nausea hits him square in the solar plexus. It only takes him a quick second to understand that she is joking. Her jokes have been real dark all night.

He says, “I bet when you signed the prenup, you were patting yourself on the back because you thought you’d make away like a bandit if we ever split up. But joke’s on you — I currently have no income.”

“Don’t be silly, Grey. You make enough paper to buy a third of this dinner.”

His jaw drops. “Wow.”

She smiles at him. “Yeah, wow.”

And then he actually pulls the car keys out of his pocket and slides it across the table to her. He says, “Hey, man, if this is fucking torture, being with me, you don’t have to stay. Go on home.”

She calmly and quietly picks up the keys, letting them jingle in her hand. She says, “How will you get home though? Are you gonna call an Uber? Is there an Uber-on-Uber discount?” She holds her blank expression for another few seconds — quietly assessing him — and then she suddenly cracks up. Her face lights up with these giggles as she holds her wine glass close to her chest.

His own gaze on her softens immensely.

“Baby,” she says fondly in between laughter. “You’re so freaking hilarious. I love you.”
He agonizes over getting another glass of wine because of the cost. He actually tells their server that he is not really a wine drinker like his wife is. Wine is actually wasted on him.

“Hon, stop talking yourself out of it,” Missandei says from across the table. “Do it!” She actually tries to get a chant going — because she’s on her third glass. “Do-it, do-it, do-it!” No else in the restaurant is joining in. People are actually staring in mild curiosity.

“Fuck it, okay! A glass of your second cheapest red blend, please!” he says. Their server — Alicia — hides this smile of amusement before she leaves.

Over the table — over candlelight — in their third hour of being at this restaurant and camping out at their two-top — he ducks his head a little and whispers kind of conspiratorially. He asks her if it bothers her, somewhere deep down inside, that he’s not very romantic. He tells her that he can make efforts at being more romantic if she wants him to.

Her bare shoulders droop at that. There’s a soft and almost proud smile on her face. She says, “I actually think you’re very romantic.”

His jaw drops comically. “What.”

“You give really great, really epic speeches about how you feel about me. You think about me constantly — to the point where you lay out of my work clothes for me every morning. You keep planning our future together to ensure that I’ll always be taken care of.”

“Oh my God,” he says in awe. “I am romantic as fuck.”

“Okay, I wouldn’t go that far,” she says, snorting, making her glass of wine fog up.

Their conversation continues on at a really good clip, just these warm back and forth exchanges that transition dizzyingly between rough and caustic jokes, sweet plaintive confessions, and just quizzical wonderings. Like, they talk about how they both hate pandas because pandas are so bad at sex and are not really that interested in their own survival as a species — which leads Grey to an oh shit moment — a moment of clarity where he wonders out loud if he hates pandas because they remind him of himself. This makes Missandei laugh loudly into the car door as she tells him to shut up. He’s so good at sex now — he cares about his own survival now. And then she tells him not to get a big head about that — the sex thing.

They talk about their finances and how he flinched when the dinner bill came. She socks him in the arm and tells him to stop fucking worrying about it and just enjoy himself. They can afford to splurge every now and then, especially since she just coldly told her little brother that he needs to get a part-time J-O-B to buy those college books that he was going on about. She says, “Can you believe Kamil is already in college? Man, time flies.”

At home, as he lays her body down on the bed, he tells her that he really, really likes her dress. He asks her if she can keep it on for the first round. She lets out this shrieking, honking laugh — laced with many glasses of wine — and gasps out, “First round? Someone is feeling overly confident, isn’t he?”

He palms her face, turning it so she’s looking at him. He says, “I’m really happy right now. Because
He knows exactly when Pia breaks up with Peck — because she sends him a really long text about it that spans three messages. He also knows because some emergency female sisterhood meeting gets called in the middle of his living room. Pia is the sobbing nucleus of it all, surrounded by Missandei, Brienne, Jhiqui, Doreah, Clea, and Dany. He’s only gotten back from his run Saturday afternoon and is on his way to the fridge to get an apple when he stops in his tracks at the sight of all the ladies. He tries to back the fuck out — but Pia spots him and says, “Grey! You’re here! Grey! I broke up with Peck! Just like you told me to!” And then her face crumples up, flushing red. She’s crying again.

He knows he shouldn’t, but he goes for it anyway. He says, “Hey, it looks like I’m intruding. Let me get out of your guys’ hair. I’m just gonna grab my shit and head on over to Jaime’s.” He can see the slow smirk come over Missandei’s face.

“You’re going?” Pia wails. “But I thought — I thought — I mean — I guess we’re not on the clock so I guess you don’t want to hang out — I mean —”

She’s crying again.

“Nice,” Jhiqui says approvingly. “The man does have a talent for making women cry.”
Addam is here!

Chapter Summary

Addam comes for a visit.

“So, Uber huh?” Jhiqui says to Grey when they are all taking a break from talking about Pia’s break-up. Jhiqui’s brow is arched, and she’s leaning forward toward Grey with her elbows on her knees. “Do you just hate women and love discrimination, or what?”

“Yep,” he responds almost immediately in a deadpan, his hand placed atop Momo 2.0’s head. “We can’t all be like you, Jhiqui. Not all of us have the time to sign change.org petitions or write Facebook status updates about our moral stances.” He pauses, eyes scanning over her phone on the coffee table. “Some of us just don’t think to spread breast cancer awareness, one pink phone case at a time.”

“Oh my God,” Jhiqui breathes out. “You’re such an asshole.”

He lightly shrugs. “I’m not sure what response from me you were expecting, when you asked me if I hated women.”

Everyone else’s eyes have been volleying back and forth between Grey and Jhiqui — and all Missandei can do is lean deeper into the couch cushions, uncrossing and then recrossing her legs. She used to care a lot more that the two of them sometimes did not get along. It used to be more of a source of stress for her. She used to feel compelled to manage and try to mitigate their disagreements. She actually used to keep them fairly separated, her friendship with Jhiqui sequestered outside of whatever thing Missandei had going on with Grey.

Jhiqui used to constantly set Missandei up on dates with guys that Jhiqui thought were good for Missandei — really nice, really friendly, really open guys who were quick to smile, with good jobs. Jhiqui also used to constantly say some subtle variation of ‘I told you so’ to Missandei, whenever Missy confessed anything about the emotional walls he put up. It used to bother Missandei enough that the fears about her relationship were only reserved for Brienne’s non-judgemental ears.

A nice byproduct of being older is really the dwindling amount of shits Missandei gives about this sort of thing these days. Her best friend doesn’t need to love her husband.

Missy sighs before she places her hand on Grey’s kneecap and uses the hold to launch herself up to her feet. She says, “Does anyone need a refill of anything? I’m headed to the kitchen.”

There are certain preponderances that might just be hardwired into him. He has these faded memories
of his emotional underdevelopment. He remembers being 22 years old and listening to Jaime and Addam whine to each other about how much they will miss one another after the end of their cohabitation. Grey can remember the tense, antagonistic bitterness that he felt inside his guts, listening to such pervasive weakness, listening to such privilege. What Grey used to always wear as this badge of honor was his own suffering — he was ripped from his family, who gave permission for him to be taken away — and that is loss and that is sadness. He taught himself that everything else above that bar was frivolous and trivial. He didn’t dwell. So why should they?

Right now, he’s working so hard to not revert. He works at this because he has this idea of the kind of person he wants to be now. With effort, he listens to Pia tell all of them about what she has lost — and he watches her just cry her fucking face off over it like someone has died — and he allows himself to remember how it felt when he lost Missandei.

Nonetheless — as much as he can allow himself to feel certain things — he still opens his mouth, and he still says to Pia, “You know, the good news is that instead of blowing your savings on a wedding, you can now invest that money and get a return on it — or even use it as a downpayment on a house. Didn’t you say that one of the things you are sad about is that you lost the dream of the house and the picket fence? Well, you actually didn’t lose that possibility. Do you want to talk to our loan officer? I can forward you her contact information.”

To him, it actually all sounds very reasonable and tangible and doable and helpful. He can sense Missandei’s amused smile — next to him — and he can feel her knuckles lightly skim down the skin of his bare arm. He knows her well enough to know that she’s warning him. She’s better at reading people than he is.

“Oh my God,” Pia whispers, the pain on her face very plain. “I’m never going to get married, am I? Oh my God.” She drops her face into her palms and lets out a shuddering breath.

“Would you be interested in contracting with my company?” Dany asks him, her arms crossed over her chest as she watches him rinse soap off the glasses and stack them in the dishwasher.

“Me? Working for you?” he asks, pausing, trying to think about what that would actually look like.

“Uh uh, nope,” Missandei says, walking into the kitchen with another handful of dirty dishes. “I’m vetoing this.” After she deposits the soiled dishes on the kitchen counter, next to the sink, she lightly swats Dany with the back of her hand. She says, “I told you. He’s not available to work yet.”

“Let him answer for himself,” Dany urges, a half-smile gracing her face.

He shuts off the faucet for the moment. He swivels his head around to smile at the both of them, from over his shoulder. He faithfully parrots, “I’m not available for work yet.”

Addam’s extended weekend visit comes at an inopportune time. Brienne’s ovulating. Thus — Jaime shoves the responsibility of picking Addam up from the airport and entertaining the guy on Grey. Drogo always works nights and, as Grey’s brain keeps reminding itself, he is utterly jobless and
useless. He has all of the time in the world to drive Addam around a city that Addam is already deeply familiar with.

Grey can count on one hand — the number of times he and Addam have hung out solo. Like, there was that one time they both arrived fifteen minutes early to dinner at the burger joint they used to frequent a lot during college. There was also that one time he showed up to Daven’s condo with the understanding that there would be some sort of party — only to find Daven stuck on a phone call with his mom on the balcony and Addam sprawled out on the couch with a bowl of peanuts and a beer bottle in hand. That was a fucking rough night. It did not get much better after Daven got off the phone. Their conversations encompassed all the things they did not have in common.

He’s actually so reluctant to spend time with Addam alone that he tries to convince Missandei to cut off of work early and come hang out with them. He tries to sell it as a fun and spontaneous thing. He tries to ply her with compliments. He tells her that she’s so great, and he loves being around her so much.

She pretty much sees right through him. She sneaks her hand underneath the hem of his shirt — touches his stomach with her warm hand — and she laughs and incredulously says, “He’s one of your best friends!”

“What are we going to even talk about!”

“Whatever you talk with other human beings about,” she says. “Whatever you spend hours talking to Jaime and Drogo about.”

“It’s not the same. Addam is rich.”

“Jaime is rich.”

“Kind of,” he says doubtfully.

He has to tell Pia that he can’t hang out with her on Friday and listen to her sad shit because he will be busy with Addam. He tells her over text message so he doesn’t have to listen to her voice or look at her face as he doles out this very, very light rejection. Missandei calls him a chickenshit for it, and he flips over his phone screen and shows her the text message full of crying emojis that Pia sends in response — as if he has appropriately proven his point.

The goodbye kiss that Missandei gives him before she leaves the house for work is surprising — it is deep and thorough and her palm cradles his cheek so carefully and lovingly. His brain feels thick and a little delirious as he breaks for air, as she leans into him and gives him another peck on his mouth. Her voice is husky and viscous as she says, “See you later, baby.”

He says, “What the fuck?” as he dips back in for another wet kiss. “That was sexy as hell.”

Against his mouth, she says, “You never know when it’s the last time. Gotta make it count.”

Which makes him frown. She thinks it’s funny to randomly devastate him with reminders of their mortality. Sometimes she surprises him with how morose her sense of humor has become. He blames his own damn self for this. She was so psychotically cheerful and bright when they first met.
“Have fun with your buddy today,” she whispers, pushing herself harder against his body, hand twisted in his shirt. “God, I just really love it when you’re social and you have friends. It just makes me feel hopeful about everything, you know?”

That statement — as earnest and truthful as it sounds — makes him want to laugh. Instead he pushes his forehead against hers and he holds her body to his. “We’re going to live forever,” he promises. “And I’ll text you and will let you know where we end up for dinner.”

It’s kind of automatic now — for him to pop his trunk and get out of the car to shove luggage into the back. Outside of the airport, he stumbles back a step due to the force of Addam’s bear hug. Addam smells like cologne or some sort of body spray — different from Jaime and Drogo’s relative odorlessness. Grey’s back lightly cracks as Addam lifts him up a couple inches.

“How’s married life? How’s life in general?”

“Um, life is okay. Except I’m jobless. Um, married life is, um, fine.”

“Yeah?” Addam teases. “It’s just fine? It’s not awesome?”

“Yeah,” Grey murmurs fondly. “Missy is really great. You’re really great. Two great people being together — how can it not be awesome? And you’ll find a job eventually, bud. Obviously you will.”

“It’s not even lunchtime when her phone starts buzzing, as the most melodramatic text messages start
They really does not have the time nor the inclination to reassure him. She mostly responds back with, “LOLOLOL,” which — she knows — will drive him a little nuts. Turnabout’s fair play and all of that. She has lost track of all of the times she has sent him mayday messages in the course of a day — during high-stress moments when she worried about her grandma, her brothers, work stuff, or even him. She sometimes sends him little messages to vent. And he likes to respond back with his severe brand of practicality. He likes to remind her that worrying about things don’t make them go away.

They might be beyond the point where it’s necessary for her to point out his hypocrisy. She knows his unemployment has been plaguing his mind — she knows because he talks about it obsessively — talks about how he’s now deeply unemployable.

He’s so dumb sometimes.

“What are you smiling about?” Kathy asks, eyes drifting down to Missandei’s phone in her hand.

“Oh, my husband is being a big girl about something,” Missy explains. “And it’s really funny. Because it sounds like he’s losing his mind.”

It doesn’t take very long for them to exhaust their go-to topics, which are their shared experiences and also their shared friends. It doesn’t take very long because Addam evidently does a really good job of keeping up-to-date with everyone’s shit, so he already knows what’s going on with Brienne and Jaime’s baby-making and Drogo’s alcoholism. Addam even knows that Drogo is at the beginning stages of trying to get financing for a food truck — and this is something that Grey actually didn’t know yet. Addam also tells Grey that Daven and Kara just adopted another dog and that Sandor and Ayla recently moved into a new house that has two bedrooms and one bathroom.

All of these informational nuggets actually manage to make Grey feel a little bit bad about himself. Because he is apparently kind of a shitty friend — or at least the kind of friend that doesn’t know how to probe — one that only learns of things when he is told things.

There is such an ease in the way Addam talks — Grey can imagine that this is why Addam is good at his job. Grey, in contrast, is this bundle of nerves as Addam casually tells Grey that he’s sort of been dating a woman for a few months, but he still hasn’t introduced her to Pippa yet. Addam remarks that he has seen the way it affects his kid when his ex brings around another guy for the kid to get attached to and then confused by — when adults leave her life. Addam tells Grey that he’s probably not going to introduce Pippa to anyone he isn’t serious about — which tends to be difficult because he has horrible taste in women.

“The last woman I was with before Emily was a lingerie model,” Addam says, pausing. “We broke up because she freaked out and went ballistic this one time I cancelled on her because Pippa was sick. She like, gave me an ultimatum after three months of dating. Her or my daughter. I was like, duh, my daughter. Good God.”

“How old was she — the model?”

“Twenty-three.”

Addam lightly laughs, drumming his fingers against the car door. “You sound like Jaime, just right then.”

When Missandei texts him back and tells him that she’s really tired and doesn’t want to fight through rush hour traffic to meet him and Addam at a restaurant downtown for dinner — he basically texts her back to call her a bitch and tell her to go fuck herself forever because he won’t be doing that ever again.

He knows that his response is too aggressive when his phone buzzes and her responding text states, *Babe. Seriously?*

He feels sufficiently shamed and contrite about the whole thing. He texts her back a quick apology. And then he manages to clamp down on his awkward quietness even more with Addam.

She’s in her sweats, and her face is devoid of makeup when she hears the whir of their garage door opening. Momo 2.0 is immediately on alert — ears erect and body tense before she predictably launches her body off the couch and high-tails it to the garage door. Missy really likes how Grey is the dog’s favorite, even though Grey withholds love from the dog all the time. Missandei suspects that if they have kids, it will be a big ol’ repeat of this — but a millionfold.

It’s not exactly something she minds that much. She loves that other things — other people besides her — find him worthy of such devotion.

“Honey, I’m home!”

Totally Addam. Totally cornball, white-bro Addam. She chuckles as she gets to her feet and shuffles over to them in her socks. She grabs onto his shoulders tightly as he launches himself at her and easily picks her up in his arms, spinning her around — laughing. She glances at Grey, who is holding a plastic bag of takeout and watching them from a few feet away — and to Addam, she says, “I made up the guest room for you.”

“We gotchoo a rice plate,” Addam says, leaning against their kitchen counter as Grey lamely offers the plastic bag of takeout to her. “Grey actually almost didn’t, because he said you’ve probably eaten already. But I was like, get your lady some food, man. She can eat it for breakfast or something.”

She grins at the way Grey stiffens. And she reaches out and plucks the bag from his hand. She confirms that he was right. She says, “I have already eaten. But thank you.”
After she pushes the bag into their fridge, she touches his back. She reaches for his hand as she presses her nose into his shoulder. She looks at Addam on the other side of the kitchen island, and she says, “How was your guys’ day together?”

A shit-eating, rakish grin comes over Addam’s face. He laughs — throaty and loudly — before he says, “Oh my God, so awkward! He looked like he wanted to murder you through the phone, when you told him you weren’t meeting us for dinner.”

As Addam succumbs to laughter again, she reaches up to run her palm against Grey’s cheek — finding his skin heated and slightly flushed.

“Sorry, man,” Grey says when they are alone again, while Missandei is letting the dog out to potty one last time before bed. “I don’t know why I’m being so fucking weird.”

“It’s all good, man,” Addam says, unzipping his suitcase on the guest bed, hunting around for his toiletry bag. “We don’t hang out that much one-on-one. It can be weird when the dynamic changes. I get it.”

“I have been having a hard time lately,” Grey confesses from his position against the door jamb. “And it seems stupid because there’s really no reason why I should feel the way I do. I have a really nice and comfortable life. I have a nice house. I really don’t have a good reason to be so worried about money all the time, but I am. I have like — the most perfect partner in life. And yet — I am just freaking out all the time. It’s so stupid.”

When she and Momo 2.0 get back in the house, she can hear the low murmur of Addam and Grey’s conversation in the guest room — the tone of it clearly serious and heavy — so she tiptoes past the door, calling out a quick good night to Addam before retreating into their bedroom.

She’s curled over and sleeping on his side of the bed, with one of their pillows sandwiched between her legs when he enters the bedroom. He can’t sleep on her side of the bed because he’s OCD about it and won’t sleep comfortably. So as much as he regrets doing so, he ends up nudging her body and rolling her over onto her side of the bed — which wakes her up.

“Grey?” she mumbles, blindly reaching out for him in the dark.

“Sorry,” he whispers, pulling back the covers to dip underneath them. “But you were just on my side of the bed.” He gently extricates his pillow from in between her legs, popping it under his head, pushing his knee in between her thighs as a replacement for the pillow.

“Did you guys have a nice chat?” she says, as her arm drops over him.
“Yeah.” And that is all he says.

“Baby, you have got to learn to stop talking my ear off.”

He lightly laughs. “I thought you were sleeping.”

“Oh. I am pretty sleepy.”

“We had a nice chat. About how I will probably never work ever again.”

“Oh, goddamn. If I hear another word about how no one will hire you because you don’t know how to talk to other human beings and you are deeply unlikable, I will — I don’t even know anymore — I will punch you in the face.” She touches his lips with the pads of her fingers. “You’re very likable. Barristan liked you quite a bit. Tanja and all the girls liked you. Addam likes you. You’re so likable. And you’re so lovable. Like, I love you. It’s so easy to love you.”

He smiles at her — so hard — in the dark. He knows that her fingers can feel his smile. He feels around and touches her neck as he shuffles closer to her. Her legs tighten around his.

She says, “You’re such a basketcase about this stuff.”

“My brain is so mental sometimes,” he says.

“Trauma will do that.”

“I’m so annoying lately, I know. Sorry you have to deal with me. I am so full of first-world problems.”

“See, I never liked that term. Every time I hear Naath referred to as the third world, I just want to cut the throat of a bitch.”

“How savage and third-world of you.”

“I should really sign a change.org petition in order to get rid of these outdated, racist terms.”

“Oh, God. Stop.”

“The look on Jhiqui’s face was really great — when you said that stuff to her.”

“Yeah, I was really proud of myself — in that moment.”
Grey is cranky about bedroom issues

Chapter Summary

Grey wakes up on the wrong side of the bed.

He has come to hate text conversations. Other than that one brief moment in time when he was trying to woo the shit out of her and resorted to texting her short, succinct missives about how much he fucking loves her and wants to bone her all the time — and the other brief moment when Jaime moved out and they missed each other because they suddenly had to traverse an annoying half-an-hour of traveling in order to see each other — Grey generally refrains from texting a lot these days.

This is why it’s driving him nuts that both of their phones are blowing up on the nightstand as the group texts roll in. Jaime loves to text. Jaime loves putting every fucking person and their mother on group texts because he can’t stop himself from entertaining and he wants a big audience. In the recent past, Jaime has told Grey that he puts Grey’s wife on the group text because Jaime doesn’t want her to feel like just ‘Grey’s wife.’ Jaime wants to consistently treat her like one of the gang. This is why they fucking get double-alerts for every fucking inconsequential thought Jaime ever has and wants to share.

Jaime loves bogging down the efficiency of information exchange with say-nothing commentary that apparently shows off how witty he thinks he is. His addiction to electronic modes of communication has, so far, not been something Jaime is growing out of.

Drogo buys into this and engages in all of the fucking joke-telling. It used to drive Grey absolutely bonkers when, during the course of a work day when he’s ass-deep in reports, the sudden buzzing chime of his phone just rips him out of his concentration. And it was always some really stupid shit, like Jaime sharing a photo of a burrito he was eating for lunch.

Currently, they are trying to nail down a time and a place to all get together. Currently, Addam is active on the group chat, which is regrettable, because it means Addam is awake and Grey has to rip himself out of bed and away from the idea of risking it and going for morning sex to go fucking entertain a full-grown adult man, not because Addam is incapable of not having a host for a bit, but because Grey’s sense of procedure and his code of conduct doesn’t ever allow him to shaft his fucking friends even though they are really fucking inconsiderate to him a lot of the time.

“I’m getting up,” he announces to the top of her sleepy head.

“Nooo!” she whines, holding tightly onto him, pressing her face deeper into his chest. She always talks about how she can’t wait for them to age and for him to gain weight so that he will be more pillowy for her to drape herself all over. Her eyes are closed as she says, “I want to cuddle with my cuddle-bear some more.”
He really wishes she wouldn’t make him sound so masculine all the time. When she uses cutesy terms of endearment for him, he feels like a child and it is not sexually arousing. He doesn’t want to fuck someone who calls him a cuddle-bear. “Addam’s awake,” he says.

“Sweetie, why are always trying to leave me? Don’t you love me?” Her voice is still whiny and edging into the territory of baby voice.

“Jesus Christ, not funny,” he gripes, feeling the pull of irritation in his head, pushing himself into sitting position. There are many times when he finds her half-asleep mutterings to be heart-stoppingly adorable. Apparently just not today.

After he leaves the really warm, really cozy bed, he sees just how much she already misses him. Missandei smoothly rolls over and smashes her face into a pillow, sighing dreamily. Her muffled voice calls out for Momo 2.0, who eagerly scrambles out of her dog bed on the floor and leaps onto the bed. He lightly slaps both of them on the butt and unnecessarily tells Missandei to keep sleeping for as long as she wants.

Having an out-of-town guest slightly upends his schedule — a fact that Missandei is teasing him over like a bitch, once she’s fully awake. She keeps telling him he actually has no schedule now that he is a kept man without a job. She keeps saying these things to him to elicit the flash of rage that always comes out before he realizes he is being fucked with.

She catches him in the midst of changing into his running clothes, in their walk-in. He feels her small hand actually come in between his legs to casually tickle his junk from behind like it’s a toy or he’s a toy. He pulls up his shorts and disconnects her hand from his body. As he straightens up, he says, “That fun for you?”

She answers him seriously. She says, “I like touching you.” She also says, “We haven’t had sex in over a week — almost two. We’ve only had sex once in the last month — twice if you count the oral, which I guess I do. Because it’s sex.”

Jesus Christ, she is keeping count. “Yeah, I know,” he says testily. She’s really rubbing his face in his inadequacy. “You just in the mode of telling me shit I already know, now?”

“God, so cranky first thing in the morning,” she breathes out, her voice darkening now. Her face is lightly screwed up in tension. She says, “I was actually trying to get a quickie going with you because I thought you looked good naked. But you know what? Your mood is terrible, so I don’t care how good you look naked. I’m taking it back.”

“What?” he asks, a little too loudly. “What the fuck? Can you be clearer next time?”

“Grey,” she says, with an air of patience. “My hand on your dick wasn’t clear enough?”

“Yeah, it was really hot, how you slapped my balls around.”

Her brows go up at that.
Grey has already left the house by the time she has sufficiently lured Addam downstairs again after his call with Pippa, using the smell of fresh coffee. She gently slides over a mug and tells him that Grey is going to meet them at the restaurant. He’s running there even though it’s seven miles away. Because he’s a crazy person.

“Spoiler alert, he’s kinda cranky this morning,” she says. “So I’d dial down your happiness around him. Other people’s happiness rankles him when he’s in a mood.”

“He was in a fine mood when I talked to him this morning, and also when he went to bed last night,” Addam says, lifting the cup to his mouth. “What did you do to him?”

She scoffs. “Nothing! I did nothing to him!” she says defensively, rolling her eyes. “I did nothing! I guess I breathed. I guess I like, talked to him. I guess that was dumb of me. God, maybe he should go back to work.”

The server has declined to seat him until at least half of his party is there. And he tries not to read it as a fucking hate-crime. He tells himself that this white child is probably just doing her fucking job, and he probably looks fucking insanely mismatched to his surroundings.

He’s still catching his breath when Drogo sneaks up on him, grabs on, and picks him up off his feet. He makes a noise of surprise when he hears Jaime’s hello and feels Jaime’s face press into his spine from behind, when he hears Addam excitedly say, “Me too! Me too!” in the background.

“Oh my God, you’re so sweaty,” Drogo murmurs, squeezing him tighter. They haven’t seen each other in a while. “Fuck, you’re so damp you’re almost wet. Goddamn, it’s so gross. Why the fuck did you decide it was a good idea to run here?”

“I love it!” Jaime declares, voice muffled in his back. “I love the way you smell after a run. Always have. Is that a weird thing to say? You smell so fresh and rank and salty.”

Grey feels himself slowly being dropped back down to the ground — and immediately, Drogo’s hands are back on him, this time trying to wrestle off his shirt, which awkwardly gets caught in his shoulders, around his head, and in his hands because he’s grabbing onto the fabric tightly. He feels air on his bare stomach and on his bare back. In the bright sweat-soaked cocoon of his shirt, he can hear Drogo rhetorically ask, “Why the fuck do you wear a shirt when you run? Is that fucking comfortable? Isn’t it hot? Are you self-conscious about your body? Still? But why, man? You’re so weird.”

“There’s like, an etiquette to this!” Grey shouts out in an anxiety-addled panic, bypassing that annoying comment about his body consciousness. “You shouldn’t run shirtless in public unless you’re a tool.” He grips on tightly to his shirt, trying to stop Drogo from stripping him in public. “Knock it off! What are you doing!”
"I’m trying to air you out!” Drogo says reasonably. “And I run shirtless all the time. Ugh, this is disgusting. Your shirt is like, wet.”

“Will you stop telling him he’s disgusting?” It’s Dany. “And let him go. People are staring.”

When his shirt finally pops free of Drogo’s grasp, he lifts his face to see a bunch of familiar, smiling faces. His hands loosen their automatic protective grip on the material.

“Ugh, you have a farmer’s tan,” Jaime observes, pushing up Grey’s short sleeve, smearing his hand up and down Grey’s bare bicep, as if Jaime can erase the farmer’s tan that way. “How is it possible that you have a farmer’s tan with your beautiful chocolate skin? You should at least go sleeveless when you run.”

“I have a whole system of how I like to do things,” Grey says, yanking his arm out of Jaime’s grasp.


“I’m going to ask if we can sit on the patio instead of inside,” Jaime remarks. “God. If you would just fucking chime in on group text, we’d actually know that you were running over here like a fucking psycho, and we can plan accordingly.”

“Go stand in front of that fan and dry off,” Drogo suggests.

“No! Don’t tell him to do that!”

“He’s not going to just do shit just because I suggest shit to him. Christ, Dany. He’s a grownass adult.”

“Hey, excuse me, Miss!” Jaime shouts, holding up his hand, trying to grab the attention of a frazzled server carrying a tray of waters. “Can we get a table on the patio actually?”

“Jaime!” Brienne hisses. “That’s not the hostess!”

“She works here, doesn’t she?”

“Yo, there’s an open table right there. We should just go sit down.”

“Drogo! You’ve actually worked as a server in restaurants!”

“Yeah. And I used to hate it when people parked their asses wherever the fuck they wanted. But you know — I never realized how fun having an abnormal sense of entitlement is. So I get it now.”

“This is sooo embarrassing,” Pia mutters.

“Hey,” she says — when she catches him trailing behind, as they all morph into a semi-single file line and start following the hostess to their table on the patio. “How was the run?”
“I’m regretting it more and more as each moment passes,” he mutters. “But it was fine. The city is so fucking polluted though.” He reaches out and lays his hand on her shoulder, causing her to tilt her face back to him. “How are you?”

“Since we last spoke?” she says evenly. “Better.”

“Missandei, I’m sorry about this morning.”

“Don’t worry about it. I probably shouldn’t have slapped your dick around and then giggled. In hindsight, I see how that might’ve made you feel. It was affectionate though, not mocking.”

“I know.” He pauses. And he says, “Please, let’s talk about this louder.”

If he had more time and more space, he’d tell her that he thinks she looks pretty. She dressed herself today, and she dressed down in jeans and a t-shirt. If he had more time, he’d tell her that he was thinking about her on his run because he was listening to the Run Like Someone is Chasing You mix.

Lunch is a dizzying mix of contrasting conversations. Jaime and Brienne talk about how stupidly tired and sick of sex they are now that the spontaneity of it is dead. Grey wants to sarcastically shove out that it must be a fucking terrible burden to be able to disconnect the mind from the body enough to fucking just bang one out whenever. Before he can send out his retort, Pia continues to be utterly obsessed over her break-up and is excited to find a new pair of ears in Addam, for her to unleash all of her micro-analyzations on. Drogo talks about his business and the insane razor-thin margins of making high-quality, ‘ethnic’ food — which everyone seems to think should cost next to nothing because everyone is fucking racist. He tells them he spends half of his time just educating people on what the fuck a fucking meat skewer is, when it is literally meat on a stick. He talks about the process of financing a food truck and his hopes of having semi-regular working hours for the first time in fucking years.

As an afterthought, Drogo also tells them that AA is going okay. He pulls out his wallet, and he shows them a chip, tossing it into the middle of the table. Addam snatches it up before Jaime can, examining it in the sunlight.

Grey’s only concern in life is the fact that he is a fucking failure on so many levels. Not only does he not have a job because his job doesn’t want him anymore, he also currently cannot give it to his wife. In bed. Sexually. Probably because his failure is now invading his personal life. It’s not just sequestered to his professional life. Nope. It is comprehensive.

He knows he’s a broken record here, and Missandei will seriously sock him in the face in public if he brings up his failure status again — so when it’s his turn to share, he waves them off and says that everything is same ol’ same ol’.

“What’s the craziest Uber passenger you’ve had so far?” Drogo prompts.

“Probably this one woman who broke up with her boyfriend and won’t stop crying in my car.”
Jaime starts cracking up in his area of the table, within arm’s reach of Pia. “Oh shit! He’s talking about you, Pee-Pee.” He reaches out and starts nudging her into laughing for real — because her face is currently plastered in a strained smile.

“I don’t really like that nickname, Jaime,” she says awkwardly.

Once again, Pia dominates the conversation with her shuddering sighs and her valiant but fruitless efforts at holding her tears at bay. She generally has no shame crying in public, so that’s what she does, as she recounts every-fucking-thing that went down with Peck to Addam, who is hearing it all for the first time, who keeps humming out these reassuring, sympathetic sounds. It’s insane to Grey — utterly insane — that anyone can be so fucking interested in the extreme minute detail of this repetitive kind of storytelling.

“You’d think that — that because I was the one who — you know — did the breaking up — that I’d — that I’d be okay. But I’m just so sad all the time.”

“Oh, hon,” Addam says, reaching across the table — arm shooting out in front of Grey’s face — trying to reach for Pia’s hand. “It’s okay to be sad. You’re going to be feeling sad for a while. Just let it happen. And know that you won’t feel this way forever.”

Good God.

“What is love?” Pia asks, with her face so ridiculously raw and open. “Like, really — what is love? Am I like, romanticizing and idealizing it a lot? Am I going to regret letting him go? What if Peck was the best I could do and I just . . . walked away?”

“You know what?” Addam says. “I think about this a lot. I’m pretty sure I’ve only been in love once — and that was way back in high school. And I took it for granted. I was a dumb kid and I cheated on her. A lot. And I still managed to be shocked when she got fed up with me and left. Um, I didn’t realize how special that relationship was because I was stupid and young.” He pauses, twirling his glass of water around. They’ve finished eating and they are just lingering now. He says, “I might not ever feel that way about a woman ever again. And for me, it’s actually okay. Because I have my kid. And I’m all about her and doing right by her. I fucking love that kid more than anything else, so — it’s fine. You know? We find things in life. Or things come our way in life.”

“Are you saying I should have a baby?”

“No, Pia!” Jaime interrupts, laughing. “That’s not what he’s saying, man! It’s not meant to be a faithful parallel! Don’t fucking have a baby right now! You can’t even keep a plant alive!”

“Whoa, plants are hard,” Addam says seriously. “It’s like, you water too much — they die. You water not enough — they die.”

“Yeah,” Dany, who has mostly been silent the entire lunch, says. There’s a trace of a grin on her face. “I feel like I’ve killed a cactus once.”
“You feel?” Drogo asks, reaching over the randomly tug on the ends of her hair. “You feel?”


Drogo has to go to work and Dany bluntly tells them she has shit to do for the rest of the day — so they both bounce after lunch. But Jaime apparently cleared out his whole night so that he can hang out with them. He says that he and Brienne already had sex in the morning, so he’s free for the rest of the day. Jaime talks about sex so casually and so blandly — like sex is a chore that he has to do — and it makes Addam waggle his brows exaggeratedly. Addam says, “Sounds like you’re really rocking her world.”

“I don’t even care if she orgasms. She doesn’t even care,” Jaime says dryly. “It’s been liberating. The sex we’ve been having is so one-sided and emotionally unfulfilling. Real eye-opening.”

“Jaime,” Addam says, shaking his head. “That’s terrible.”

“You know what’s terrible? Having to have sex with someone that you are pissed at. Have you ever had a contentious disagreement with your significant other and then go, ‘Oh, shit, we have to fuck each other now’?”

“I’m sure it’s not as bad as all that.”

“No, it’s not,” Jaime admits. “Obviously I’m trying to be funny here. But a lot of it is true.”

On Missandei’s couch, in Pia’s own words, she says that though no one loves her and she is at least three years away from realistically having a baby of her own because she still needs to meet Mr. Right and let him woo her and fit in a wedding and all of that before they can start a family — a series of words that makes Missandei shoot her eyes to the bottle of wine — Pia still has this avid interest in the inner workings of relationships and children. She tells them she is preparing so that she will be a real pro when it’s time to get serious. She tells them she realizes she sounds fucking insane, but at least she has the self-awareness.

“I wish Jaime didn’t tell people that we’re trying,” Brienne says, sighing. “Because people are constantly asking me if I’m with child yet. And then they generally look at me like I’m a failure when I say I’m not.” She lightly shakes her blond bangs out of her eyes. She says, “I feel like Jaime, as the guy, just gets some nudge-nudge wink-wink bullshit when it comes to this. That’s kind of annoying.”

“It’s only been like — what? — two months?” Pia asks. “It’ll happen. It’s early.”

Brienne shrugs. “Yeah, about two months. And I don’t care. This doesn’t stress me out. Well, Jaime stresses me out sometimes. But that’s normal.”
“Every time I call my grandma or my brothers, the first thing they ask me is pretty much if I’m pregnant yet,” Missandei says. “My favorite part is when my grandma keeps reminding me that she is old as hell and she can die at any moment — die without laying eyes on her grandbaby. And I’m like, ‘Goddamn, Grandma, you actually already have six grandchildren. Who are actually on the same continent. Go play with them.’”

“Oh, it’s not just the family members —”

“Right. My freaking coworkers think it’s cool to inquire about my vacancy in my uterus now that I’m married. I actually keep wearing super tight dresses — you know, when Grey isn’t dressing me — to show people that I’m not pregnant.” Missandei pauses. “Sometimes I feel like my wardrobe is sending the wrong message to random strange men though. That and the fact that I don’t wear a wedding ring.”

“Guys,” Pia interjects. “I would seriously kill to have your problems. You’re complaining because you’re in loving relationships with men who want to have babies with you.”

Jaime waves off the beer bottle, stating that he has temporarily quit the booze in solidarity — for Brienne’s sake and also in honor of Drogo. Evidently impressed and sentimental, Addam also waves off the beer and clutches onto his glass of water tighter. The sun has set and a chill has settled over the lake behind Grey’s house.

Grey is not moved. He uses one beer bottle to pop open the cap of another beer bottle and starts guzzling it down, feeling it bite its way down his throat. Maybe he can make something happen with Missandei later if he’s a little boozed up.

Grey notices that Pia does not make a move to grab her jacket or to leave as Jaime quickly straightens up the coffee table and transports glasses of water to the kitchen sink.

Jaime and Brienne say their goodbyes at the front door, with Momo 2.0 bouncing against their knees in the commotion.

“Ah, so good seeing you, man,” Jaime says, hugging Addam tightly. “Please visit more often.”

It’s with this growing sense of dissatisfaction, that Grey realizes that he is probably not even going to get the chance to fail at getting laid tonight. Addam already went up to bed. The two of them have
time to squeeze in breakfast before Grey has to get Addam to the airport.

Pia is plastered to Missandei’s side on the couch, doing whatever stupid shit on the computer, deaf and blind to Missandei’s stifled yawns. Grey kind of wants to tell Pia to get the fuck out of his house and go cry over her lost future in her apartment by herself for a while so that he can try to see if Missandei’s naked body can inspire an erection from him before she passes out from general exhaustion because she’s been putting in some insane hours at work, and he’s been twiddling his thumbs at home like some fucking dolt.

“I’ve been looking at houses that are on the market,” Pia explains to him. “Online, I mean. I mean, just casually. I’m showing Missy my list.”

“Oh?” Grey says.

“Yeah. Just for fun. I’m nowhere near ready to buy yet.”

“So are you guys gonna be down here for a while?”

Missandei gives him a tired smile — appreciative of his subtlety.

He’s shirtless and sleeping soundly in bed, looking ridiculously cute and peaceful by the time she crawls up the stairs, after saying bye to Pia.

Missandei leans down and actually licks his shoulder blade — which is unsurprisingly salty because he didn’t shower after his run. He doesn’t stir. She has this really wicked burn that she thought up — about a sex advent calendar full of condoms that he will never use. She was so excited to say it to him, after she thought it up. Because he’s going to hate it. He’s going to hate it so much.

Getting to him in bed has been the foremost thing on her mind for the last couple of hours. It’s pretty much her sympathy for Pia’s plight and Pia’s obvious loneliness that stopped Missandei from nicely kicking their friend out the door.

“Why are you staring at me?” he says, into the pillow, eyes still shut, startling her with the sudden sound.

“Oh! I thought you were sleeping.”

“I was. But you woke me up when you licked me.”

He looks at the clock on their nightstand. He has to wake up in three hours to drive Addam to the airport. She is going to be able to sleep in. It’s this context that leads him to grab a fistful of her underwear in his hand and drag it down her legs. Her breathing is deep and heavy — mostly
wordless — though she does tell him that she has this terrible and funny thing she wants to say to him.

He whispers, “Why do you want to say such terrible things to me?” as he dips down and lightly runs his teeth over the soft skin of her breast.

“Because I love you so much,” she confesses, clutching onto his face. “And it’s not enough to tell you that I love you sometimes.”

“Ridiculous,” he whispers into her sternum. “You’re ridiculous.” He kisses her there. Then he shuffles up a little bit up the bed so that her hand can reach him. He finds her delicate fingers underneath the covers and then he grabs her wrist and leads her palm to his body in the dark.

Her touch is gentle and careful. She’s holding light, soft, malleable weight of him in her palm. He lowers his face so that he can kiss her on her lips. He brushes his fingers over her forehead when he pulls back. He asks, “How do you want to do this tonight?”

“I want to be able to talk to you,” she says. She means that she wants to see his face, she wants to see his expression, she doesn’t want for him to bury his face in between her thighs. She suddenly feels like she has to clarify. She lets go of him and she transfer her hold to his hand, which she leads in between her legs.

“Shit,” he says, immediately getting to work. “It’s fucking nearly four in the morning. How much talking do you need to get out of your system?” When she doesn’t answer him, he softens his tone and he says, “What do you want to talk about, babe?”

“Are you okay?” she whispers, rubbing these deep lines down his back. “You’d tell me if you weren’t okay, wouldn’t you?”

He tells her that he thinks he’s okay. The whole penis thing is honestly pretty fucking weird and psyching him out — but then, it’s probably also normal for him. He tells her that it freaks him out a little bit — that she is also freaked out — because he has become so dependent on her surety. He asks her, what if it’s not related to his joblessness at all? He jokes that maybe he should go back on the morphine.

Which makes her violently slam the heel of her hand into his chest. She tells him it’s not funny. He soothingly shushes her and tells her to relax a bit more, right before he kisses her and asks her if she feels okay on her end because she feels pretty good from his vantage point.

When she comes, kind of vocally and convulsively, saying his name and “fuck,” over and over again, his jaw kind of drops and he says, “Goddamn,” into her throat, because like a lot of things about her, it’s sexy as hell. He doesn’t get why his body is stupidly numb to this.
Chapter Summary

Grey goes a little insane in the brain regarding his bedroom issues.

“These eggs are so great,” Addam says, scooping up a forkful of yellow onto his fork. “They are so fluffy and yummy.” Addam can pretty much find the very bland positive in everything. He and Grey are complete opposites in this respect.

Grey tends to be especially quiet in the mornings — it takes him time to warm up to conversation and to human interaction. Usually, Missandei is the one who has to bear the brunt of his morning introversion.

“Whatcha got going on this week?” Grey asks quietly, before snapping the end off of his bacon with his front teeth.

Addam stretches his neck from side to side. “A lot of softball. A lot of cheerleading. You?”

“Nothing, man. I have jack-all going on.”

Addam frowns momentarily, before he says, “Well, feel free to come back to Casterly Rock and chill at my place whenever you want, since you have free time and all. We can hang out one-on-one some more.”

“Yeah? Maybe. Sounds fun. But it also sounds it like costs money that I don’t want to spend.”

“Bud, don’t even worry about money. Plane ticket is not bad, and once you’re with me, you don’t have to spend anything. I got you.”

Grey groans. “You saying that makes me feel terrible, frankly. But thank you.”

“I figured. That’s why I refrained from offering to buy your plane ticket for you.” Addam grins. “I was trying to soften the blow.” And then he clears his throat. “What is the point in having rich, privileged, white friends if you never let them buy you stuff?” Due to Jaime’s influence over the years, Addam has adopted certain talking points. “Is it a man thing? A male pride thing?”

Grey shrugs. “It’s more that I don’t want to be in emotional, psychological debt. I mean, I feel like I’d have to have sex with you, if you were to gift me an entire plane ticket. Like, in my head, nice deeds are transactional.”

Addam shakes his head. “That’s crazy, man! It’d just be a gift! That’s all. You never have to pay me
back for gifts.” He pauses. “And especially not through sexual favors.”

“Well, I know this. Obviously, my rational brain knows this.” Grey touches his forefinger to his temple. “But sometimes it forgets to be rational.”

A choked laugh of surprise escapes from Addam’s throat. He says, “Shut up. When are you not rational?”

“Sometimes,” Grey mutters, actually thinking back to the times when he was stubbornly irrational and emotional about things. “Sometimes.”

With a straight face, Addam says, “Is this how you stole Missy away from me? Did she give you a present? And did you say to yourself, ‘Oh, man, now I have to have sex with this woman because she gave me a present, even though she might be Addam’s soulmate’?”

The joke manages to surprise Grey. Because he tends to be humorless about this sort of thing. The concept of taking Missandei away from someone else actually makes him feel uncomfortable. It’s another one of those things that he just feels, but can’t really make sense of. He doesn’t really want to carry the joke forward. All he really wants to do is say, “I didn’t steal her.”

There’s a pointedness and an edge in his voice, which makes Addam’s eyes flash in awareness. Addam says, “I’m kidding. Obviously she and I had one shitty, awkward date. Obviously she only went out with me to mess you up. Obviously she chose you.”

Grey mutters, “Sorry.” He’s apologizing for being overly sensitive.

Outside, at the airport drop-off, Grey pops the trunk and gets out of the car. He’s prepared for the hug this time. He spreads his arms out wide and lets Addam walk into his body.

The hug is predictably tight. Because white people are so serious with their hugging.

Addam doesn’t let go for a while — and it feels awkward to Grey, but that is also predictable. He can hear Addam’s dreamy sigh, and he can hear Addam say, “Amazing to see you. Thank you for letting me crash at your place. Tell Missy I said thanks also. Love you.”

“You’re welcome.” And then Grey sighs, too. But his is weary. “I love you too.”

“Say it again. But this time with more feeling.”

Grey is kind of an information junkie — not in the same way Jaime is. Jaime is motivated by idealistic broad concepts propped up on a mountain of overly intricate policies and rules. Grey’s instinct is always to slog through data to find patterns. He likes to categorize, organize, and make
sense out of randomness. Jaime tends to hypothesize and then find information to back up his viewpoint. Grey tends to hold back on making judgement until he has enough information.

He is currently obsessed with the number of Uber riders who sit in the front passenger of his seat. He’s wasted so much time in between drives trying to find enough information on the internet, enough raw data, to figure out just how fucking normal it is that people keep sitting up front with him. It’s not the most terrible thing in the world to make small talk for a while, but he’d rather not. He’s trying to figure out if it’s something he’s doing to cause this. He went on a message board full of self-reported anecdotes — exaggerated accounts about how 99 percent of Uber riders typically sit in the back. Grey has been keeping track. His rate is closer to 75 percent in the back, 25 percent in the front.

He talks about this with Missandei — at a really opportune time, he knows. He bombards her with this information right when she walks through the door at night after work. Her eyes are droopy and her shoulders are slightly hunched from exhaustion. She’s frowning at him as she impatiently listens to him. He can tell he is sharing completely too much detail on how annoyed he is by the methodology of his data collection — so he moves on. For her sake, he fast-forwards the fact that he is a fucking vortex of off-average shit because people keep sitting next to him, and it’s driving him nuts.

“Grey,” she says tiredly, absently placing her purse on the kitchen table. He’s going to have to remember to take that upstairs later. “I have to hop on a conference call with the Yin office in an hour. Because of the time difference.” She sighs, blinking and rubbing her eyes carefully with her fingers, still smearing her eye makeup. “Let me ask you something. Are the majority of the people sitting in your front seat female?”

“Yeah, the majority of them. Probably four in five.”

She sighs again. “They’re sitting in front with you because they think you’re handsome, stupid. It’s obvious, you robot.”

After a lengthy stare at her, he finally says, “Maybe I’ll find my new, nicer wife this way.”

She’s unimpressed. She sarcastically says, “You’re hilarious.” And then she says, “Go for it. I dare you. See if I care.”

“Oh, you’ll care,” he throws back. “You’ll care so much.”

“I want to shower before this dumb call,” she says evenly.

“And you want me to join you.” He says it as a statement, not a question — because he can read her mind now.

“Yeah, only if you don’t talk.”

“Oh, that’s subtle and romantic,” he says, working to suppress his smile. “Okay sure. I don’t having anything else going on right now. Why not?”
She’d actually be a terrible mess if it weren’t for Grey and his obsessive need to constantly fine tune everything he touches. If it weren’t for him, her diet would be shit because she does not even have the capacity to care about the kind of calories she shoves into her face. If it weren’t for him, she’d be yanking clothes off the floor and smelling them to figure out if she can wear them as she frantically runs around in the morning, getting ready for work.

Everyone in the office is just dying under the onslaught of work that keeps coming out of the firehose. They all keep telling themselves it’s temporary — until they hire new people. Missandei keeps telling herself that she loves her job, and she recently got a modest, semi-ballar raise and promotion. She keeps muttering stuff in the wrong language in the wrong meetings all the time because she keeps losing track of who she’s talking to.

Nevertheless, she catches Bingo looking at her pressed shirt, her lintless slate skirt, and her polished pumps — Grey tends to dress Missandei more formal that she’d normally dress herself — and Bingo watches Missandei shove her hand into her lunch bag and pull out this bento box of six compartments — all of them filled with a modified version of Grey’s running food. He told her that her stuff is lower carb than what he eats because she’s not constantly moving all day. He has told her that her food is high in protein and fiber, with a solid amount of fat, actually. He gave her a lot of insane detail like how he always does when it comes to these things.

“Must be nice,” Bingo remarks, touching his messy curls and picking at his wrinkled plaid shirt. “The upside of doh-mess — domestick — domesticity. Shit, that’s a hard word to say.”

“Want some? He always overpacks.”

“So, hypothetically, how much would I need for a down payment?” Pia asks, holding up a cherry tomato that she speared with her fork. She twirls it around in the air.

Jesus, where to even begin? “Okay,” he says, lowering his sandwich from his face. “So what you actually need to do is you need to sit down, budget everything, and calculate how much you can comfortably put toward a mortgage each month. Once you have that number, then you do some comps and you subtract insurance, taxes, interest from that number. An amortization calculator would be helpful to use. Oh, and you may or may not want to figure in probable salary increases over the years —”

“Oh my God, I said hypothetically!”

“Yeah,” he says pointedly. “This is a hypothetical calculation. We don’t actually know what your interest or insurance rates are.”

It’s a real trip to break out his golf shoes and drag his very affordable clubs all the way to the rich
people ‘burbs where Barristan lives and smack balls around in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday, drinking mint juleps, which Grey completely hates — but it’s apparently Barristan’s favorite midday golf drink.

Grey forgot to bring his sunglasses, so Barristan is letting him borrow a pair of pricey Oakley Prizms, which has a sheen of pink. Whenever Grey catches a reflection of himself in shiny surfaces, in his polo shirt, which also happens to be pink, and fitted, flat-front shorts — these are relics from the time he was gainfully employed and had to interface with clients — he thinks that he looks like a real douchebag. He wants to take a picture of himself and send it to Missandei. He wants to ask her if she wants to do butt stuff later with a fucking non-pro golf superstar who looks like he currently does.

His underwhelming impression of how he looks is exacerbated when Barristan claps him on the back and says, “Great shot, Tiger,” before hopping into a golf cart, outfitted with what Barristan called a “terrific bluetooth stereo system.” Barristan only calls him Tiger on the golf course because he knows how much it pisses Grey off.

Grey faithfully hops in right next to Barristan and swipes through his phone, bringing up Missandei’s Bitches and Hos mix. Which is a mix of rap music about bitches. And hos. Barristan thinks it’s funny, and he said it makes feel kind of hip — blaring the tunes as he recklessly drives almost 30 miles an hour over to the next hole.

Retirement actually looks really good on Ol’ Selmy. Grey has actually never seen Barristan so relaxed and so at ease.

“We should all get together soon!” Barristan shouts, trying to be heard over the deep bass rattling the speakers. “Weather’s been lovely! We can barbeque on the back deck! We have a chimenea now! I would love to see your better half!”

Doreah gets engaged to Tank, and Missy finds out about it over group email — a fact that Doreah actually apologizes for, citing that she has been so busy lately. Missandei sends off a short congratulatory note and mentions it to Grey, who cannot even give less of a shit about it — which is well in character. He actually quizzically says, “I thought they were already engaged? They’ve been together forever.”

“They weren’t.” Missandei says dully. Because that is all she can think to say.

“Oh.” He pauses, then he says, “Goddammit, Pia is gonna be a real pain in the ass about this.”

She nudges him with her shoulder as she rips open an envelope — a utility bill — with her thumb. “I feel bad for Pia sometimes.”

The crazy thing is that he can muster up a hard-on, albeit one that’s a bit on the soft side, when he is
by himself. Sometimes, like half of the time, he can drag out a really dissatisfying orgasm. The so-called release he gets from going solo is barely easing his anxiousness. It feels like a fucking science experiment, more than anything else. As always, his body is like a fucking puzzle that he can’t solve.

Grey tells Jaime about the state of his penis over a pizza dinner on Jaime’s couch. He tends to use Jaime as a litmus test that he implicitly trusts, one to gauge how far off of relative normal he is. Missandei has a tendency of telling him he is perfect and normal because she is so biased — and she’s also a woman so there are certain things she will never fully understand.

Jaime actually doesn’t exactly know what to say to Grey initially. But then he recovers and just validates Grey’s fears and Grey’s concerns, tells him that this will probably pass because this is probably situational. Jaime asks Grey if he’s talked about it in-depth with Missandei, to which Grey confesses that he has not. He’s only sort of talked about it with Missandei. But obviously she has noticed that all he can do lately is everything except penetration.

“Dude, side note, but you must be really good at sex when you’re one-hundred,” Jaime says. “I’m not saying that to stroke your ego. It’s just that — you just said ‘everything except penetration,’ and I’m like — Grey, what is ‘everything’? It’s not just three to five things? There are more things?”

Grey smacks his fist into Jaime’s bicep. He says, “Shut up. I am concerned. What if I can never have sex ever again? How would we even have kids?”

“Well,” Jaime says reluctantly. “You said you can still sorta jack off. You can splooge that up to her uterus, I guess. Also, Missy has her frozen, fertilized eggs. Worst-case scenario, you pop those puppies in her. Or you adopt. Worst-case, you’re okay.” Jaime shrugs. “As for the sex — you’re being super heteronormative, man. Sex doesn’t require a dick.”

“Jaime — thank you,” Grey says gratefully.

“Oh shit, I was helpful?”

“Yeah. That was comforting.”

“Another side note, man. Brienne is pregnant. But she could still miscarry so we’re holding off on telling people for now. Just FYI.”

All of her clothes are off and she’s lying naked in their bed, belly down with her face cushioned in a pillow. She is saying all of the right and sexy things and making all of the right and sexy sounds, as he digs his hands into her supple skin. She came home from work and absentmindedly said that her body was sore from sitting in meetings all day. He fed her dinner and then he took her upstairs and stripped her. He actually warned her that it’s not gonna be sexual. She can finally cash in on that non-sexy back rub he owes her from eons ago.

She drags out a low growl, and she tells him, “You’re fucking magic. You’re the fucking best. I fucking love your hands on my body. You make me feel so fucking good.”

He lets out this exhale of disbelief. He’s in disbelief because he’s looking down at the front of his
pants and there is seriously no fucking activity there — even as his brain spins a little from the sensory memory of how it used to feel, being inside of her warm body.

“I miss you and sex,” he says quietly, lightly squeezing her butt. “I’m so discouraged and annoyed.”

“We have sex still,” she murmurs, pushing the words into the pillow. “And it’s okay. You’ll find me again. You always do.”

She takes his sexual dysfunction in such stride now.

There are a lot of things he wants to just blurt out to her — the stuff that’s been in his head. He wants to ask her if she thinks she can deal with this shit indefinitely — if she can put up with oral and his fingers in her holes until they die. He has this fear that she will lie to him and say yes, because she doesn’t yet know that the answer is actually no. He also wants to tell her that it might not — probably is not — likely is not — it is not okay with him, if he has to be a giver for the rest of his life. There’s this terrible and excessively masculine part of him that feels like he needs to be capable of aggressively penetrating her with his dick in a toxic and dominating way — he thinks that he needs to at least feel like he has the option to do that kind of thing. He knows that he’s an utter and complete asshole for feeling this way. Lately, he keeps remembering what it was like to not have the option — he keeps remembering just how fucking shitty and bleak it used to feel and how dark it was inside of him when he was younger — and he’s so terrified of reverting back to that. He wants to tell her that he hates that he cannot hold onto happiness for very long. He wants to be able to hold onto happiness so badly, but he is just so easily influenced by external factors. He just wishes it were all easier.

He refrains from telling her all of this shit in detail because he knows she has already been pushing herself to the brink of exhaustion trying to be everything that he apparently needs her to be. He is so fucking high maintenance and needy.

His hand glides against her body as she rolls over, exposing her breasts, smiling up at him when she catches him looking at them. She asks, “Are you okay?” It’s something she’s been asking him with increasing frequency lately. It might be giving him a bit of a complex.

He always says, “I think so.”

“What are you thinking about right now?”

“Uh, truthfully?”

She smiles softly. “Yeah, obviously I want the truth.”

“I was thinking that I’m so annoying and selfish, and I care about my own sexual gratification so much these days,” he says, smoothing his sweaty hands up and down her stomach, making her grab onto his wrists because she’s ticklish.

There is a slight pause — she pulls his right hand up to her mouth and presses her lips to his knuckles — and then she reaches up with her other hand, letting go of his wrist. She mimes a twisting motion, like she’s turning a cog, up in the air, in front of his hovering face. She says, “Sometimes I honestly want to reach inside that brain of yours and fix how you see yourself. I want you to see yourself like how I see you.”

Something about the action and those words inspire this emotion inside of him. He says, “This
fucking bullshit *really* doesn’t bother you?” His tone is darkly bitter.

“No, *really* doesn’t. How I feel about you is just . . . it’s unconditional. I’ll love you no matter what happens.”

“That’s fucking crazy. What if I go on a fucking shooting spree and murder a bunch of people? Would you be *stupid* enough to love me then?”

She sighs, gently pushing his hands away, rolling over to reach for her discarded shirt, which is on the floor. “That’s really what you wanna say to me? After I tell you that I love you? What the fuck is *wrong* with you?”

“Jesus, don’t be dramatic, Missandei. You don’t have to put your clothes back on,” he says, making a move to stop her from pulling her shirt over her head. “We’re just talking.”

“I can’t have an argument with you, with my tits out,” she says, trying to pull her shirt from his grasp. “It makes me feel too vulnerable. I’m really getting sick of you throwing my love for you back in my face, by the way.”

He clenches tighter onto the fabric. He testily says, “We’re *not* having an argument! We’re just fucking *talking*!”

He tells himself that the visit to the doctor is just because he has a lot of time on his hands and he might as well just get a check-up. Because maybe he is fucking dying and that is why his dick is being way off. It would be good to know this information.

He used to never go to the doctor — because he didn’t like the idea of someone poking and prodding at him. He didn’t want to know about all the things wrong with his body because it was pointless. He didn’t plan on living forever. He used to rationalize it with platitudes. He used to tell himself that life is short. Whatever happens just happens.

But then he got a dog and he became positively compulsive about taking Momo 2.0 to her dog doctor so that she never has to feel pain or sickness. He took her to the vet when she was peeing really frequently — he thought — and blew money on a urinalysis that told him that she did not have a bladder infection.

He started going to his own doctor regularly when he got all serious and committed with Missandei. For obvious reasons.

So Grey doesn’t actually tell Missandei or anyone that he’s going to the doctor today because — as he keeps saying to himself — it’s not a big deal. People get physicals all the time.

It becomes a little bit complicated when, after he’s done with his physical and his doctor tells him that his prostate, blood pressure, weight, and other junk looks and feels fine, after he puts his clothes back on and sits across from her as she types notes into her computer — well, he randomly picks his doctor’s brain about erectile dysfunction — possible causes, physical and psychological. He actually says out loud, “Depression? Would depression do it?” His voice is tinged with desperation. He
desperately wants her to say yes so that he’d have an answer.

This is the same doctor he’s been going to for years — ever since his ass-bleeding incident. He really was taken by the matter-of-fact way she handled his ass-bleeding. And he is averse to change when it is so intimate. He doesn’t want to go over his entire medical history with someone new, some stranger. He tells Dr. Thompson that his erections have been like, completely non-existent lately.

He almost expects her to smile at his hysterical anxiety. But her face is just blank as she thinks over the new information.

In that time, he nervously blurts, “I lost my job a few months ago. Would that do it? I’m like, really anxious all the time about finances, and I worry about letting my wife down all the time. Would that do it?”

She tilts her head slightly as she frustratingly continues to think. “These are all possible factors,” she says mildly.
Missandei stifles a yawn as she waves off the wine menu that Brienne offers her. The wine will make her even sleepier and it’s barely even noon. Brienne is not drinking wine either — on account of being pregnant, a fact that Brienne says does not feel real yet. She says she imagines it won’t feel real until she starts showing or maybe vomiting. She nervously adds, “Maybe it will never feel real. Maybe I’ll take care of another human being all the way through college, and it still won’t feel real.”

Missy laughs and doesn’t bother reassuring Brienne. Brienne knows that she is being a little nutty. Instead, Missy asks, “How’s Jaime dealing with everything?”

“He’s ecstatic. Over the moon. Which, of course he is,” Brienne says dryly. “It’s so simple and straightforward for him sometimes. He’s so obnoxious. What if our baby isn’t cute?”

Missandei choke a little bit on her water, reaching out to swipe up a napkin so she can dab her lips with it. “All babies are cute,” she finally says, when she recovers. “And since when do you care about cute babies?”

“I’ve just been thinking a lot — about hardship and privilege and how terrible it is to grow up as the weird kid that has no friends.”

“It worked out for you, though,” Missandei says. “You have a marvelous personality because you grew up as the weird kid with no friends. Anyway, better to be a late bloomer than an early starter — that’s probably a popular colloquialism, isn’t it?”

“I don’t want to be a jolly, fat pregnant lady standing next to a guy who looks like he belongs in a stock photo that’s used for dental brochures,” Brienne says glumly. “I don’t have any close friends who are pregnant or who have been pregnant. It already feels lonely. You should get pregnant, too. So I can stand next to you instead. We can start a posse — a new gang. People will be so scared of us. Just kidding. No one fears a pregnant woman. We’re so fucking vulnerable.”

“Oh my God, you’re totally freaking out right now, and it’s so cute,” Missy gushes. She laughs quietly, shrugging her shoulders. She says, “Babe, you’ll be alright. Just trust in the process. People have been doing this since the start of the species.”

“Oh great, so I’m going to fuck up something that all of humanity can do.”
“Not all of humanity can do it well. My parents sucked, for instance.”

“This is really comforting,” Brienne says in a deadpan. “Thank you for talking me through this. Are you gonna get pregnant with me or not? Are you a bro or not?”

“Um . . . I’m not.”

“Ugh, that’s not very cool, bro.”

In the years since he’s been off drugs, he’s completely forgotten how easy it is to get fucking drugs. Dr. Thompson really should grill his fucking ass to ascertain whether he’s some fucking drug-seeking compulsive liar before she starts pecking out prescription orders on her computer. All she makes him do is fill out a short questionnaire while she disappears off somewhere for about twenty minutes.

When she looks over his questionnaire, she remarks that according to the piece of paper in her hand, he is severely depressed.

He wants to protest this really lackadaisical diagnosis. How much can she really know about him based on some answers he gave on a questionnaire? He wants to tell her that there is context around those self-worth questions — around the questions that pivoted around his fears of failures. He wants to tell her that he’s fucking not white — though it seems redundant because she has eyes and she can see that he is not white. He wants to tell her that being fucking disappointed and overbearingly hard on himself is just a fucking personality trait of his, and it’s normal for people like him. She should’ve given him the questionnaire for non-white non-crybabies. He would probably come out as only moderately depressed there. It’s really the severely, of severely depressed, that makes him feel stigmatized.

Dr. Thompson tells him that his meds should be ready at the pharmacy soon. She tells him that she put in scripts for an anti-anxiety medication, an antidepressant, and also Cialis for more erections. She tells him to make an appointment for a month from now.

In response, he says, “Should I see a therapist or something?”

She blandly says, “If you want to. It’s not a bad idea.”

He honestly wants to be like — what the fuck, Dr. Thompson?

Because all of those appealing qualities of disengagement that he was drawn to, more than a decade ago — is now just leaving him wanting.

At some point, Brienne’s tendency to be overly considerate overtakes her. She realizes that she has
been monopolizing the lunch conversation with her stuff and feels sheepish over it. Brienne tends to get talked over in group conversations — she tends to hang back — because she is nice and not an attention-whore. For this reason, Missandei lingers a little bit longer in all of the pregnancy talk. She doesn’t let Brienne cut herself off right away. They chat a little bit more about what a bitch Jhiqui was at points of her pregnancy — what a basket case she became. They joked about how Jhiqui used to blame it on hormones. Brienne gives Missy a shady grin and says, “So what is her freaking excuse these days?”

Missandei casually cracks her tired and sore neck as she brings up Grey. It’s mostly just something to talk about. She tells Brienne that he’s been an asshole lately. She says, “Though, to be fair, I’ve also been a real asshole to him lately, too. We’ve just been kind of assholes to each other. But if I had to like, quantify it, I’d say that he’s a bigger asshole than I am. Probably by about 30 percent.”

Brienne points her fork at Missandei real quick before she goes back to her chicken. She says, “See, that’s how I know you guys are married. You sounded exactly like him just then. Because who actually quantifies assholery?” Around her bite of chicken, Brienne asks, “Is it still because of the unemployment stuff?”

“Probably,” Missandei says.

“Maybe he just needs to get a job. Maybe he just needs to go back to work.”

Missy shrugs. “Yeah, he’ll probably be a lot happier if he goes back to work,” she admits. “And he can, if he wants to. I’m not really actively stopping him. But I dunno. Do I want him to be the kind of person that has to keep himself obscenely busy so that he never has to deal with the stuff in his head? No, if I’m honest, I don’t want that.” Missy clears her throat. “Brienne — he freaks out and goes apeshit when the dog goes off-script and like, pees on the azaleas.”

“I can’t really imagine that,” Brienne says. “He’s so cool-headed and calm and collected all the time.”

“He’s actually not.” Missandei frowns. “But I guess he’s good at hiding these things about himself.”

“Now that I think about it, I remember your guys’ screaming match that one time I overheard it — in the old apartment. Hey,” Brienne says gently — carefully now. She says, “So to me, it actually sounds like you’re pretty stressed out, too. I mean, correct me if I’m wrong — but it sounds like it’s not just because of work — I mean, not just about you working a lot and him not working at all.”

After a thick pause — one in which Missandei considers Brienne’s words — Missandei finally releases a loud and rough groan. She says, “He’s such a fucking dumb asshole. I fucking love him so fucking much and I tell him so all the time and all he can fucking do is obsess about what a fucking failure he is and how he doesn’t understand why I’m sticking around. And I’m like, you fucking dumb asshole. Like I have all the fucking time in the world to listen to your fucking dumb first-world problems. I am fucking working twelve-hour days so I’m too tired to listen to your fucking dumb motherfucking neuroses. He has really stupid problems that he blows up in his head, Brienne. He’ll get a papercut and he’ll get insanely angry at himself for getting a papercut and he’ll acts like he’s dying and like he doesn’t deserve a bandaid, Brienne. He’ll be like — ‘Just leave me and let me die alone because I’m a fucking failure, Missandei! You deserve better!’ And I’m trying to be supportive and nice, and I’m like, ‘Baby, you’ll be okay. This is just a little minor setback.’ And he’ll be like, ‘What the fuck do you even know about papercuts, Missandei!’ And it’s like, oh my God, is this stupid motherfucker for real right now? This is the dipshit I am currently living with. Fucking insane asshole.”
Brienne bursts out laughing.

“It’s not funny!” Missandei says defensively.

“I know!” Brienne says, choking around her laughter. “I know it’s not funny.”

He realizes he accidentally fell right down the fucking rabbit hole, and he’s a real fucking motherfucking idiot. He’s going to have a really awkward and confusing conversation with Missandei over dinner. It’s just that when he called to make an appointment, the receptionist asked him what for. He told her just his annual check up because he’s due. And then she asked him when he’d like to come in, which threw him because he thought that he’d be a slave to their schedule and all of that. He didn’t want to explain his whole fucking employment situation to her and the fact that he is free as a bird, so he vaguely said, “Whenever.” And she actually said that she had an opening at two o’clock today.

And he said yes to that, figuring it was just a fucking physical.

And right now, he is holding so many pills in his hands, just so many.

Missandei’s going to be ragged and tired and hungry when she gets home — and he’s going to end up saying something terrible, something like: Hey, baby. I randomly got prescribed Cialis. Want to fuck now?

And then he’d have to explain the rest of it to her.

He feels ready to jump out of his skin when he hears their garage open. He’s been waiting for her to come home for hours. He’s actually made a lot of progress in a day and has a lot of thoughts just that he needs to bounce off her. He knows it’s his nervous face greeting her, when the door to the garage swings open. She blinks hard and reaches out to grasp the door jamb for balance as she teeters on her heels. He reaches out to grab her hips, to steady her.

She smacks him on the shoulder before she says, “Babe! God. You scared the shit out of me! Why were you standing right at the door like that!”

Missandei knows something is up with him pretty much right away. Because he is being weird as fuck — weirder than normal. Her suspicion gets confirmed when he follows her into the kitchen, as she stoops down to greet the dog, and he blurts, “Can I have a little bit of money to take an online course?”

She says, “Huh? What are you talking about? What course? What are you trying to learn?” She grasps onto the counter to pull herself back into standing position. She refrains from releasing a tired
sigh — and she decides to just roll with the fucking punches. She makes sure her voice is clean and sweet and patient, as she says, “Honey, you know that we share bank accounts. You know it’s your money, too. Spend it however you want. You don’t have to ask permission for stuff like this.”

“You have to complete 90 hours of education to become a real estate broker,” he says.

Her head lightly ricochets back. “You want to become a real estate agent?” she says neutrally — carefully. She feels a headache coming on. She says, “Um, Grey. I don’t know if you remember, but you hate people. Real estate agents have to hang around people all day, listening to them talk. Baby, that’s like your worst nightmare. What’s your logic with this?”

“No no,” he says, holding his hand up. “This isn’t my second career or something crazy like that. It’s just that Pia is talking about looking at houses and I was thinking — you know — if she needed help there — I could help? I have the time. And you know, the entire time we were in the process of looking for a house and buying a property, all I ever said was a monkey can do what a real estate agent does.”

“Yes, I remember,” Missandei says. “You were terrible to our agent.”

“Because she wasn’t very smart,” he explains.

Grey is trying to move through the whole real estate thing fast — which is why he led with it. Because it is the most minor of all of his things. He’s actually trying to get to the meat of the rest of the stuff he needs to talk to her about. But Missandei is stubbornly and frustratingly stuck on this real estate thing. She asks him if he still plans on being an Uber driver, for instance. He doesn’t really see the relevance of the question and it annoys him a little bit, that she is kinda derailing the conversation with her continuous stream of questions. He stops himself from saying something mean and sarcastic. Instead he answers her straight on and says maybe. He might? He doesn’t know.

She mutters, “If you want to take a class so your brain doesn’t atrophy, you should do something fun. Like an art or a painting class. Honestly, babe, I sometimes don’t feel like you really know how to have fun. In like, a frivolous way that is not goal-oriented. I want to help you get there, you know? I mean, we’ve talked about this before.”

He really loves how she’s talking to him like he’s a fucking dumb child. He really loves how patronizing and syrupy her tone is. “I run,” he points out. “That’s fun for me.”


He doesn’t even have time to argue this stupid shit with her. “Classes are not very expensive, and they don’t take that much time,” he says, going back to the real estate course.

“Grey, it’s fine. Whatever. Do your real estate course and go nuts. You’re focusing on the wrong thing here. I’m just saying — I wish you’d just truly relax, and not always constantly work on achievement. Like, babe, what about that painting idea? Do you want learn how to paint? Like, what if you’re an artist, and you don’t even know it?”
“I’m not a fucking artist!” he finally snaps. “Jesus Christ, I do not want to learn how to paint at all. Why would I paint shit when I can just buy shit or take a photo? That sounds fucking terrible.”

Missandei’s mood completely turns on a dime. The fake air of casual joviality drops from her face and she scowls at him. She shouts, “Art is fucking art!” which is a little nonsensical to him, which she immediately realizes. So she adds, “You taking a fucking picture on your phone is not art. Art is not fucking decoration!”

“But it is though,” he says — reasonable in tone. “That’s its purpose.”

“Grey! You are fucking killing me, man! You are killing me!”

They have gone completely off the fucking rails. He can see that she’s actually on the verge of crying because she is so pissed and so frustrated with him. He can see her eyes tearing up, and he can see her efforts at holding back. He actually does not have his typical emotional response to it. This time, he doesn’t want to punch down the world to prevent her from crying. He kind of thinks she deserves to feel upset because she’s being kind of a bitch to him. He mostly wants to clutch at his own head and scream-ask her why she makes shit so fucking hard sometimes. He feels his own anger and his own aggression building and building. He feels like this fight might just escalate even more, if he starts to say some of the shit he’s currently thinking in his head.

All of it — all of it — immediately dissipates and cold fear hits him between the eyes and in his heart — when he sees that she finally notices the prescription bottles on the countertop, next to a pile of their mail — she hadn’t seen the bottles there because she was so distracted by everything else.

She immediately stomps over and snatches up the bottles, reading the labels on them.

“I went to the doctor today,” he says quietly. “Those were prescribed to me.”

She’s silent for a long time, so he kind of gets on his tiptoes so he can peer at the labels again — even though he has pretty much memorized them. He says, “Um, that one there is an anti-anxiety med. The one in the middle is an antidepressant. And the one on the left is, um, erectile dysfunct —”

“I know what these are for!” she suddenly snaps.

As he cracks his neck and lightly swings his racquet back and forth, nodding at Drogo, Grey tells himself that Missandei is nuts and fucking wrong. He totally engages in activities just for fun. He’s about to play racquetball, for instance — just for fun. He’s not trying to go pro at racquetball. She’s totally full of shit.

He and Drogo are playing in the middle of the workday without Tyrion or Jaime, who are working, because Drogo’s schedule continues to be terrible and irregular — and Grey’s schedule is wide open.
While he is in the mode of basically telling Jaime just about everything about himself, this is not a practice that he engages in with Drogo — for various reasons he doesn’t really understand. But he’s been trying. He just wishes he doesn’t have to verbalize it. Sometimes verbalizing things leads people down a path of confusion, because he has a habit of omitting contextual information. Missandei is the one person on the planet that understands him the best, and she still gets caught in a storm of confusion sometimes — because of how he communicates.

They get coffee now — because Drogo doesn’t drink alcohol anymore, and he never will again. They get coffee or they get tea instead of going out to a bar. It’s still some disorienting thing Grey is trying to acclimate to. There are a lot of moms and young people who park their butts in coffee shops, for instance. And it’s just a different, bizarre environment.

“How’s life?” Grey asks, deciding to keep it vague for the time being.

Drogo shrugs. “Food truck shit is driving me nuts. But that’s about all.”

“Yeah? What’s driving you nuts about it?”

“Not making money. Losing money. Going into insane debt. Being a failure. Falling down a flight of stairs and becoming paralyzed, so that I can’t operate my food truck — thus starting the chain of events that lead to be losing money, going into insane debt, and becoming a failure.”

“You’ve done this type of thing before, though,” Grey points out. “You have a high tolerance for risk.”

“Depends on the type of risk,” Drogo says, sipping from his coffee cup. “Maybe I’m actually stupid and undisciplined, because I can’t do a nine-to-five.”

“As someone who has only known a nine-to-five, I don’t think your problem is that you’re stupid and undisciplined.”

Drogo shrugs. “Yeah.”

He pretty much expects Drogo to make him feel pretty terrible and self-conscious about the sex stuff — because it’s Drogo. Grey half expects Drogo to downplay Grey’s shit and suggest to him something ineffectively insulting, like watch more porn.

Grey knows that watching more porn isn’t at all the solution to his problem.

But Drogo is actually pretty cool about it — and obviously deeply curious. Drogo even admits to it. He actually says, “I gotta tell you, I’ve been deeply curious ever since the first time this came up —
with Jaime.”

“Yeah,” Grey says, sighing. “That was a great conversation.”

Drogo clears his throat. “Um, you know — that mental stuff can really fuck with you. Um, remember when I got fat?” Drogo doesn’t wait for Grey to answer, because of course he remembers when Drogo got fat. “That was shitty, in more ways than one,” Drogo says. “I was an adult man living at home with my mommies. I felt hideous and ugly in my own body. I kept drinking because I’m an alcoholic and was just so fucking depressed because the company folded and I fucking lost my life’s savings up until that point. And the drinking not only helped the weight stick, but it also did not help in bed. And then it became a shitty cycle.” Drogo raps his knuckles on the table. “Depression really fucks with you.” He shrugs. “Man, you lost your job. I get it. I know how your brain works, man. I’m not shocked that . . . you can’t fuck your woman right now.”

Grey expels out a breath and hits his palm against his flushing cheek. He says, “Oh my God, say that louder so everyone can hear you.”

“I mean, it’s not physical, right? You got that checked out?”

Grey sighs again. “I mean, at this point, more than one medical professional has told me that I’m young and I’m healthy and everything looks normal.”

“So take that at face value.”

It’s just as he suspected. A fucking monkey can do this. He starts to breeze through the real estate course in record time, just bored out of his fucking mind in front of his computer, chipping away at the 90 hours of information. He has not told Pia that he is going to get a real estate license so that he can legally open the doors to homes for sale for her — so that her innocent-ass mind doesn’t get polluted by some simpering idiot who points out granite countertops when they are really quartz or marble. Fucking granite is not catch-all term for stone countertops. It’s also a fairly base-level upgrade, but some people go apeshit over it. Pia would be one of those people who go apeshit over it because she is just too trusting.

He’s still on the computer when Missandei gets home. She greets him very evenly and very calmly. Things have been a little bit stilted and tense ever since he went and got a bunch of drugs on a whim without talking to her about it beforehand — ever since he got laid off, actually, if he were to be completely honest with himself. He has not started taking any of the drugs. He’d have to ramp onto the antidepressants, something Missandei knows a fair bit about. The anti-anxiety medication is meant to be used on an as-needed basis. As is the Cialis. But his current situation does not require him to pop those pills. Missandei is not especially keen on having sex with him lately. She hasn’t explicitly verbalized his, but he can just tell. From all of the damming silence and challenging stares she gives him when he walks in on her while she’s naked and changing, like she’s just daring him to make a pass at her so that he can see what will happen if he does that.

She had told him that she’s still processing, but perhaps her biggest emotional blockage is that she really doesn’t want him to throw drugs at a problem. She had told him that she has historically had an issue with this.
He had asked her if she wants him to go to a therapist.

She had shrugged. And she had asked him if he wants to.

He had returned the question back to her. Does she want him to?

The circular nature of that conversation seemed to really bother her.

Missandei is sure that she will always love him in a profound, all-encompassing kind of way — but she can see — how people change and why people divorce each other over certain changes. Her mind keeps going to doomsday scenarios in which he transforms into all of the ugliness that her grandma is always talking about. Because that’s what drug abuse does. It’s a disease, and it changes people.

The addictive nature of his anti-anxiety medication really upsets her. It’s a benzodiazepine. She is completely sure he did not divulge his past drug addiction to his doctor, so his doctor probably does not know that he has a history of substance abuse when she prescribed him the meds. Missandei really doesn’t want to be the kind of person that comes home and counts her husband’s pills. She does not want to distrust him at all. She also doesn’t want to be the kind of person that fucking stands in the way of his healing because she’s an uptight bitch when it comes to drugs.

All she feels around him lately is tense. She keeps waiting for him to boldly bring up the Cialis so that she can slap it out of his hand and scream at him that she doesn’t currently feel like getting dicked by him again.

“What do you want me to do?” He asks her this over their strained dinner. “What can I do to make you happy? You want me to dump it all down the toilet? You want me to make an appointment with a psychologist? You want to forget any of this happened and go back to normal, whatever normal is? What do you want?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I did not expect any of this at all.” She moves her carrots around on the plate. She says, “It still bothers me that you took it upon yourself to do all this without talking to me, though I get why you did and what you were thinking. And I’m glad you went to the doctor and talked to her about stuff. But it’s weird to come into it all after a bunch of decisions have been made already. It reminds me of young-Grey, and all of the secret-keeping you used to do and all the times you shut me out.”

He frowns.

“Yo, have you taken the train to Boner-town yet?”
Grey’s hand immediately flies out in Jaime’s general direction, intent on hitting him — but Jaime capably jumps away because he was expecting to get hit. He neatly careens into Drogo, tripping them up a few steps. “Why do you have to say shit like that?” Grey gripes.

“You need to relax! You’ve been so wound up lately.”

“So,” Drogo prompts, maintaining a straight face. “Back to Bieber’s question. Have you taken the train to Boner-town yet, Dovoeddi?”

Grey finally laughs. He laughs in disbelief as he shakes his head. He says, “Naw, guys. I haven’t taken the train to . . . Boner-town. Because imagine this: Missandei really does not want to fuck me presently.”

“You don’t really need her,” Jaime says, shrugging. “I mean, from a purely biological standpoint — you don’t need her. I’d just be interested to see if the pills work. You should take one for fun. And for science.”

“Taking pills for fun is kinda what she’s pissed about,” Grey says. “So I’m not gonna chance it. What if the medication works too well, and she comes home from work and I’m still rocking a hard-on of steel. And she’s like, ‘What the fuck is going on? I know this shit isn’t natural!’ And she goes and counts my tablets, and she decides to beat me to death for my drug-seeking behavior.” He shrugs. “It’s complicated, man.”

“Dude, I really hate to say it,” Drogo teases out, not at all reluctantly. “But I’m gonna say it. I think Missy is completely overreacting here. I think she’s kind of being a bitch to you about this. All you did was try to take care of your mind and your body, which is hard for you. You fucking talked to a medical professional about your dick and your brain! Doesn’t that even count for something? Does she even know how hard it was to get you to talk to a medical professional about the fucking river of blood that came out of your ass back in the day? You should be congratulated for going to the fucking doctor and getting treatment instead of getting a fucking crazy smackdown over it. You should be getting so much sex! I don’t think how she is treating you is deserved or fair.”

“Whoa,” Jaime says. “Here’s an idea, D. You should tell Missy all of this. You should tell her it’s her wifely duty to have sex with Grey. See what happens.”

“Puh-lease. I’m not scared of her. I’ll tell her. I’ll tell her right now!”

“Her concerns are valid,” Grey cuts in. “I feel terrible for how I handled it, actually. I don’t deserve sex, guys.”
Missy meets up with her ex

Chapter Summary

Missandei meets up with an old flame. Grey takes it well. JK. He does not.

She reads the email first thing in the morning, blinking past the dry remnants of sleep in her eyes. She blindly palms the nightstand for her glasses, and she cannot find them. She has to pull the phone closer to her face and squint to make out the message.

She mentions it to Grey over breakfast, as he reads through a page of the newspaper, as he absently grinds coffee beans with their manual crank. She tells him, “Neal emailed me — out of the blue. He wants to get together and catch up.”

Grey freezes, not lifting his eyes from the newspaper. After a slight pause, he asks, “Neal, your ex?”

She says, “Yeah.”

She can actually see him roll his eyes even though they are pointed down at the counter — because he makes no effort at hiding the motion from her. He sounds petulant and pointlessly jealous when he says, “Well, I hope you guys will be very happy together.”

It is not a good look on him.

Grey doesn’t particularly feel like socializing, but Tank and Doreah’s dinner party is something that they have to show their faces at because is the first time they’ve all gotten together since the engagement, since news of Brienne’s secret-for-now pregnancy broke.

That secret gets shoved into the center of the party and stripped down when Clea notices that Brienne is not drinking alcohol at all. Clea loudly says, “Oh my God, you’re pregnant! Congrats!”

After which, Jaime tightly broke down some stats about miscarriages in the first twelve weeks. He’s being being pre-emptively defensive and obliquely protective. Jhiqui doesn’t recognize it for what it is so she waves him off and tells him she’s actually been pregnant before. She sarcastically thanks Jaime for mansplaining miscarriages to her — and he responds back with a stink-face.
All in all, Grey is actually grateful for their petty sniping, for this kind of distraction. He’s grateful for Drogo’s weary AA updates. He’s glad for the stories about how terrible it is for Drogo to visit his family because they don’t take his alcoholism seriously at all so they keep partying around him and calling him a puss and and triggering him with amber bottles in his face. He resentfully talks about how it’s like his sisters have forgotten that they all got the shit beaten out of them by an alcoholic when they were all little. He bitterly gripes about how memory is so unreliable sometimes. He concedes, “Lydia gets it. But she’s outnumbered,” as Dany silently leans in and hugs his arm into her chest. Those two seem really solid lately.

Pia cries a little bit when she gets drunk at the party. She blubbers and tells Drogo she’s so ashamed that she got drunk and is being so insensitive about his alcoholism in front of him. It inspires Jaime to crack, “This is really great. We continue to have a brilliant record when it comes to dinner parties. Congrats, Tank and Doreah!”

During a lull in conversation — Grey just cannot help himself. He continues to twirl his wine in his glass — he’s been sniffing more than he has been drinking — and apropos of nothing, he tells everyone, “Missandei is going on a date with her ex-boyfriend.”

“Oh, God,” Jaime says in disgust immediately — faithfully — like a real pal. “That dillweed?”

“Oh my God,” Clea breathes. “Are you for real?”

She had actually directed that question at Missandei, but Grey takes the liberty of answering Clea. He says, “Yeah, she is for real.”

“Why would you ever want to see the guy again?” Doreah asks. “Once I’m done with a guy, I’m just done, you know? Do you think he wants to get back together? After all these years?”

“God, I hope so,” Grey mutters. “I hope he confesses his undying love,” he says, finally raising his glass to take a sip of wine. “I hope they end up being very happy together. You just can’t fucking stand in the way of true love, you know?”

She’s stiff and awkwardly stilted as she makes the rounds and hugs all of their friends goodbye. Grey has gone out of his way to embarrass her in front of everyone. It makes her feel angry with him because his behavior is so childish. She’s not surprised that some of them take the liberty of vouching on Grey’s behalf to her. Like, Jaime apologizes in Grey’s stead and Jaime tells her that he gets it — he completely gets it. After all, he and Grey used to live together. She wants to tell Jaime that he actually doesn’t get it. The nature of her relationship with Grey is different from the nature of Jaime’s relationship with Grey.

Missandei actually appreciates Jhiqui’s resting bitch face tonight. She is glad when she sees Jhiqui give Grey a glare — oriented at his back — as she lightly shakes her head and sighs before she embraces Missandei. And not at all slyly, Jhiqui loudly tells Missandei that if she ever feels like taking a break from her marriage, she can definitely come hang out at Jhiqui’s house and play with Arqo and just be pampered for a little bit. Jhiqui says she can call her massage therapist and schedule a home visit. Before she kisses Missandei’s cheek, Jhiqui says it could like how it used to be — like how their friendship used to be when it was just the two of them.
Drogo holds Missandei tightly to his chest and into her ear, he whispers, “Cut him some slack. He’s been having a hard time.”

It’s a comment that she doesn’t really respond to. She doesn’t really know how to respond to it. It’s not like it’s news to her. It’s not like she isn’t the person who is closest to him. It’s not like she hasn’t already been cutting him tons and tons of slack. It’s not like she’s not also tired as hell of all of this grueling bullshit. She just stares blankly up at Drogo’s expectant face — he’s expecting her to acquiesce or he’s expecting her to smile at him, like there’s something funny in all of this. And there probably is, but she currently can’t find it. She wonders if Drogo or Jaime ever bother defending her with such ferocity, when she has messed up with Grey.

The entire drive back home is dead silent, with her resting her head on her fist, gazing out the window. He thinks that she’s blowing it a little out of proportion. He thinks that she’s being a little overly sensitive — and even as he makes his observation to himself, he realizes that there is a touch of hypocrisy in how he is interpreting everything. He affirms to himself that he was just trying to be funny. He was just fucking joking around. She knows what his sense of humor is all about. She fucking married it. But she still made it all awkward and weird with her seriousness in the face of all of his jokes. Obviously he doesn’t care if she sees her ex. Obviously he knows that she will never leave him. Obviously he knows that she loves him. Obviously he was just fucking kidding around.

After he takes Momo 2.0 out to potty and wipes her paws down with a hand towel, the both of them advance up the stairs to the bedroom. The nightstand light is glowing out from underneath the door. Momo 2.0 actually looks up at him questioningly — a little hesitantly — because she’s used to being shut out of the bedroom sometimes — when Grey and Missandei have sex. She usually ends up crawling into one of her kennels in the other rooms and bunking down.

Grey knows how tonight will play out, so he scoops up the dog and carries her the rest of the way into the bedroom. They walk past Missandei, who is reading in bed. He sits the dog on the bathroom counter and he makes her watch him as he brushes his teeth and gets ready for bed.

Afterward, after Momo 2.0 ambles into her dog bed on the floor and Grey pulls back the blanket and sheet, Missandei reaches out toward the lamp.

He says, “You don’t have to turn it off. You can keep reading. It doesn’t bother me.”

Her arm freezes mid-air — and she apparently decides to shut off the light anyway because the room gets enveloped in darkness.

In the pitch black, he leans over and just by smell and body heat, he finds her face. He kisses her quickly on her mouth and he says, “Night.”
Her stomach actually flips over onto itself — when she sees Neal walk through the glass door of the cafe. It’s so surreal to see him again after so much time has passed. She kind of shakily gets to her feet to greet him, as a bright smile makes his entire face shine.

The hug is a touch awkward, but firm and substantial. His hands clutch onto her forearms as he looks her up and down, as he says, “Wow, how is possible that you look even more beautiful than I remember?”

She has actually forgotten his tendency for effusive compliments. She kind of bashfully hunches her shoulders, and she says, “It’s good to see you.”

Grey doesn’t really want to wait around like a chump as his wife falls in love with her ex-boyfriend, so he spends half an hour in aggravating and inexplicable Sunday morning traffic just to impose his presence on Nick. Freaking Jaime has family responsibilities with Brienne’s dad and stepmom. Drogo has to work. And Nick is a pushover and reluctantly said that he has to do some yard work over the phone, trying to get out of having to entertain Grey — to which Grey responded with, “Oh, let me help you.”

Nick’s idea of yard work involves assembling and filling up a vinyl above-ground swimming pool with hundreds of gallons of water. It’s taking hours, actually.

Arqo is running around the yard with floaties already on his arms and completely just losing his shit over the prospect of his new not-age-appropriate swimming pool. He is so excited.

A glass of ice water laced with cucumbers gets shoved into his hand by Jhiqui. There’s a bottle of sunscreen in her other hand — presumably for Arqo. She gives Grey a sardonic smile as she watches him sip from his glass. She says, “How’s everything going, Fifty Shades?”


“I never took you for the jealous type,” Nick interjects.

“I’m not. I simply just hate the idea of her ever having been physical with anyone who isn’t me.”

“Whatever, man,” Grey mutters. “Sorry I’m not evolved enough for you.”

“Just don’t think about it, Grey,” Nick says. “I know it’s hard not to think about it, but you have got to remind yourself that this is a you-issue. She’s done nothing wrong. It’s all in your head.”
“Yeah?” Grey says. “How do you do it? How do you not think about it? How does it not bug you, for instance, seeing Drogo from time to time?”

“What?”

Grey had been so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he completely missed the daggers that Jhiqui had been shooting into him with her eyes.

So, it’s just as she suspected. Neal simply wants to atone. He doesn’t want to declare his undying love for her. Over coffee, he tells her that he’s in the process of getting a divorce actually, and it’s terrible. It’s a terrible and drawn out process. He tells her that it’s far easier to get married than it is to get divorced. He proudly shows her pictures of his two young sons on his phone and he tells her a little bit about them and his worries about the future. He tells her he tried to hang on for as long as he could in the marriage just so he could keep seeing his kids every day.

He also tells her that he’s been cheated on now — so now he knows just how fucking terrible it feels to have that happen. He’s still a little romantic and dramatic, so he tells her that it feels like his heart has been ripped out. And then he says, “I’m really sorry for what I did to you.”

To which she easily responds with, “You didn’t cheat on me, though. You just strung me along for a year or so. But you didn’t cheat on me. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

It makes him pale a little bit — he looks a little nauseous and upset. It makes Missandei burst out laughing — she reaches across the table and lightly shoves at his shoulder. She says, “Gosh, I’m kidding! I’m just joking with you! It’s all good!”

His voice is a little thin and far away, as he says, “I’ve forgotten your sense of humor,” as he pushes out a weak smile. “Honestly, Missy, I don’t know what I’m doing. I mean, right here. I don’t know why I asked to see you. I’m just a wreck these days. I think I just wanted to confirm to myself that you’re still out there, and you’re still doing good.”

It seems like Jhiqui and Nick want to have an argument with each other — and Grey is fine with that. He wants to leave and go home so that he no longer has to awkwardly feel stuck in the middle of whatever this is. But they are not letting him go home. They insist on holding him hostage at their humongous house as they force out these awkward niceties. They make him stay for lunch.

He’s kind of playing around with Arqo in the backyard, with his feet on the wet grass and his arms hanging over the edge of the pool. The front of his shirt is just drenched. Jhiqui and Nick are in the kitchen stacking food onto trays and probably saying mean shit to each other. They left Grey with their toddler in the pool, completely unconcerned with the possibility of said toddler drowning accidentally. When Grey asked Arqo if he knows how to swim, Arqo said, “Yes! Swim!” And then demonstrated by splashing spastically in the water.
This kid completely does not know how to swim.

“Arqo!” Grey snaps, reaching out to grab the kid’s forearm. “Come on, man! I told you to not let go of the edge, man.”

Neal gives her ring finger a clear glance and then he asks her if she’s still with Grey. She tells him that yes, she is still with Grey. And they are actually married. She doesn’t explain the absence of a ring, and Neal doesn’t ask. Instead he asks her if she’s happy, and then he muses about the past out loud. He tells her he can remember the moment that he met Grey — it was in her apartment and they were helping her move out. He tells her he remembers initially thinking very little of Grey’s presence, when Grey showed up with Jaime and started moving her furniture around.

“But then I saw the way you looked at him,” Neal says. “When he went to leave.”

“How did I look at him?” she asks.

“I dunno. Intimately, I guess is how I’d describe it.” Neal shrugs. “How’s he?”

She lightly laughs. “He’s good. Same ol’ same ol’.”

“So — are you happy?”

He’s torn. Jhiqui looks like she’s going to tip the overstacked tray of food all over the grass if he doesn’t run over to help her, but if he runs over to help her, her child might just die. Grey is rendered immobile, save for his tight grip on Arqo’s thrashing arm. Luckily, the kid is actually a really happy, really cheerful kid and isn’t struggling against Grey’s grip. Arqo thinks everything is a game.

Grey reaches into the pool with both of his hands and yanks Arqo bodily out. The kid’s high-pitched, squealing laughter rings in his ears. A stream of ice-cold hose water flows down the front of Greg’s shirt, down his jeans. The material sticks to his legs uncomfortably as he carries the kid over to the patio table.

“Oh, God,” Jhiqui mutters when she sees them advancing. “You guys are a mess.”

She’s expecting him to be home and armed with a bunch of passive aggressive and bitchy comments about her ‘date’ with Neal when she opens the garage door and enters the foyer. Momo 2.0 comes
trotting up to her as she calls out his name — twice.

A modest number of irritated text messages are coming through on his phone inquiring on his whereabouts as he hugs Jhiqui, Nick, and Arqo goodbye on their front stoop. Grey bounces Arqo in his arms because they have bonded, Arqo having repeatedly brushed death and Grey having saved Arqo’s dumb child ass from death over and over — and Grey boldly says to Jhiqui and Nick, “Hey, sorry for stirring up old shit, guys. I didn’t realize. I hope it didn’t cause much trouble between you guys.”

“Not a big deal,” Nick says smoothly, and it actually sounds like he means it. “It’s all good.”

Jhiqui reaches out to take her kid back from Grey. She says, “Thanks for coming over and babysitting while we had a fight that you started. You’re actually surprisingly great with him.”

They end up arriving late at Barristan and Grace’s house because Grey came home wearing damp clothes and had to change as Missandei waited around with her face already made up, with her arms crossed over the neckline of her summer dress in aggravation, telling him stuff he already knows — that she didn’t know where he was because he didn’t tell her where he was. The subtext is that she wishes he would tell her where he is so that she doesn’t stress out wondering if he’s going to be home in time to get ready for a dinner at his old boss’ house — a dinner that he scheduled. The subtext is also that this is just the latest in a long string of shit that he conveniently forgets to communicate to her in a timely manner. He’s been terrible at this lately.

She’s been conflating his flaws in her mind lately. She doesn’t want to do this — but she has been doing it.

They are also late arriving at Barristan’s because after Grey changed, he says he wants to stop at the store to pick up a bottle of wine. She tepidly tells him that they are already late, but he tells her it’s not a big deal. She ends up following him into the wine store mutely, stalking behind him as he takes forever reading every goddamn wine label like he doesn’t have a care in the world.

He’s holding a merlot, and he’s in the midst of texting Jaime with one hand, to ask for a fucking merlot recommendation — as he calculatedly asks her, “How was coffee with Neal?”

“It was fine. We’re in love now. I’m going to leave you for him.”

Grey’s eyes snap up to hers. She can tell that he is suddenly so pissed at her for what she just said, which is dumb because she’s only fucking repeating back all of the terrible shit he’s been saying to her. Him being angry is fine with her. Because she’s not very happy with him at the moment, either.
Barristan is such an enthusiastic fan of them and their love that it’s actually hard for them to stay angry with each other in Barristan’s presence. Barristan doesn’t even care that they are late — something that Grey had capably predicted because he had worked closely for the man for a decade — and Missandei gets her body crushed in an embrace. The smell of Old Spice and cumin hits her nose — Barristan’s deodorant and dinner. Barristan’s soft hands are holding onto both of hers as he leads her to a seat in the back patio, and he’s telling her that she looks so beautiful, just radiant — just gorgeous. He asks Grey, “Isn’t she beautiful?”

“She’s alright,” Grey drawls lazily, already cutting the foil off the top of the bottle of wine they brought. She makes eye contact with him — and he’s amused. She can tell.

Missandei feels distinctly less special — when Tanja arrives with Mitch and Barristan does the exact same song and dance with them.

After they appropriately ooh and ahh over the chiminea as Barristan pokes around meat on the grate with his tongs and Grace refills their wine glasses, Tanja lightly nudges Grey with her shoulder — and she says, “There’s a director-level opening in finance at my company.” Her voice is lilting and smooth. She says, “I may have told them that I know a guy — I may have talked you up a little bit. Or a lot. They might think you are the second coming. Wanna have a meeting? Wanna get a resume together?”

Grey sighs. He doesn’t answer right away.

And in that time, Barristan lifts his flushed face from the fiery hole of his chiminea and he says, “Now why would he do that, Tanja? He currently has a vibrant career as a taxi driver that he’s deeply passionate about.”

“It’s Uber, sweetheart,” Grace corrects. “Isn’t it Uber?” she asks, turning her attention to Missandei.

“It is,” Missandei replies faithfully. Grey is staying resolutely silent on this, so after a pause — Missandei says, “Tell us about the job, Tanja. What happened to the former director? What is the department like?”

He supposes that everything is actually pretty nice and easy between them — when they are not focused on the elephant in the room. Dinner tastes good, and her eyes are bright as she softly smiles at him from across the table. He really does think she is beautiful. He ends up missing something that Barristan says to him because he’s so wrapped up in looking back at her. He gets caught being inattentive and gets teased for it by Selmy — Barristan says something about them being newlyweds — which kind of makes Grey hang his head a little bit in embarrassment. He still feels her eyes on
him as everyone laughs.

At some point during the evening, he decides that he’s going to try and go for it.

When it’s time to go home, for instance, he walks around to open the passenger door for her — an action that surprises her. In Barristan and Grace’s driveway, he kisses her. He lingers in the kiss. He pries her mouth apart with his, and he licks her tongue as he places his hand on her hip, guiding her against his body. His heart is throbbing in his throat as he pulls his face back to look at her. He whispers, “Are you cold?”

She admits, “A little bit.”

He says, “Let’s get you home.”

At home, after taking off their shoes and letting the dog out to pee and poop in the yard, he shuts the door to the bedroom in Momo 2.0’s face. And then he kisses Missandei again, next to their bed. His fingers come up to gently run against her shoulders. He lets the backs of his hands skim the swells of her breasts. He carefully says, “Do you want to try?”

She swallows before she questioningly says, “Try?”

He keeps himself and his emotions steady as forces himself to be explicit. He says, “Do you want to try to have sex tonight? With me?”

“With the medication, right?”

“Maybe,” he says.

There’s a pause on her end. It’s short, but her hesitation manages to make him feel stupid and small and pathetic anyway. And then she says, “Sure. Okay.” He feels her hands touching his palms, before she intertwines her fingers with his. She lightly says, “Do you want me to go grab the bottle?”

Her measured response makes him release this heavy sigh. It makes him squeeze her hands as he pulls her closer, enveloping her in his body. With his arms wrapped around her, he says, “I’m sorry it’s been rough between us lately.”

In the dark, as they are lying in bed with clothes on and minimal body contact, after letting Momo 2.0 back into the room, after not having any sex, he tiredly tells her that he’s so fucking sick of his fucking messed up body. He tells her that he knows that she’s fed up with listening to him talk about how he’s a piece of shit that can’t do jack right — but that’s who he is. He tells her that he cannot even stop loathing himself sometimes — lately, most of the time. He tells her that he’s not even a man because he cannot muster up the very basic shit that all men can do. He tells her he’s going mad with the sex thing. He asks her, what if it never ever changes? What if the medication doesn’t even work? He asks her how many fucking men she knows in their early thirties who are taking erectile dysfunction medication?

It’s when he experimentally and bitterly says out loud that maybe she would be better off had she
stuck with Neal — that’s when she actually rolls over and punches him right in the middle of his chest — knocking the wind out of him.

She’s saying, “Is that what you want? Is that what you want, you fucking self-sabotaging dumbass?”

He’s struggling to catch his breath. He’s trying to tell her that he’s just kidding and she needs to get better at detecting when he is joking, as she sits on him and starts pummeling the pillow next to his head over and over again with her fist. She is muffling her frustrated screams, and she is telling him that he’s fucking driving her insane and she is really sick of him and how negative he is all the time. She tells him that his negativity makes her unhappy. That strikes a chord in him. It’s kind of what he wants to hear from her — these accusations — so he kind of just lies there and listens to it all for a while.

It’s kind of a surprise — when she bends down and kisses him — but it’s also not. He kisses her back. He also grabs onto her ass and he drags her soft weight over his penis. It’s not a surprise to him when she lifts up a little bit pushes her hand into his underwear, feels around, and then squeezes him. He’s soft. He winces — he grabs her wrist. He starts to apologize. He starts to say, “Yeah, I’m fucking sorry but —”

“God, shut up,” she says.

He kisses her again, enthusiastically, when she messily and proactively smears her tongue against his. He tries to fight her a little bit for the fun of it, when she yanks his pants down. She groans, and she actually grinds out that she still thinks he is so fucking hot. She says, “You’re so fucking hot, and you’re gonna get it right now.”

He’s tempted to wryly tell her that his stupid dick fucking ain’t happening without drugs but instead he says, “Oh, shit. Okay,” when she goes sideways with sex and gets really personal with his ass without much preamble. He tells her to hold on a second before he nicely extricates himself from her arms and hands, as he gets out of bed, pulling up his boxers — in order to kick the dog out of the room real quick again. He can hear the drawer to their nightstand open. After Momo 2.0 is out of the room, he climbs back into bed and pulls off his pants. She snaps the cap back on the lube and drops it carelessly on the bed.

He shakes his head against the pillow. He grunts. He has these stray errant thoughts that he probably shouldn’t vocalize. He can hear her heavy breathing. It still hurts a little bit — but that is subsiding. He is probably not completely clean but that is going to be her problem because she started this.

“Found it,” she says wryly.

“Yep,” he says, closely one eye and wincing. “You did.”

“My entire finger is like, up your butt.”

“Yep. It is.”
Grey and Missy have great sex

Chapter Summary

Sex and therapy

As bizarre and kooky as it sounds, he went along with this because he wanted her to know just how fucking serious he is about how shitty he currently is at sex. He started off intending on proving to her that he’s still all sorts of fucked up in the head, and it’s fucking terminal. It’s fucking irreversible. He had this stupid imagining where she shoves her finger up his ass a few times — to no avail — and it all just ends with her extreme sexual dissatisfaction and frustration with him.

It’s not working out according to his fatalistic fantasies. She’s actually hissing out a slow “yesss,” because he keeps dropping his head down into the mattress and letting out these weak little helpless whimpers before he rights himself and acts like a fucking man about getting touched in the butt. She keeps carefully riling him up with such intention.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he mutters, slightly shifting his weight backwards, nudging her finger inside of him, feeling it press up against his prostate. It actually sometimes feels so fucking great. He shivers.

They end up taking their time — she occasionally eyes the clock and does a mental calculation of how many hours of sleep she’s going to end up getting — then she catches him suppressing a groan, suppressing pleasure, suppressing happiness, and she refocuses on what she’s doing — gently stroking him from the inside — and she breathes through her own slamming pulse.

They actually end up doing a lot of communicating — more than they have been doing lately. He keeps mindlessly muttering stuff like, “This is so crazy. It’s just so fucking crazy,” just dropping these vague statements in between the push and pull of his groans. She keeps blinking back some tears because she has missed him — she has missed them a lot. She whispers out her devotion. She tells him that she loves him so much that it’s crazy, that it hurts sometimes because it’s so crazy. He tells her he misses her and sex so much. She keeps soothingly telling him that he doesn’t have to miss sex. Because they’ve been having sex. They are actually having sex, right now. She asks him if this can be enough for him, for the time being. She tells him to please let it be enough. And she asks him how it feels, to describe how it feels to her. She asks him if it feels good.
He says, “God, Missandei.” He says, “I love you.”

She actually wistfully tells him that that’s the first time she’s heard him say that in about a month. She tells him, “I’ve kinda missed hearing it.”

He says, “What? I haven’t told you I love you in over a month?”

“I don’t think so,” she says quietly.


He comically promises her that he’s gonna eventually fuck her again so hard that she’s going to probably die from it — die from a killer orgasm. She mocking mimics his personality when it’s at its most dour — she tells him that she doesn’t orgasm from vaginal intercourse alone, so it seems unlikely that she will die orgasmically from being fucked so hard. He laughs — because he gets the joke. He needlessly tells her he’s being figurative — he’s trying to be sexy — and she should just go along with it, like he’s going along with this. He tells her that this doesn’t feel as good when his doctor does it — but his doctor is looking for cancer. His doctor is not trying to get him off.

She says, “How do you know I’m not looking for cancer?”

He says, “God, are you? God, you are so comprehensive, baby.”

She circles back to his previous statement, because she doesn’t want it to fall through the cracks. She tells him that he honestly doesn’t have to try that hard to be sexy because she generally finds him to be very sexy — even when he is being a real jerk and a real whiny baby.

He mutters out more expletives, and he tells her that he’s really, really sorry for being a jerk and a whiny baby with her lately.

She doesn’t even care right now — she shakes her head even though he can’t see her and she tells him that it’s okay, because she doesn’t care. She’s been a punk to him, too, but it doesn’t even matter right now because he’s so perfect right now.

With non-specificity, he tells her that he’s just so scared sometimes. He’s just terrified sometimes. And then he apparently gazes down at himself. He mutters that he is totally flaccid right now, and it is crazy that it’s happening like this. This is usually not how this happens. He tells her that what she’s doing feels fucking amazing. He asks her what will happen if he can never fuck her ever again. He clarifies, and he says that he means with his dick. What if he can never fuck her again with his dick? He unnecessarily reminds her that he used to be okay with performing oral on her for-fucking-ever until the end of time — but times have changed and he is just so toxically masculine now. He’s lived an entire life in which his dick was an active participant in sex with her — and he just can’t go back now. That’s the fucking problem with knowledge. He can’t forget and he can’t unknow and he won’t settle for less anymore. His dick must now figure into sex — at least some of the time — or else he is going to go fucking insane.

She says, “I think I get what you’re saying. And it’s okay to feel that way. It’s human to feel that way.”

“What if it never works, ever again?”
She feels like this isn’t really a question about his penis. This is really a question about acceptance. This is why she decides to take a forceful stance on this. This is why she strategically says, “I don’t even fucking care, Grey. It doesn’t matter to me if your dick never works ever again. Your dick is honestly not even my favorite thing when it comes to our sex life. You are. You’re my favorite thing.”

His wonky penis is actually a blessing in disguise. The other times they did this, she ended up finishing him off with a hand job or she just pulled out and then mounted him. With those options currently completely off the table, they are left with no choice but to just continue on and see where it all goes.

Where it goes is that it takes time — it has taken more than an hour — but it builds and builds — the tension and the pleasure and the feelings — his swearing becomes louder and louder — and he’s so sweaty and warm to the touch — until it breaks. Then she’s this captive audience as he scrunches up and makes more noise — a little louder than before, shuddering and shivering in bed. It takes her an entire beat to realize what is happening — because usually when he comes, a whole bunch of fluid also comes out. His current orgasm is so fucking abstract — and it is so fucking awesome. She bites down so hard on her bottom lip that she almost draws blood.

Her cheeks are so hot and her heart is pounding — as she pushes him so that he collapses onto his stomach, just this messy, sweat-soaked pile of flesh on their bed. It is easy because he is boneless right now. She leaves him in that state as she shimmies off the bed, still wearing her dress, uncomfortably shuffling her shaky legs together as she gets to her feet.

In their bathroom, she pulls up the skirt to her dress and hooks some fingers over the edge of her panties. She pulls down her underwear, looks at engulfing wetness, steps out of them, picks them up, bunches them up, and throws them into the laundry basket a distance away.

Then she pumps a few dollops of soap into her palm and washes her hands at one of the sinks, still squeezing her knees and thighs together and shifting her weight from hip to hip.

When she gets to the bedroom, she’s armed with a damp washcloth and some fresh underwear for him because he does not prefer to sleep completely naked. He has not even moved an inch. He’s still face down on his stomach. His neck and head is still angled uncomfortably. He still looks like he’s dead because she has killed him. She cannot even wipe the giddy smile off of her face. A big part of her actually wants to taunt the shit out of him and ask him who is the fucking king here — but instead, what she does is she cheerfully hops on the bed and she happily spreads him before she wipes the shiny lube off him. He groans into the bed. She also just feels so gushy and girly and all smitten.

She says, “Okay, done,” depositing the washcloth on the nightstand for the time being. She then says, “Flip over, babe. So I can put your undies on.”
He still manages to wake up earlier than she does. Her clothes for the day are laid out and the smell of coffee is wafting up the stairs as she puts on her makeup.

Her clicking heels on the floor signal to him that she’s ready for breakfast. He slides a small plate of eggs and places a mug in front of her as she climbs onto a stool on the other side of the island.

He’s also holding an ice pack to his neck. He’s muttering something about how he just might stay home and just nap on the couch all day. She makes a noncommittal noise of agreement, says something absently like, “That sounds nice, babe.”

“I’m getting fucking old,” he says in irritation.

It makes this soft smile slowly grow over her face. He’s being sensitive — because of last night. He is being standoffish with her and is acting introverted. But that’s pretty much par for the course. She doesn’t want him to feel more vulnerable than he already does, so she refrains from gloating over it all and reminding him that she is fucking king of the house. She is the fucking king because she made him come so hard that he threw his neck out.

He almost doesn’t tell Missandei about his naturalization interview — only because it means jackshit to him and it’s a fucking joke of a process and he doesn’t want to waste her time with such non-importance — but he does end up telling her about it because after the whole thing with the doctor visit and the drugs and how pissed off she got over that — well, he might as well cover his bases and just tell her about every fucking boring thing that happens to him from now on.

He arrives half an hour early and has to wait in the waiting area. He snaps a picture of the lobby and sends it to Jaime — kind of mockingly — and then sends the same picture to Missandei.

He massages his sore neck as he rests the back of his head against the wall. His neck has been bothering him for an entire week now.

So fucking worth it.

The older she gets, the faster the passage of time clips by and the more her priorities shift around. Before she knows it, nearly a month has gone by since he first got his medication, since their fight over it. She is a little surprised she has managed to backburner it for a month, but she’s been preoccupied with work, her grandmother’s health care, their own finances, and keeping up with
social obligations. She realizes that she’s been putting off this conversation when she flips through the pile of their mail and comes across a letter from his doctor’s office. It looks like a bill or a statement. Even though it’s addressed to him, they are married so she rips open the envelope and pulls out the sheet of paper inside.

It’s actually a letter reminding him that he is overdue for a follow-up appointment so that his doctor can check in on the antidepressant, the anti-anxiety, and the ED medications. The medications are listed out as three bullet points, and the letter sounds deeply clinical.

When he gets home from his run and finds the envelope all torn open and the letter lying face-up on the kitchen counter — she didn’t set it up like that to fuck with him, just so it’s clear that she invaded his privacy and opened his mail and she’s sorry about that — but she knows he will probably interpret this as her fucking with him — she’s not surprised when she hears him call out her name and comes searching for her. He’s holding the letter in his hand when he arrives at the door of their office.

He says, “I’m gonna call them and tell them that I don’t need a follow-up. Because I’m not taking the drugs.”

She frowns. Because it’s so obvious sometimes — just how much he loves her. She says, “Um, let’s talk about this.”

It’s never really that he wants to withhold the truth from her. It’s really that sometimes he doesn’t even know what the truth is. He can’t explain it to himself so he can’t really even begin to explain it to her.

One thing that is true, though, is that all he really wants to do is to make her happy. He is fucking going mental over the thought that he might not be able to do this, in spite of his best efforts. He’s been going through the motions. He’s been trying to take his unemployment in stride, because she wants him to. He hasn’t run out and gotten a new job that he will probably feel apathetic about, because that’s not really what she wants him to do. He’s been trying to keep busy and upbeat as best as he can, because that’s what would alleviate pressure on her. He knows her so well at this point, that he knows what all the right actions are.

And it has still been difficult.

Seemingly out of nowhere, but not really, she asks him, “What if you change? On drugs, I mean. What if your personality like, changes?”

He says, “I know, right? I’ve been thinking the same sort of thing. I’ve been worried about the same sort of thing.”

“You know what’s dumb? I’ve been on an antidepressant. I freaking extol the virtues of antidepressants to other people. I know that it doesn’t change who you are, fundamentally on the inside. But the second it got turned on you, I freaked out.”

“I know,” he says. “I get it.”
“Like, what if you become this happy person that smiles all the time and makes terrible corny jokes? What if you start getting really into brewing your own beer and hosting board game nights?”

“I will never want to brew my own beer, Missandei,” he says emphatically. “I will never get the point of Pictionary or think that it’s fun.”

“I tell myself that I don’t want you to change because I just accept the way you are — but maybe the truth is that I am attracted to the dark and sad version of you because I am f*cked in the brain, and I am actually a fucking obstacle in your health and happiness — not f*cking supportive or a good wife.”

He shakes his head slowly, pretty much in disbelief. He says, “I don’t think so, babe. I don’t think that’s what going on. You’re a good wife.”

She sighs. “What if you take the drugs and like, you like them too much?”

“Missandei, I can tell you. If the Cialis works, I’m gonna like it a f*cking lot.”

Her face scrunches up. “I’m not talking about the Cialis, Grey! You’re being such a dude about this! I’m talking about the Xanax! What if it becomes addicting?”

He pauses, considering this. He carefully says, “I’ve taken benzodiazepines before.”

“Yeah,” she says flatly. “To get off morphine, which you were addicted to.”

“Yeah, I remember,” he says. “The Valium was awesome and useful in that, man.”

“Are you trying to make me laugh?”

“Yeah, because this conversation is hilarious.”

They are lying down in their bed and staring up at the ceiling. He keeps going back to the past, to when they were young kids. He remembers all the things that they didn’t yet know, back then — about themselves and about each other. Sometimes he doesn’t feel like much has changed — when he is at his most pessimistic. He is still lacking answers. Like, her love didn’t make his dick problems go away. Her love didn’t cure his brain deficiencies. Love is not the be-all and end-all. He has probably always known it wouldn’t be. But he was also probably kind of hopeful about it all at one point. He will probably pass on his messed up brain onto a kid — if nothing changes and they decide to have kids. He will probably curse his kid with the same sort of shit, if nothing changes. This is probably why it’s not all that responsible to have a kid with her right now.

“Grey, I don’t want to lose you. I can’t lose you.”

He sighs. He says, “I’ve actually been trying to deal with this horribly difficult shit that I want to bury forever, just so I can stay with you for as long as I can.”
It’s when he hears her sniff — when he realizes that she is crying — that the blockage in his chest throbs. He reaches out and he grabs onto her — he hugs her tightly to his body. He tells her the truth, which is simple at this point. He says, “Only death can rip me away from you.”

“Oh my God,” she mutters, running her lips against his Adam’s apple. “I get that you think that’s a super romantic statement, but it’s actually terrifying. Because death and drugs actually ripped my brother away from me. It’s like, if it happened once — it can happen again. That’s really stressful.”

“Yo, you want a Xanax for that? I have some.”

Her choked laugh makes him smile. He smooths his palm over the back of her head, and he soaks himself in the smell and warmth of her.

He says to her, “I think I want to see someone — a professional, I mean. I think it’s time.”

Jaime hasn’t seen his therapist in years — because he hasn’t needed to. This is why Grey decides that it’s not altogether weird and inappropriate to ask Jaime for the referral, because he also remembers Jaime describing his therapist as “Blackish” at some point.

Honestly, Grey wants to punch Jaime in his fucking smug face when he sees Jaime triumphantly throw his fists in the air and scream out that he wins — that he is a motherfucking winner.

Drogo looks amused. His arms are crossed over his chest as he watches Jaime jump up and down in place. Drogo says, “Man, you actually lost. We actually destroyed you assholes today.”

Tyrion pauses from packing up his gear, racquet still in his hand. He’s smirking as he says, “Not even reality can put a damper on Jaime’s overinflated and delusional self-importance.”

Jaime is still gloating when they arrive at the restaurant. He is gloating about so many things that he bears no responsibility for. He’s gloating that Tyrion is now chief of staff at their Uncle Kevan’s office. Tyrion dryly comments that nepotism is alive and well. Jaime says, “You are actually the very fucking best,” so seriously and so passionately that it makes Tyrion kind of blush. Jaime undoes all the charm of that compliment by reminding them all that Drogo is in fucking AA — a fact that Drogo does not dispute, though he does tepidly say that Jaime had very little to do with that.

“That’s not my point,” Jaime says. “My point is that we’re all making fucking progress in life. I’m like, having a kid. And like, Grey fucking got married in the last year. He is becoming a citizen. He smiles at people sometimes. And he is finally — finally motherfucker — after a million years — seeking professional help for that whole human trafficking aspect of his early childhood. That is fucking — can you believe this? Do you remember when I used to bug you about this constantly and how you used to get so mad at me?”

“I’m really glad you’re doing this, man. I’m so glad you’re opening yourself up to this.”

Grey refrains from bursting Jaime’s bubble, though they both are completely aware that this step is due to Missandei more than any of it is due to Jaime’s annoying harping over the years. Grey’s getting his citizenship because it completely eliminates the already very unlikely possibility of him getting deported away from her and back to the Summer Isles. He got married because he just fucking loves her like crazy and wants to be legally bound to her so that, in the event of his death, she will easily get all of his stuff and be able to live a comfortable life for the rest of her life. He’s honestly seeing a therapist because he thinks she secretly wants him to, but she doesn’t want to push him into it. And maybe the therapist will figure out what the hell is going on with his dick through the incredibly painful stories he will tell about his parents.

Jaime’s former therapist is covered under Missandei’s insurance — something that she notes with glee. When he was working, his coverage was their primary because it was the better plan. When he lost his job, they opted not to pay exorbitant premiums to keep on his plan. They just added him onto her plan.

She is so self-satisfied and so cocky about this — and it’s really not just about the insurance — it’s clearly about something else, something more. She basically struts over it all though. He thinks that her clothes are pleasantly tight around her body as she swivels around to watch him as she walks forward. She bodily pulls him over and down onto the couch cushions, seating him on their sofa. Then she bends over to look him in the face, with her arm braced against the back. It makes him feel breathless. She’s gushing, and she looks just so fucking beautiful and adorable to him, as she preens, as she says, “I told you I’d take care of you, baby. Didn’t I tell you I’d take care you?”

He resists laughing out loud. He just stares back at her and he says, “You did. You did tell me you’d take care of me.”

“See! I’m doing it! I’m taking care of you!”

Grey makes a grab for her. He yanks her into his lap. He presses his mouth against hers. And then he says, “No one doubted you here, Missandei. I never nay-sayed you on this.”
Grey meets his therapist

Chapter Summary

Grey goes and meets his new shrink. Missandei gets into a text-fight with one of her besties.

Missandei has been treating him like he’s made of glass — or like he’s a skittish dog. Actually, she’s been treating him like how they treated Momo 2.0 when they first got her. It’s like Missandei is constantly afraid he’s going to shit the fucking cage at any moment. Her actions are actually very, very subtle — this is what Grey tells Jaime when they talk about it, in order to be fair in his portrayal of her.

“You're fucking nuts, man,” Jaime says, not at all self-conscious about qualifying Grey’s mental anxieties as insanity. “All Missy is doing is looking at you for a second too long or smiling at you a skosh too hard. This doesn’t make her a fucking oppressive bitch.”

“Um, I never said it did,” Grey says plainly.

It’s a really sunny and nice day, so they are sitting outside on a restaurant patio, grabbing a couple of beers after their run — it’s the only way they can consume alcohol socially and in public these days — on account of Drogo.

“How do you even want her to look at you?” Jaime asks. “How is a person supposed to look at you so you don’t take it the wrong way?”

It is becoming exceedingly clear which side of this Jaime is coming down on. Grey is starting to get the sense that he is monopolizing the conversation too much with his neuroses and Jaime is over it. Grey is starting to get the sense that Jaime is tired of taking Grey’s micro-issues seriously.

But maybe he’s interpreting all of this rather pessimistically — as is his nature.

To Jaime, he feels silly and small as he quietly says, “I remember when we were young —”

“Younger,” Jaime interjects, correcting Grey. “Shit, you’re not geriatric yet, dude.”

“Well, my dick is,” Grey snaps, annoyed at being interrupted right when he was about to say something difficult.

This makes Jaime frown. It makes Jaime say, “Sorry, man. What were you saying about being young?”
Actually, when Grey was young, he would’ve been a lot more wounded in these moments of inattentiveness. He would’ve thought that Jaime’s diverted attention meant that Jaime didn’t give a shit so Grey should just shut up forever about his shit. Grey can still feel these tendencies skirting around in his head, trying to push him into doing the most comfortable thing — which is to disengage and just carry on like everything is fine.

But lessons have been learned. Instead, he just rolls his eyes real quick, then he says, “When we were younger, the way she looked at me — she like, looked at me like — like she —” He’s pausing because he finds this all to be stupidly embarrassing to articulate. It sounds so arrogant and boastful in his head. He cuts eye contact from Jaime and looks far off, up through the green flickering leaves, up at the sky. “She looked at me like she wanted me. You know? Like, she wanted to be with me. You know? Like, like — in a couple-y, relationship, kind of sexual kind of way.”

Jaime’s hand is covering his mouth. His elbow is propped against the table and he’s swinging his head lightly back and forth as he pushes back a laugh. His voice is muffled as he says, “Understatement of the year. She constantly looked at you like she wanted to rape you in front of the rest of us, dude.”

“Well, I liked it,” Grey says snappishly. “It made me feel powerful. It made me feel capable. It made me feel like I had control.”

“Okay?”

“And at one point in my life, I was wearing power suits to work and I was pulling in some serious fucking money and people cared so much about what I thought about things — and I felt I was indispensable.”

“Okay.”

“But I’m obviously not indispensable. Right now, Missandei is just killing it at work,” Grey says. “She’s doing so good, and she really loves what she does. And she’s taking care of our mortgage and most of the bills by herself like she doesn’t even need me. She’s even paying for all of my shit right now. And when she looks at me — it’s so fucking indulgent. She looks at me half the time like she’s humoring me. The other time, she looks at me like she thinks I’m doing something cute — like I’m the dog. And I know this is all my interpretation, and it’s not her fault. But I don’t feel in control anymore. I don’t get what I’m around for. I don’t feel . . . like a man. Basically.”

Jaime, more or less, conveys to Grey that Grey’s issues are not all that novel or original. From the beginning of time, men have been grappling with their maleness and losing their shit over it. Jaime tells Grey that it’s been really awesome, how unexpectedly useless he feels in the face of Brienne’s pregnancy. She’s fucking developing life in her uterus, and she’s calling all the shots — and all he can do is occasionally make suggestions based on the mountain of shit he has obsessively read and pored over just so he doesn’t feel like such an impotent motherfucker. But she basically picks and chooses the things she wants to listen to, when it comes to his opinion on her diet or her exercise regimen.

Jaime points out that Drogo basically broke up with Dany because of masculinity issues. Jaime says
his dad cheated on his dying mom for the same kind of reasons. He says that he refuses to accept any of his dad’s money and makes his life pointlessly hard sometimes — for the same reasons. He says sometimes he lets comments about Brienne’s looks get to him, for the same reasons.

He says, “I dunno what to tell you, man. We get this messaging from the moment we are born, about what it’s all supposed to be about. It’s hard, and it’s a legit issue. And for what it’s worth — while there is a smidgen less rape in her eyes these days, I really don’t think Missy looks at you like you’re her pet. Like, I think that’s pretty off-base.”

Jhiqui texts Missandei and tells Missandei that Nick is really hurt that Jhiqui purposefully hid personal information from him. Nick knows about her stupid one night stand with Drogo from a million, jillion years ago.

Missy pretty much looks at her phone in this numbing and tired kind of disbelief. She’s kind of bombarded with stuff lately — work stuff, family stuff, Grey stuff. Missandei doesn’t really know what kind of response Jhiqui is expecting from her. She knows it isn’t the right response, but she ends up making light of it. After all, the one night stand in question really was a million years ago so who fucking cares? She types out that the situation sounds awkward but Nick will get over it.

Jhiqui actually wants to focus on Grey, griping about how Grey is such a blabbermouth. It’s this gentle precursor to the torrent of complaints that Jhiqui probably wants to unleash about Grey to Missandei.

Missandei LOLs Jhiqui. Grey kind of taught her this — to blow off people’s feelings with an LOL. Missy writes out LOL, and she says that being talkative is actually not something Grey is known for.

The conversation almost tapers off after that. Jhiqui is obviously dissatisfied. Missy does not currently care. It would’ve tapered off, but then Jhiqui musters up the balls to write a text that says: He’s so emotionally stunted.

Missandei flares red. She strategically gives Jhiqui an out. Missy writes: Grey or Nick?

Jhiqui decides not to take the out. She writes: Grey. Duh

Missandei’s hands are kind of sweating and shaking from adrenaline — she really likes how a woman who lied to her husband via omission for years is being so superior because Grey accidentally let a thing that he did not even know was still a fucking secret slip — accidentally — and Missy hammers out a response. She originally types out: Fuck you

But then she thinks better of that. She thinks that a fuck you response will only make Jhiqui settle harder into her righteousness. Missandei actually wants Jhiqui to feel bad. And Missy also wants to be a classy adult about this because she has gone through years of therapy herself. She quickly erases the fuck you and instead, she writes out: I think that's a really rude and untrue thing to say about him.

She hits the send button. And she’s rattling her phone in her hand as she mutters, “And fuck you, Jhiqui!” out loud.
Bingo, who had been absently watching her from across the table, lets out a low whistle. He says, “So anyway, about this site visit —”

Because he is jobless and a kept spouse, he can have a therapy appointment in the middle of the day, no problem. His appointment is at 1 p.m., and the receptionist at the place is so fucking ridiculously nice to him. She’s gently smiling at him as she takes his credit card and his ID and promises to bring them back after she photocopies his ID. He wants to tell her to go fucking nuts, he doesn’t care what she does with his shit because he assumes she’s professional and isn’t trying to steal his identity, which currently might not be worth much.

He has to fill out another questionnaire about his feelings and his emotions. In contrast to the one that caused his doctor to diagnose him as severely depressed, this one is far more open-ended. It asks him why he is here, for instance. It only gives him three lines to answer this question.

He’s nervous and jittery as he sits in the waiting area, a small enclosed room, waiting for his appointment. He’s crouched over his knees and staring into his glowing phone, punching out a message to her. It’s actually the latest in a long string of messages — an ongoing conversation they’ve been having in an effort at being better at communicating with each other. He types out that he’s at the therapist’s office. And he feels fucking anxious and freaked out — and he doesn’t know why he feels this way.

Her response comes back right away. She has known when his appointment is. She has clearly made herself available to answer his text messages on purpose. It is simultaneously touching and emasculating. He feels like a fucking hysterical bitch about this.

Missandei is trying to distract him. She’s asking him what he wants to eat for dinner. She’s asking him if he wants to go on a grocery run with her after she gets off work.

It’s Grey who brings up Jaime first. Amari is a professional, so he refrains from mentioning Jaime. But Grey blurts, “Did Jaime talk about me at all, in his sessions?”

Amari actually smiles and leans forward a little bit. “I can’t really tell you that,” he says.

Grey feels stupid and lame. Because he is already bad at therapy. “I only bring it up because I was wondering how much you already know about me. If you know a lot, I can skip over some stuff.” He scrunches up his face. “But you must have like, hundreds of patients so why would you even remember the stuff Jaime said years ago? God.”

“This is the first time you’ve done something like this?”

“Well, I went with my wife to her therapy sessions a couple times, years ago.” Grey pauses. “We
weren’t married then. Me and my wife, I mean. But we went because we were having a hard time getting on the same page about having kids. God, I really don’t know what level of detail you need to do your job.”

“Why don’t you tell me about one of the things that has brought you here today?”

“Oh,” Grey says, trying to quickly figure out what the easiest thing to bring up would be. “Ahh. Um, God, I don’t know — where to start. I mean, I filled out that form and I wrote some stuff down about why I’m here. Did you read it?”

“I did,” Amari says softly. “Why don’t you start by telling me about your wife? What’s her name?”

“Her name is Missandei.”

He doesn’t even know where to start, telling a complete stranger about Missandei. So he completely picks a random place to start. He talks about how glad she is that he is in therapy. He doesn’t know what else to say about that — and he inexplicably feels kind of bad for his very, very inoffensive and bland portrayal of her — so he tells Amari that he really loves his wife. And that feels really stupid, because she’s his wife so it should be obvious that he fucking loves her — unless it’s some sham marriage — a green card marriage. Which it is not. But maybe it could be interpreted as such by some people because he’s actually in the process of becoming a citizen. But actually, he’s naturalizing because he’s been a permanent resident for like, more than two fucking decades, not because he married her. He actually came over because of that amnesty policy, because he was technically a refugee and technically escaping political persecution. Missandei actually basically has the same story so they have that in common — except she got off her ass and naturalized way back when. Her first job sponsored her because she knows a bajillion languages and that is like, special and rare. That was also part of why she felt like she had to sell her soul to those fuckers. His situation was different because he landed in King’s Landing and not Myr, so citizenship was actually always presented to him on a silver platter. He had these mental hang-ups about becoming a citizen. But now it’s really a no-brainer because he’s married to her. What if he accidentally robs a convenience store with a gun and gets deported back to the Summer Isles? What would Missandei even fucking do there? How would she even eke out a living there? Grey tells Amari he’s going to ruin Missandei’s life if he doesn’t become a citizen.

Amari says, “Do you articulate it that way a lot to yourself? That you will ruin things if you make a mistake?”

Grey says, “Sometimes I say stuff that way to be kind of funny about it. Sometimes it’s true.”

The first session honestly just passes in a blur — he’s surprised when Amari tells him that their time is up. He’s also shocked over all the topics that they didn’t cover. All he did for the entire session was talk about Missandei and citizenship.
Grey feels like he didn’t accomplish anything — and he’s really not keen on the prospect of going another fucking week without having heteronormative sex — so before he gets up from his seat, he quickly asks Amari, “Is it okay to take Cialis if you think your erectile dysfunction is psychological? Isn’t that a drug for physical issues?”

If Amari is fazed at all, he doesn’t show it. He also takes barely any time before he says, “A lot of men with psychological ED find that medication is helpful because it helps them get over the mental block and boosts confidence.”

“What about antidepressants? I read that they can actually impair sexual function? Actually, I know that they can impair sexual function. And is it okay to take Xanax if you were previous addicted to an opiate?”

“Grey,” Amari says. “The Cialis is completely safe. You can take that today if you wanted to, and you’d be fine. The antidepressant and the Xanax are more complicated and have certain side effects, some of which you brought up. We’ll talk about this more next week. Until then though, can you actually hold off on all of the medications?”

“Even the Cialis? Even though it’s safe?”

“Yes. Even the Cialis. Even though it’s safe.”

She’s known this man for basically her entire adult life. This is how she knows it’s not very smart to jump down his throat and ask him all the questions she wants to ask him about his therapy session, the second she gets home. Doing so would probably inspire some caustic comments from him about how she needs to get the fuck off his balls.

Instead, she forces herself to be a very cool and chill wife — which currently feels like going against her very nature — as she changes her clothes before they head out to the grocery store. He watches her undress and redress, standing in the doorway of their bathroom with his arms crossed over his chest. She is telling him about how the sales team went maverick on her and sold a product that doesn’t actually exist. She is telling him how the rest of this week will involve some serious cover-her-ass shit.

“And what an ass it is,” he says, his voice so steady and deadpan that it takes her a beat to realize it’s a compliment — a come-on. Then, lightning-fast, before she gets a chance to volley something super-sexualized back at him — Grey switches tack. He straightens up, and he says, “I find that having both biz dev and delivery sit down and map out the customer journey is a good way to realign the two. Often times, we all take information for granted and the exercise of remapping will likely uncover a lot of things that can and should be done differently.”

She smiles at him. She says, “Babe, I really like that. I’m going to schedule a meeting so we can do that.” She watches him as he lightly shrugs and awkwardly acts like he’s not utterly pleased with himself. She resists laughing over it — because she knows he’s been sensitive lately and will interpret it as her laughing at him, rather than her just laughing because she thinks he’s so fucking cute.
“Cool,” he says — casually, blandly — his eyes still drifting off and looking at their smoke alarm with avid interest.

He honestly just kills her with this shit all the time. Her heart just throbs over this shit all the time. And she can’t take it anymore. She feels like she’s going to burst from holding in all of these feelings of pride. She says, “Grey, you’re honestly like — just one of the smartest people I know. And I know sitting at home being unemployed is just such a waste. I know how hard it must be for you. Thank you, baby.”

After dinner, in bed, he starts something up with her. He kisses her deeply as his hand dips underneath the hem of her sleep shorts. His palm and fingers roughly knead the cushion of her bottom before he pulls away all the barriers. They are rolling around nakedly and she is giggling, as he tells her to just hold still for a fucking minute — as these micro-smiles breaks out across his face between moments of seriousness.

She starts struggling with her breathing as he goes down on her. She tries not to fuck too much with what he’s doing, with the natural clenching of her legs around his head. She blindly throws the blanket off of their bodies, because her face and her body is so hot. When the sex starts in earnest, she is pretty coherent and can carry on all sorts of conversations. She tells him that his body is so strong and so great and so pretty. She tells him that Doreah can’t even pee in front of Tank and when Doreah told her this, Missandei thought it was kind of odd and weirdly puritanical — but maybe she’s being too judgmental. She asks him if she’s just a gross woman, or if it’s a mark of intimacy and sexual compatibility — and she answers her own question. She tells him that she actually loves her deep familiarity with his body and his deep familiarity with her body. She tells him she wants to know every fucking thing about his body. She jokingly-but-not-really tells him that his ass hole is the fucking cutest little thing ever, and she wishes it was socially acceptable for her to like, tell people this — so that they know this very cool fact about him — and it shocks him enough that he lightly coughs against her.

He dryly asks her to please not tell other people about his butt in too much detail. It’s just too much information, and no one cares except for her.

Her coherency drops off as she gets closer and closer to her orgasm. Toward the end, she’s just grinding out aggressive encouragement to him and digging her fingers into their sheets.

When she comes, she shuts her eyes tightly and she’s repeating his name, over and over. She’s telling him she fucking loves him, over and over.

And after it’s done, with her palpitating heart and her woozy air-deprived brain fighting to gain back coherency, she pulls his body up hers, with his help. She shoves her tongue into his hot mouth and kisses him all dirty as her legs continue to kick the sheets and blankets the rest of the way off the bed. She has a handful of his ass as she bluntly asks him how he wants to fucking get off — because it’s his turn to lose his fucking mind.

He says, “We have all of one option at the moment,” as he sardonically lets a grin slip out. “So I guess I’ll take what’s behind door three.”
Then he glances at the clock. She sees him looking at it — because it’s blatant.

And then he says, “Babe, it’s pretty late. It’s a work night. Like — I know it takes a long time and requires some prep. Like — we can rain-check this —”

“Shut up,” she says, pushing herself to her knees.

It’s too warm for them to do much post-coital cuddling. He actually reaches out and hits her boobs with the back of his hand like a bro — as he gets her attention and breathlessly tells her the therapist told him to not start chomping down Cialis like it’s candy just yet. He says, “I didn’t get a chance to ask why not, because we were five minutes past time, and I felt awkward.”

“Huh,” she says.

“So I guess it’s another week of this these terrible, mind-melting ass-orgasms.”

That makes her laugh.

Jaime bought a table at a fundraising gala to give some support to the nonprofit he used to volunteer at. He then went around filling in eight of the ten seats. He invited his brother and Tysha, Missandei and Grey, Drogo and Dany, and his sister and the guy his sister is dating.

A few days ago, Jaime had baldly reminded them all over email that it is a fundraiser. He covered their ticket, so he expects that they all donate at least that amount to the organization. He said that he expects they will bring their wallets and their generosity. It’s all very heavy-handed and not very subtle — it’s all very Jaime-like.

Missandei arrives by herself. Grey is on his way. They drove separately because she came straight from work because she would’ve been late if she had stopped off at home.

She’s actually running into a lot of people she knows, a lot of industry contacts. Her company is commonly an event sponsor for these kinds of things. It takes her forever to get to the table because she keeps recognizing people and she keeps getting stopped to have quick catch-up chats.

Grey arrives late enough that he doesn’t have much time to talk to anyone before dinner and the program starts. He had miscalculated how fucking hard it was going to be to get downtown. And
then he had refused to spring for valet parking and wasted long minutes trying to find parking. He currently hates himself a whole fucking lot.

He is also slightly underdressed — but this is something he kind of did on purpose. He doesn’t like how it feels, to dress for a job that he no longer has. He feels the most comfortable not putting on airs and just being straightforward with his bum self.

He can’t really describe how it feels — when it’s time for speeches and they bring out all of the program cohorts to talk about their life experiences. There are so many stories about injustice and unfairness. There is a story about human trafficking, and he’s probably imagining it, but it’s like he can feel Jaime’s intentional stare, boring right into the fucking side of his face — like Jaime thinks he’s fucking stupid and can’t make these simple correlations himself. He knows it’s unearned, but he feels kinda pissed at Jaime for inviting him to this fundraiser by the end of the speeches.

When it’s time to raise the paddle and pry open their wallets, Missandei leans over and she gently kisses him on the cheek — they actually haven’t said real hellos to each other — before she asks him, again, what their budget is for this kind of thing. They have already talked about it absently a week ago, but they didn’t get anywhere with it. Grey had cracked that they are fucking poor-ass people now. Missandei had disputed that and had gotten annoyed at him for being fatalistic. That same old shit. They didn’t get much further than the argument.

He touches her cheek with his fingertips. He says, “Up to you, babe. I don’t care.”

Naturally, she ends up giving too much for his comfort. She never agrees with him, that they are poor as shit.

The donation makes Jaime go, “Nice!” as he smiles at her gratefully.

Because they arrived separately, they have to depart separately. Her arms come around his shoulders when he tells her he’ll see her at home.

When Amari asks him how his week was, Grey says it was fine. He quickly lists off the stuff that happened. He took his real estate exam. It was stupid and boring, but he passed, which is good because he would’ve fucking honor-killed himself if he had failed it. He drove people around sometimes. He cleaned his house. He took care of his dog. He hung out with his wife. His life is honestly pretty dull and unremarkable. He asks Amari, again, just how much detail he needs to give for Amari to properly shrink his brain.

That makes Amari smile — and Grey’s question actually doesn’t get answered. Instead, Amari asks, “Did you take Cialis this week?”

Grey kind of does a doubletake. He says, “No. I didn’t. Because you told me not to.”

“I actually asked you not to,” Amari smoothly corrects. “Nothing that I say in here is anything you have to do.”

Grey feels thrown. He says, “You will learn that I’m very obedient.”
“Are you really?”

“Yes,” Grey says. “To a fault.”
Chapter Summary

Grey tries that ED med.

He thinks that there ought to be some level of trust built before he has to spill his entire guts out on sex — but actually, not really. It’s only the second time they’ve talked — the second time they’ve ever seen each other — and Grey is honestly pretty stunned when Amari bluntly brings it up and asks Grey how he would describe his sex life.

Grey defensively and automatically blurts out, “It’s fine.” And then he realizes that he’s lying. He sees Amari open and non-judgemental face. It inspires Grey to clear his throat. It causes him to say, “Actually, it’s not currently fine. Sorry, you blindsided me there.”

And then there is a lengthy pause in which Grey belatedly realizes that the questionnaire that he filled out was probably really telling. Also the fact that he baldly asked about Cialis last session. Okay, so he sees why this topic was brought up.

The rest of the session is pretty much just information exchange, as far as Grey can tell. Forty-five minutes doesn’t really seem like enough time to get into the nitty-gritty of things, but maybe cool stuff is happening to his brain without him realizing it. Grey tells Amari that he hasn’t had a decent erection in months — more accurately two months — which is still months, plural.

He’s kind of stunned when Amari asks him to define what a decent erection is, in Grey’s opinion. Grey quickly shuts his hanging jaw, and then he says, “I mean, it’s a non-shitty erection.”

Amari kind of smiles. “I mean, what is a non-shitty erection — to you? What does that look and feel like?”

“Like, you want me to quantify this on the Mohs scale of hardness?”

Amari actually does laugh at that — it looks like he’s breaking character — and it makes Grey sheepishly rub the back of his neck. He then admits that he feels very uncomfortable and awkward talking about sex — always has. He has this secret fear that he’s actually doing sex all wrong, and the more he talks about it — the more he will reveal and the more other people realize that he’s not doing it correctly at all.

“Has Missandei expressed that she finds your sex life to be out of the ordinary at all?”

“Well, no,” Grey says. “But you can’t trust what that woman says at all because she’s so fucking moronically in love with me.” After a pause, Grey says, “That was the truth masquerading as a joke that sounds ambiguously truthful. Hope you like those. Because I have a million of them.”
“You sound anxious and a little bit manic right now.”

Grey nods. “I feel anxious and manic right now. Should I be taking Xanax right now?”

“No,” Amari says. “You are coping pretty well without, as far as I can tell. You’re really self-aware.” After barely a pause, Amari flips it back to what they were talking. He asks, “Have you been able to achieve erections at all in the last two months?”

“Yes. Sometimes. But they are puny and sad. And never with Missandei in the room.”

“And your sex drive — would you say it’s been normal for you in the last two months — or would you say it’s been low?”

“Low?” Grey asks uncertainly.

“Have you wanted to have sex — mentally, emotionally?”

“Oh,” Grey says, with understanding. “Yeah. I want to have sex, but physically, it just doesn’t happen — like, I can’t get, uh, it up?”

“And this is an inordinate and sudden occurrence?”

“Actually! Um, yes and no. It’s been especially weird lately. But this is actually a recurring issue I’ve had throughout my life.”

“Since you became sexually active?”

“Yes. Since then.”

“When was that? When did you become sexually active?”

“Young. But I don’t want to talk about that today. Maybe some other time though.”

“Okay. Have you gone through any sort of big life change in the last few months?”

“I got married about six months ago. I lost my job about four months ago.”

“You lost your job?”

“Yeah.”

He’s dialing Missandei’s phone the second he gets into his car, putting her on the speakers as he starts up his car and backs out the parking spot. Her voice rings out clearly and kind of distractedly. She’s asking him what he needs — and she’s asking him what he needs because for years now, the only time he ever calls her is when he needs her to spring into action right away. Like he’s cooking dinner and he needs a bulb of garlic so he calls her when she’s on her way home from work to tell
her to get her ass to the grocery store to buy him a bulb of garlic.

For this reason, her voice is also tight and impatient. Over the speakers, her voice is saying, “I’m taking care of dinner! I’m cooking right now, sheezus!” which is pre-emptively defensive. She probably thinks he’s calling to boss her around and to tell her to get moving on dinner so that it’s ready upon his arrival.

He says, “Wow. I am the very best.”

“Huh?”

“Babe, I just called to shoot the shit with you. I didn’t call to tell you all the ways you are probably fucking up dinner.”

“Ha ha,” she says sarcastically, her voice crackling with momentary static. He can hear running water in the background. He can hear her banging pots and pans around. He can hear her say, “How was therapy?”

“Um, he just cleared me to have sex with you.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, it was crazy and I wasn’t expecting it. I literally spent the entire session talking about my lackluster non-boners and then at the end of it, he told me that my homework was to talk to you about this. And then to have a go with the Cialis.”

“Oh my God,” she mutters. “I get it now. You are calling me because it’s your homework, you nerd.” Then after a pause, she says. “You are also calling me to warn me that you’re gonna try and tear shit up tonight. Man, Grey. Such finesse. Such subtlety. Such a romantic.”

Missandei comically chugs her glass of wine at the same time that Grey knocks back a tablet of Cialis with a glass of water. If she’s honest with herself, she finds it all to be a touch overly clinical, and she also feels a lot of pressure to have sex with the guy tonight — not that that’s typically a hardship for her — but she’s still trying to figure out how she feels about the medication. She’s been trying to convince Grey that he is really dick-centric, and he really doesn’t need to be. She might actually disagree with his therapist — that it’s time to make sex all conventional again. She thought she’d have more time to try and rewire Grey’s brain.

There’s so much subtext and so many butterflies in her gut, as she starts taking off her clothes in front of him. He’s murmured to her that it could take up to half an hour. She has tried to be sexy and flirty. She has told him that it means he has half an hour of foreplay to fill. There’s this radiation of nerves just emanating off of him — and it’s like he can’t even hear her trying to be cute with him. He just absently nods and looks at the clock on their nightstand.

When she’s naked, she straddles him on the bed and plants full kisses onto his soft lips as her fingers work to undo the closure of his pants.
He drops his forehead right into the middle of her sternum, in between her breasts. He screams out, “What the fuck!”

Missandei licks her lips as she rubs up and down his spine with her hand. She says, “Baby, it’s okay —”

“What the fuck is going on! I might as well be eating fucking Tic Tacs!”

She brought up a bowl of clams and a crusty loaf of bread, and she’s eating the rest of her dinner topless on the bed as she watches him be too distracted to even bitch her out about raining crumbs down on the bed. He had been so eager to check off having super heteronormative sex from his list of shit to do that he didn’t really let her enjoy dinner. He had been so eager to go for sex that he didn’t really bother tasting any of the work she put into the meal. The clams are briny and juicy and buttery. There’s a nice acidity from half the bottle of wine she poured into the broth. And the bread is from his favorite bakery that she stopped at on her lunch break.

She moans, shoving another sopping wet bite of bread into her mouth. “Oh man, baby, I really nailed this. I put some fennel fronds on it left over from the salad, and it gives it this nice peppery anise flavor. I mean, I didn’t even follow a recipe, Grey! This came from my head! Gosh, I’m like, a pretty decent cook now! Don’t you think? Baby, do you want some?”

“Maybe I should go back to work and get a real fucking job,” he tells her tightly, spinning on his heels to face her. He’s standing on the floor, at the foot of their bed. “Maybe — for fucking real, I need to procure some morphine and shove that shit up my ass again. But you know what? I bet you that none of that shit would even work because why would it! Because why would shit actually work out for me!”

“Oh, okay,” she says casually. “So I guess we’re still not done talking about your penis.” After a short pause, she shouts, “You’re fucking being hysterical, Grey! I’m so sorry you have a fucking gigantic house on a lake! I’m so sorry you have a fucking hot wife who fucking adores the shit out of you! I’m so sorry we’ve had sex like, fucking every day lately. But it’s all about your fucking cock, isn’t it? All roads lead back to your fucking cock, I guess!”

“Okay,” he says calmly now. “I get what you’re doing. I hear how ridiculous it sounds. Point proven, you fucking bitch.”

She pats the bed. “Come here, baby.”
She rolls over and lets out a really garlicky burp right into his face and — just as his expression screws up in disgust — she smiles down at him, cups his cheek, and starts making out with him. She drapes half of her body over his, feeling the fabric of her cotton underwear twist against her skin.

Against her mouth, he mutters, “You’re trying to change the subject,” right before he pushes her over flat on her back and presses her body deep into the mattress with his weight. She groans and grinds against his thigh. He whispers, “If I didn’t know any better, I would say that you’re actually relieved that the Cialis didn’t work, you crafty motherfucker.” He says it before he dips back down to kiss her, which goes hard, which becomes more urgent and frantic and wet.

She gasps and hisses as he gropes her breast, as he lightly bites down on her neck. Her sigh is hot and breathy as she rasps, “Take it off.”

“Take what off, Missandei?” he whispers, pretending like he doesn’t know exactly what she is talking about.

She is already shimmying out of her underwear.

The sex is predictable — only because they have had so much fucking sex with each other over the years — and it is still just everything. She bangs her fist on the wall to release this aggressive tension coiled up inside of her, as she throbs and as she starts to leak tears down the side of her face because this shit is crazy.

It’s like he has something to prove. It’s like she has a stand to make. For both of these reasons, her orgasm is choking when it hits. She’s loud and she’s vocal and she’s blubbering that it is so good as she comes on his face. He keeps fucking with the smoothness of it by pausing to watch, and she’s crying as she yells at him to fucking keep going.

Grey calls his doctor after the major fail with the Cialis, and Dr. Thompson simply tells him to try again. She reiterates that his testosterone levels look good and his blood pressure is great and his cholesterol is great and he is just the perfect specimen of a man — she reiterates that there is nothing physically wrong with him, which could actually be why the Cialis did not yield desired results. She tells him to try again anyways. She reminds him that the pill is not a magic bullet. Arousal is still necessary. She asks him if he was sexually stimulated after he took the med — like he is fucking stupid or something.

Once again, Grey wants to shout what the fuck at her, into the phone. He wants to say of course he was fucking stimulated. He was simulated as fuck. There was a fucking super attractive naked woman in his fucking bed begging him to fuck her — or eating a fucking bowl of clams — but nothing fucking happened — besides the amazing oral sex that happened.

Dr. Thompson doesn’t seem to understand that this shit is ruining his life. She seems to think that he should be glad that he’s in such tiptop shape. She basically implies that his erection problem is all in his head — and he should just get over his performance anxiety.

The lack of concern coming from this woman almost breaks Grey’s mind because he’s still
sometimes so prone to believing that he’s always one step away from death. He blurs that he is seeing a therapist.

She says, “Oh, that’s a good idea,” breezily, before she tells him she has to get off the phone.

Grey starts taking the Cialis liberally, and at random times — which is kind of concerning to her, save for the fact that nothing happens to him. He does get a little bit of a headache — which she latches onto. She tells him that it must mean the drug is actually potent and that he didn’t just get a sugar pill and he isn’t being fucked with by his medical professionals — that this isn’t some inane long game designed to make him nuts like he is theorizing.

“Amari’s great, huh?” Jaime says conversationally, leaning against the railing of his deck, a glass of lemonade in his hand. “Has he said anything about me? Probably not, huh? Man, I miss that guy. I wonder how his life is going all the time. Can you tell him I said hello?”

Grey doesn’t even dignify any of that with a response. He just sloshes his minty lemonade around until some of it spills over his hand, and then he gripes and complains about spilling it over his hand. He complains that it’s all cold and wet and stuff.

Missandei walks up with a wad of napkins — having overheard him bitching and moaning about the lemonade. She wipes him down wordlessly before she retreats to throw away the napkins.

Drogo watches the entire interaction with interest. He’s sipping from his own glass as he also watches Brienne lay down a cheese board on the patio table. Drogo says, “How are things going with you guys otherwise?”

“Me and Amari?” Grey asks quizzically.

“No, stupid,” Drogo says in slight exasperation. “You and Missy.”

Missandei overhears that, too. She takes the liberty of answering for the both of them. As she walks a stack of plates over the table, she says, “Things are going good. We’re rock solid and stuff, in spite of Grey’s best efforts at ruining things with his shitty mood.”

“I was actually talking about sex specifically,” Drogo says plainly. “Are you giving him the sex?”

Missandei freezes. Jaime is being very obvious with the throat-slashing motions he is making. It seems that they have talked about this like a bunch of gossiping hags. It seems like they are operating under a misapprehension. Missandei narrows her eyes. And then she dangerously says, “Excuse me?”

Drogo grins at her like he doesn’t even give a fuck about living, like he’s not scared of hurting her
feelings with his assumptions. He actually completely ignores her and directs his next question to Grey — who, to his credit, looks completely uncomfortable. Drogo asks, “Have you guys taken the train to B-town yet?”

“Oh, great,” Missy says sarcastically. “Definitely talk around inside jokes so I can’t tell how exactly you guys are making fun of me, you jerks.”

Drogo is being Drogo and is acting like it’s all one big joke. Jaime is being Jaime and is acting like smothering giggles and being a fucking hypeman gives him purpose in life. Grey is strategically not doing jack — he’s not placating her because he probably knows she will go apeshit if he did that, and he’s not nudging elbows with Drogo because he probably knows that she will slap his face off if he did that. Brienne and Dany are just being their normal, lovely selves.

And Missy is probably being touchy and overly sensitive like how she gets sometimes. So it’s a personality flaw to care too much. So what? So her feelings are little bit hurt. So what? So she’s a bit dramatic sometimes. So what? Is that really so terrible?

And once again, one man’s obsession with his dick is taking so much focus away from one woman’s immense efforts at creating a really nice meal.

“Jaime actually cooked,” Brienne says.

“Huh?”

“Jaime actually made dinner. Not me,” she clarifies.

“Huh?”

“Missandei,” Grey interjects. “You actually muttered that last bit out loud.” And then he clears his throat carefully. He’s wiping the condensation from his glass of lemonade. And then in a very moderated tone, he says, “So, Jaime. I’m sorry for taking focus away from your immense efforts at creating a really nice meal for all of us — with my obsession with my dick.”

Jaime sounds strangled — because he’s currently dying from not laughing — as he says, “Um, it’s alright, boo. I mean, we all have moments. Where we wonder. About the state of things. Down there.”

After dinner smooths out — after she stops being so butt-hurt and paranoid over all the stuff that they must’ve said about her to each other behind her back — she’s sucking down a really tart lemon sorbet that Jaime made, hollowing out her cheeks. She feels Grey’s hand crawl against the back of her neck before he grabs hold, before he lightly digs his thumb into her carotid artery and feels around for her pulse.
To the rest of the group, he says, “So Missandei has actually been amazing lately. Not at all a prudish bitch-shrew, like what you called her, Drogo.”

“What!” Drogo gasps, immediately straightening in his seat. “I never said that! Missy, I never called you that!”

“You think you’re so funny,” she says, feeling her shoulders droop, looking Grey in the face. “But you’re not. How is it funny when no one can tell when your jokes are actually jokes?”

“I can tell when his jokes are jokes,” Jaime pipes in helpfully.

“We get it,” Brienne says. “You freaking love him more than anything else in the world.”

“You sound jelly,” Jaime says evenly.

“No,” she corrects. “I sound like I’m real tired of watching the Jaime, Drogo, and Grey Show.”

“Thanks for including my name in the show title even though it’s obvious they love each other more than they love me,” Drogo says.

“Yeah, seriously, thank you,” Dany adds. “Drogo likes to cry out his feelings about that kind of thing and tell me about it. Pretty much all the time.”

Drogo reaches out to gently nudge her. “Geez, stop making me sound so cool and awesome all the time.”

She’s curled up against him, holding onto him tightly. She’s alternating between sweeping her palm up and down his bare chest and pressing soft, chaste kisses against his cheek and neck. She tells him that he smells so good. She asks him if he knows just how lucky they both are. She expands on it, and she clarifies. She whispers, “To have what we have, to have each other.”

He lifts the blanket up higher, covering her bare shoulder. He says, “Yeah, I know. I think about it a lot actually.”

Grey announces to Amari that the Cialis didn’t work worth shit — which garners a look of non-surprise — which inspires Grey to ask Amari if Amari just sent him on a fucking fool’s errand then.

Amari says that he actually didn’t know which way it was going to go. He was hopeful that it could help, but he’s not surprised that it didn’t.

Grey is especially irritable during this session — partly due to Amari’s emotional evenness in the
face of Grey’s extreme displeasure with everything — and also just abstractly. And also because his dick is just never going to work ever again. He tells Amari he just feels jittery like something unpleasant wants to break out of his fucking skull. He repeats a lot of facts that he just knows — that his life is fucking great and his wife is fucking great and he has everything he could ever fucking want — but it might not be enough. He still feels excessively stressed out over the dumbest shit. He can tell he is actively seeking out things to feel stressed out over. He puts out this theory. He tells Amari that maybe he’s fucking mental and he’s the kind of person that cannot actually fucking handle contentment and happiness. Maybe he’s the kind of person that is forever seeking out fucking dysfunction because he thrives on that shit. Grey talks about what a fucking hurricane of failure he’s been lately and how that’s been driving him nuts, too.

When he hazards a look up at Amari — Grey feels really ashamed and kind of embarrassed over the outburst. He says, “I’m sorry.”

Amari says, “It’s okay.”

Amari talks a long time about anxiety and the need for control being a symptom of trying to manage anxiety. This is how Grey distills down the entire five-minutes worth of content that Amari lays down. There’s something in the articulation and the entire conceit of talk therapy that Grey honestly does not get, but he’s going through the motions and he’s trying to buy into the process and he’s putting forth his very best effort because it means something to her.

“You talk about Missandei with a lot of passion and respect.”

Grey can only respond with a guarded look. “I mean, I also call her a bitch when she’s being one. To her face. Just to keep it real.”

Amari smiles. “Sometimes our need to protect ourselves come out a bit counterintuitively.” Upon Grey’s blank look of utter non-comprehension, Amari says, “It seems to me — and correct me if I’m wrong — that you obviously care about her a lot and you have a great deal of admiration for her. But what I’ve been seeing is that it seems uncomfortable for you to express how you feel about your wife, so sometimes after you say something complimentary about her, you immediately turn around and you make a caustic comment about her that you play off like a joke. Would you say that you do this fairly often?”

Grey shakes his head at himself. He says, “I do this like, all the time. She’s really great because she puts up with it. Why do you think I do this?”

“Why do you think you do this?”

Grey sighs. Then he twists his face in the most tension-filled frown. He bitterly says, “I feel like the fucking obvious answer you want me to give is to say it’s because all the trauma. All of the fucking trauma of my fucking life. I feel like I’m supposed to say that, and it’s supposed to be some breakthrough.”
Amari tells Grey that he’s obviously very intelligent and he’s obviously skeptical about the value of therapy. Amari asks Grey what he needs — in terms of therapy.

Grey succinctly says, “I need the truth. I need the facts. I need things that are concrete. I don’t need dressing. I don’t need philosophy. I don’t need spiritualism. I don’t need to answer questions about what my place in the fucking universe is or what the meaning of life is.”

“How?” Amari says. “What do you want to know? I’ll give it to you straight.”

“Do you think I’m severely depressed?” Grey asks, point-blank.

“It’s a little more specific and nuanced than that. I’ve also only had three sessions with you. But right now, I can tell you that I think you are probably suffering from a form of post-traumatic stress disorder and probably have been for decades now.”

“Oh, shit,” Grey says. “Yeah, I’d buy that. Okay. Do you think I need to be medicated?”

“I haven’t come to a conclusion on that yet. I don’t know enough about you yet.”

“Okay, fair. Why do you think the Cialis didn’t work for me?”

“People respond to drugs differently. It’s possible another medication would be more effective for you — but maybe not. I know you don’t want to hear this, but while most cases of ED tend to be physical — I think that yours is actually psychological.”

“So I’m doing this to myself, and it’s all in my head.”

“No. I wouldn’t put it that way at all.”

“Do you think losing my job has anything to do with it?”

“Again, I don’t know you well enough yet. And this is an inexact science. But if I had to guess, I’d say losing your job was probably a trigger.”

“Do you think I’ll ever get an erection again?”

“Yeah. I’m hopeful about it.”

“Oh, good,” Grey mutters. “At least one of us should be. What does the process entail — like, fixing the PTSD or whatever?”

“I don’t know yet. I think it will likely be a combination of cognitive behavioral therapy and exposure therapy — maybe eye movement desensitization and reprocessing.”

“Missandei went through cognitive behavioral therapy some years back, and she’s way less batshit these days.” After a beat, Grey cracks a smile and he says, “See, that was a joke. I was bringing it back to what we talked about at the beginning. It was a joke, but it’s also true. Do you get it?”

Amari grins. He dryly says, “Yes, I get it, Grey.”
Missy hates teenagers

Everyone finds the fact that he is now in real estate sales to be hilarious — which he doesn’t understand beyond the tired old joke that he is generally awkward around people. He talks to a bunch of brokerage firms and blatantly lies to them and acts like being a real estate agent is something he actually wants to do. He leaves these meetings rolling his eyes and telling himself that everyone is wrong about him. He is not awkward around people at all. He is actually likable as fuck when he wants to be.

He goes with a national brokerage firm based on their commission split. He doesn’t anticipate doing much in sales beyond the random transactions that he will do for friends and family whenever they need him to — but of course, he isn’t extremely transparent about this.

He picks a day when Missandei has to work late. It’s a Thursday, and that is the day that he spends hours driving with Pia from place to place.

Just like most everyone who considers buying a place for the very first time, Pia is constantly in sticker shock. She keeps saying that she thought her money would buy a garage or at least a big yard. He tells telling her not to be dumb — of course her money isn’t going to buy a garage or a big yard in the neighborhood that she wants to live in. Naturally, her response to that is to bitch and moan and ask the heavens why housing prices are so sky-high. He pretty much wants to choke her to death because he doesn’t even have the fucking time to explain the real estate market or fucking capitalism to her. She’d only give him a third of her attention, anyway.

“Ugh, the appliances are white. I hate white. I wish they were stainless steel.”

Grey cracks his neck. Then he says, “You know you can buy new shit and paint walls different colors and re-landscape the land, right? You need to look past this cosmetic shit and at whether you can live in this specific location, whether the architecture of the house is what you want, and whether there are repairs or renovations that are beyond your ability to take care of.”

“Beep-beep, does not compute. Please restart, Grey-bot.”

Jaime taught her that. Jaime gave her permission to start sassing Grey. Grey does not find this shit nearly as amusing as everyone else does.

Missy doesn’t realize what a misanthrope she has become due to her babe’s influence — what a skeptic of love she now is — until Adara and Kamil’s short three-day stopover in King’s Landing on their way home for the summer. Adara brings her boyfriend, who is actually a Westeros-born Naathi dipshit. Missandei cannot even blame his skin color on his utter lameness.
They keep sucking face with each other as she tries to carry on a conversation with Kamil over lunch. It is disgusting. She says to Kamil, “If you’re interested in finance, you might want to talk to Grey about it because he worked in finance. Often what you study in school is different from what it’s like being on the job.” Even as these words come out of her mouth, she cannot even hear what she is saying, because she is so disgusted with what she’s seeing.

Andy’s greatest sin is that he talked too much about himself, when Missandei politely asked him what he is studying in school. He expanded and also told her what he plans to do after graduation. Maybe a think-tank. Maybe a start-up. Adara looks at him with such adoration. It is so disgusting.

Missy decides that there will not be any premarital sex happening in her house — so she does not let Adara and Andy — or as she has started calling him behind his back: Mr. Pretentious Blah-Guy — sleep in the same room. Adara looks horrified when Missandei gives them options. Either Andy and Kamil can bunk down together in the second guest room, or they can all sleep apart and one of them takes the couch in the living room.

Adara is very vague when she reminds Missandei that she is like almost, 22 years old now.

Missandei blankly and kinda-condemningly says, “I don’t see what point you are trying to make to me.”

“I hate that kid,” Missandei spits, right after she finishes brushing her teeth.

Grey materializes next to her and leans his butt against their bathroom vanity. His arms are crossed over his chest. There’s the barest of smiles on his face as he says, “You’re being really subtle about your dislike of him. I like how you look like you want to vomit every time they touch each other.” He spontaneously leans in and smushes his face against her cheek, sniffing her. Into her neck, he says, “She’s probably going to marry him now. Because you disapprove of him and all. Isn’t that how it worked with us?”

She clears her throat. “You and me were different,” she says pointedly. “My grandma was cray, and my brothers were overprotective for no reason.”

“Yeah,” Grey deadpans. “Because I didn’t lure you away from purity with lots of premarital sex, and my personality is inherently likable.”

“Well, you’re at least hot so it was fucking obvious why I was having lots of premarital sex with you,” she says stonily. “That Andy kid is like, short and it doesn’t look like he likes to exercise. He’s actually kind of ugly like a troll. I don’t get what she sees in him. I get what he sees in her. My sister is like, really cute and pretty. She’s so dumb though. She’s slumming it so hard. I bet he’s never given her an orgasm. Not fucking once because he’s probably so selfish and inept at sex.”
Grey’s laugh is loud and startled. He widens his eyes at her, and he grabs ahold of her hips. He says, “That was actually really mean and really superficial!”

“I didn’t say it to his face,” she mutters. “Just to you.”

“Baby,” she says into the dark, with her hands laid on top of each other, on her stomach. “Babe, are you still awake?” Upon getting no answer from him, Missy actually reaches over and slams her hand into his shoulder. She says, “Grey! Are you awake?”

He blearily gasps awake, reaching over to defensively rub his shoulder. She hears the bed sheet rustling. She sees the dark figure of his body and his face rolling over onto his side to face her. She hears him say, “What the fuck, man? You know better than to wake me up suddenly. I could’ve strangled you dead.”


“What the fuck, man?” he repeats. “What do you need?”

“What kind of mother do you think I’d be?”

“Oh my God,” he mutters. “We can’t be having this conversation right now.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m tired, babe,” he grinds out, now rolling over so he’s on his stomach, still facing her. He reaches out to absently pet her thigh, before he cups her cheek and holds it in his palm. “I love you though, so please don’t get touchy with me for being tired.”

“I guess more specifically, I’m wondering what kind of mother I’d be to a daughter,” Missandei says, actually deciding to completely ignore what Grey just said. “It’s all so easy with Kamil. It always has been. He’s so sweet and open and easy-going. And in contrast, his sister is fucking moody asshole. She always has been. And you know — I know what it’s like to feel like your parents don’t get you. And I know what it feels like to be obsessed with some boy at the expense of yourself. And you’d think that, having the experience that I do with all of this stuff — you’d think I’d be more empathetic. But I want to rip her away from fucking dull-ass blah-guy because he’s not worthy, and I want to tell her how to live her life because it’s so frustrating — all the things she doesn’t know and all the self-worth she needs to gain. I want to beat the shit out of her, so she’d be more self-confident. That’s completely counter-intuitive. I am crazy.”

She hears him softly groan next to her. She actually feels his hand transfer from her cheek to her boob, which he thoroughly rubs and pinches before settling in a comfort-hold. She is just generally waiting this out — she’s generally waiting for his logic to be apparent.

His voice is laden with sleepiness when he finally says, “I think you’re being especially hard on her because you see too much of yourself in her. Be kind to yourself, baby.”
She can only respond with stunned silence. In that time, he falls back asleep.

To be honest, Grey doesn’t like Andy that much either. Andy is too familiar and a know-it-all. Andy grabs the bottle of whiskey from the freezer and pours himself a glass in front of them, and Grey has to pull an apoplectic Missandei from the kitchen before she can fat-shame the kid in a rage. Grey may have saved that kid’s fucking life, but he also really has very little tolerance for this kind of fucking bullshit.

He also doesn’t particularly like Adara that much these days. His feelings on Adara probably started to turn a little bit when he learned that their mother told Adara to avoid being alone with him because apparently he gives off some strong sexual assault vibes, some strong rapist vibes. It bothered him that he was talked about like that. But that wasn’t at all Adara’s fault, and she was just a kid when that incident happened. It’s just that, that kind of information messes with the brain.

Adara also didn’t endear herself to him when she freaked out and tried to hit him that one time. But then Missandei slapped Adara across the face in retribution, so he supposes that he can call that particular incident a zero-sum incident.

Maybe he doesn’t really have a good reason for not liking Adara. Maybe he is an asshole, too. Just like his wife. Maybe they are both being dicks to this girl for no reason at all.

He likes Kamil though. He likes Kamil a lot. Kamil is athletic so they can kill a lot of time together going on runs or kicking balls around. Grey’s thinking about taking Kamil to the gym and letting that kid and his boundless energy run the racquetball court. Or maybe they can gather enough people for a pick-up game. Or maybe they can do a quick 9-hole.

“Yo, Kamil,” he suddenly hollers, watching Missandei’s younger brother’s head pop up from where he was slouching and tinkering with his tablet on the couch. “Wanna go hit some balls around?”

“Ooh!” Kamil says, positively squealing, already getting up to go put on his shoes. This is why Grey likes this kid. “I am down!”

“Hey, don’t be a dick,” Missandei says, coming up behind Grey and squeezing his butt. The action is hidden behind the kitchen counter, but he still twists out of her grasp because there’s a fucking child in the room — granted an 18-year-old child, but still. “Take Andy with you guys,” she says.

Grey’s heart kind of drops into his stomach at that.

From behind sunglasses, with her arms lightly folded across her chest, Missandei watches as Adara carefully sips a lemon drop martini. They are outside on a restaurant’s patio. Missy resists reminiscing and telling Adara about how she remembers what it was like to be 21 years old, she remembers lemon drop martini benders. She remembers waking up in a pile of her own drool with
last night’s clothes still on. She remembers agonizing over when life was going to really start as she simultaneously was kinda scared-shitless over it. Missy also remembers all the faking it until she made it.

She doesn’t tell Adara this because the last few times she tried, she was pretty much shut down. Adara doesn’t really want to hear her patronizing wisdom, it seems.

“So Andy seems nice,” Missandei says conversationally.

“I know you don’t like him,” Adara throws back snippily. “But you didn’t like Yussef either.”

It’s not at all a shocker when, in the middle of Grey’s discussion with Kamil on how analytics in basketball continues to change the game, in ways wholly different than it did baseball, Andy interrupts to make it all about himself and how smart he thinks he is. Grey’s in the middle of babbling about player tracking and the evaluation of the efficiency of a team by analyzing player movement — when Andy pipes in and says, “I’ve read lots of articles about the cultishness of sports culture, which fosters this kind of conservative collectivism in people. Personally, I think it’s very problematic that a bunch of white people gather in a stadium to cheer on a socially acceptable form of Black male brutality and aggression. And let’s not forget that the owners of these sports teams are often really rich white men.”

Kamil is a really open and sweet guy. So his face is bare and he’s all ready to say something like, oh really? Tell me more!

But Grey is just beyond fucking annoyed with this shit. He says, “I’m Black. I like sports. Where do I fit into your simplistic equation?”

“Well,” Andy says, avoiding eye contact and shifting on his feet now, because he was clearly not expecting confrontation. “I was paraphrasing a bunch of research.”

“Oh okay,” Grey says sarcastically. “Definitely keep criticizing collectivism with overly generalized statements then.”

When they all get back together for dinner, Andy is sulking, Adara is moody, poor Kamil is being quiet — and Grey and Missandei are super tired and counting down the hours until they can drop their house guests off at the airport.

They also have no time alone together to trade notes — to explain to each other how they each feel like they royally shoved their foot into their mouths — and also to complain to each other about how fucking sensitive and fragile kids are these days.

Missandei doesn’t get the chance to tell him that maybe her relationship with her sister is just doomed
forever. Missy will forever be this relative who is part-stranger, part-resentful benefactor. Adara will forever be the child who was stuck being raised by their parents while Missandei drank from the cup of freedom and got to do whatever the fuck she wanted for her entire life. Missy will always get to be irritatingly high and mighty, and Adara will forever have to listen to Missandei’s shit because Missandei gave her money at some point.

All Missandei can really do at the moment is to tightly wrap her arms around him when they have a short five-second breather next to the fridge — he’s grabbing the marinated beef — and she murmurs, “I’m so glad we don’t have kids.”

Grey tells Amari that he grew up among a lot of scarcity — which is a real oxymoron. He tells Amari that his parents evidently were shit at birth control because he ended up popping out in the midst of some serious famine — the sixth child to a family that was already starving, which is sometimes just fucking crazy to him. He tells Amari that he thinks he can remember his parents being religious — about as religious as people from that culture and that time period probably tended to be. Like, they probably were not fanatic. But they also saw a purpose and a trajectory and a reason for the arrival of their youngest child. So they kept him alive.

“I honestly can’t remember very much from childhood,” Grey says. “I don’t know if it’s repression for the sake of self-protection or what. But I struggle to remember old things all the time. And then when I catch myself remembering something terrible — well, it’s terrible. And I’m like, what’s the fucking point in remembering this shit?” He sighs. “Stop, don’t answer that. I already know what the point in remembering this shit is. It was a frustrated, rhetorical question.”

Grey likes to dedicate at least five minutes of every therapy session to sex — because it is not embarrassing and annoying at all — his non-progress on that front. He partly brings it up to be proactive, to beat Amari to the punch. He tells Amari that his dick is still so fucking pointless and useless — beyond peeing — that he might as well not even have it. He tells Amari that when he says these things out loud — sort of as a joke — Missandei kind of freaks out on him and yells at him and accuses him of being sexist. She likes to sarcastically ask him if it just the end of the world to him, to be like a woman. And sometimes her logic-leaps are just so fucking bananas to him that they just inspire him to say the wrong things to her. Like, he tells her to stop being fucking insane. He tells her that being a guy with a jacked up dick is actually nothing like being a fucking woman, so no. He’s not being sexist at all. However, she is being real idiotic.

And then she gets upset when he says stuff like that. And then they fight. Which is stupid because their entire interaction only started because he was trying to fucking have sex with that jerk.

“She keeps saying that sex does not revolve around my dick — sex is not about my dick. Sex is not always penis in the vagina. Sex is a state of mind. Sex is broad. Sex is blah blah blah whatever. This shit is like, her fucking mantra these days. And I get it. I get her point of view on this. But — come on, man. When you’ve had something great — and then you don’t get to have it anymore. Come on.
It sucks. It really sucks. Is this what getting old is gonna be all about? Because I am not into it, man. Should I just fucking kill myself, right now?” Grey pauses. “Missandei really hates that joke.”

“So Grey, what I’m hearing from you is a lot of, ‘I think’ and ‘I believe’ — it’s all very logical and rational. You are telling me that you are frustrated with Missandei because she keeps steering the conversation off-topic — in your estimation — is that accurate?”

“Okay, yes, that is accurate,” Grey mutters. “Not crazy about how you worded that because I can tell we’re heading into a territory where you’re about to tell me I’m being an asshole, and I’m kind of wrong on this, but okay. Sure. Keep saying stuff.”

Amari smiles.

When Mossador gets all big-brother-y on the phone with her — that is, when he starts refuting her own concept of herself with big sweeping statements about what women are put on Earth to do — make babies — Missandei kind of momentarily goes nuts and she blurts out, “I don’t think I can get pregnant from anal sex, man. And that is the only kind of sex we’ve been having.” She purposefully left it ambiguous. She purposefully let it sound misleading to teach her brother a lesson about what women are put on Earth to do.

The other end is dead silent.

She laughs — nervously. She says, “I’m kidding! Gosh, I’m kidding! I wish I can see the look on your face right now!”

Grey’s new thing in the evening is spending an hour or so on his laptop, writing stuff down — just long, long blocks of paragraphs. This is coming out of a guy who professes to have gone out of his way to avoid taking college courses that required essay writing.

When she first asked him what he is doing — he told her that he started journaling. He then dryly told her Amari told him to start writing out his thoughts and stuff.

She wants to ask him like, so many things. She wants to ask him what he is thinking about, what he is writing, if she could actually like, read what he is writing or would that be completely fucking way weird for him? She wants to ask him if it’s a lot easier to tell his therapist things than it is for him to tell her things — and if that’s the case, is it okay? Is it normal? If it’s not normal — if they have a communication issue — does she make it hard for him to talk to her about certain things? She would really like to work on this so that he doesn’t have to keep it all inside all the time.

She actually kind of gets a little bit teary when she rides out this train of thought too long. She starts to feel kind of bad for all the things that she evidently cannot be.
Missandei generally leaves him alone and leaves it alone, though. She spends the evening playing around with 2.0, flipping the dog onto her back and giving her belly rubs. They spend the hour watching TV together as Missandei cradles the dog tightly against her chest and imagines what it would be like if the dog was actually like, a human baby. She imagines how she would feel about this.

They’ve gotten into this pattern where they come together in bed after the lights are off, and they start automatically kissing and feeling each other up. Every night, in spite of how sore and tired her vagina is, there is a check-in on the state of his penis. She runs her tongue into his mouth to move things along, and her hands sneak into his underwear so that she can gently touch and hold him for a little bit — before something snaps inside of him — something in his brain — before he comes to some sort of conclusion or decision that results in him pulling down her underwear and pushing her legs apart.

Tonight though, with her hand down his pants, he says to her, “Can I tell you something?”

Her hand stills. She says, “You can tell me anything.”

He says, “I’ve been thinking a lot about this, and I think I’ve worked out some thoughts.”

“Okay.”

“I really miss the sex we used to have.”

“Baby,” she says patiently. “I know that. Because you tell me this, like all the time.”

“Christ, Missandei. Give me a minute. I’m going somewhere with this.”

He tells her that he misses the sex that they used to have because it physically felt good — it actually felt fucking great. He tells her that the feeling of being inside her — the heat and the wetness and the pressure and the repetitive push and pull of it — that stuff is really, really fantastic. It’s hard not to miss that.

The words — the sound of his voice as he says it all — low and moderated and careful — it really gets her in the guts. Her face and her body kind of flush and throb even though no specific memory of sex comes to mind. She can’t stop herself from laying her palm over her beating heart.

He tells her that the way they currently have sex also feels physically really good — and this is something he’s really grateful to her for because she really took the lead and she really read his mind and his fears. He tells her that honestly, if he had to quantify it — the orgasms he has via prostate are actually bigger — more comprehensive, longer, more intense — than the ones via penis. He says, “So there’s a fun fact for you.”
He says, “So I’ve been trying to figure out why I’m so fucking attached to dick-gasms when butt-gasms are actually so much better. And I really like how I’m talking about this like I’m 13 years old, but I’m just like, really awkward and nervous when it comes to talking about sex, you know?”

She feels like she’s burning up in bed. She says, “You’re doing really great, babe.”

He sighs. “I miss being inside you, dude. I miss us coming at the same time — as I’m inside you. I miss being able to easily look at your face during sex. I miss feeling like we’re actively doing something together, simultaneously. I think that’s probably why I keep saying I miss you — even though you are right here, in front of my face. I really do just miss you. I mean like — like, I miss that feeling of like — of like, connection beyond what is physical, you know? I miss like, the entire experience. Um, does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” she whispers.

“So I don’t know. I think, if we can figure out like — how to have sex — so that it’s like — more like connection-y — like, I think that would be nice? I think I would be way less whiny about my shitty dick.”

Therapy becomes cemented as something that’s actually useful to him — when he wakes up the next morning and doesn’t feel immediately smacked in the face with a pervading sense of dread. He wakes up kind of refreshed. She is curled up on her side of the bed, with the blanket rumpled around her body, having stolen them, having tossed and turned a few times overnight.

He carries on with his routine. He picks out an outfit for her. He pulls out slacks and a fitted but wispy blouse for her. He hooks the hangers over the door handle of their closet before he goes downstairs to make breakfast.

He hands her coffee after she comes downstairs. The way she looks at him is just too fucking much. He just keeps smiling back at her — and they both keep not saying much to each other — like a couple of idiots. He just keeps observing to himself that she’s so fucking amazing and beautiful and he just wishes she didn’t have to go to work — that they were independently wealthy so that he could trap her at home and hang out with her all day.

Her body is a little concave and her shoulders are a little bit hunched over, when he says goodbye to her at the car. She’s looking up at him kind of shyly.

She expels out a breath. She says, “Um, you should know. That my underwear. Is a fucking mess right now. You need to stop looking at me like that.”

He says, “Goddammit,” as his hand just doesn’t give a fuck and does what it wants, as his hand slides between her legs and feels her up through her slacks. “You’re very warm.”

She falls back a little and lightly smacks against the car. She hisses. She says, “You are being hot as hell right now, and I cannot stand it. Should I call in sick today? No, I’m joking. I’m a fucking adult.” She reaches down, grabs his wrist, and extricates his hand from between her legs. “Fuck me
later with your mouth though, okay?”

It is agonizing to tell her that he loves her sometimes, because it’s just not enough sometimes.
He tells Amari that alone time with his mother was rare and really special because he was the youngest and thus always fighting for attention. He can remember the feeling of being held by her as his ears eagerly drank up a story that she told him — some sort of origin myth about the ocean and the islands that he can no longer remember the details of. He tells Amari that there was a moment in college where he masochistically stayed up all night and tried to Google the story because it got into his head at one point. It made him miss his first class the following day because he overslept.

“What did it feel like, exactly, to be held by your mother?” Amari asks.

“Oh God,” Grey mutters, voice quiet and low. He rubs his face with his hand, before he says, “I was just a little kid, so it felt warm. It felt safe. I felt happy. I thought my mother was the most beautiful woman. It is a terrible memory.”

“Because of what happened later,” Amari fills in.

“Yes, because of the betrayal that happened later,” Grey says in a deadpan.

Grey’s in the middle of leisurely eating an onion bagel next to a trash bin outside of the bagel shop with their dog when she calls him. He’s not expecting the call but his mouth automatically curves into a smile anyway. He’s kind of in the middle of laughing already, when he answers the call and says, “Hey, baby.”

Her voice is perfunctory and brisk — which is a jarring one-eighty from the sex-voice he said goodbye to in the morning. It’s like a wasabi-punch to the nose, and he sharply inhales.

She must be surrounded by her colleagues. On the phone, Missandei asks him if he is busy. He had these plans to go to the dog park with 2.0 and teach her to not dork out so hard when faced with playing rottweilers and huskies as he simultaneously teaches himself not to respond to people’s polite inquiries on his dog’s breed with randomly pointless and defensive aggression. When he tells Missandei that he is not particularly busy, she asks him if he minds getting his butt midtown because there is a damsel in distress clutching the side of a building, waiting for him outside of a high-rise.

She’s trying to be funny — and he doesn’t get it. But they are at the point in their cohabitation where
he doesn’t bother asking the questions. He’s all blind trust now. He starts heading to the car with Momo 2.0. He knows that Missandei is probably not leading him to some terrible impending death scenario.

And it all makes sense and he gets why it’s funny, when he shows up at the address twenty minutes later.

Dany’s glossy platinum head is like a beacon that he can see from a block away. Her pale hands are pressed against granite. Her lips are curled in a perma-frown. And she is rocking some incredibly unflattering pitch black shades that swallow up half her face.

Grey rolls down the window as he pulls up to the curb. Momo 2.0 is pressing her small feet into his hip. He says, “Yo! Somebody call for an Uber?”

Her head pops up a little bit. She recognizes his voice. Her frown deepens, and the first thing she says to him is, “It’s so hot! I am so fucking sweaty! Is the AC on in your car?”

Dany’s fingers are pinched around the deep V neckline of her sheer blouse, and she’s vigorously flapping the material against her chest and flashing him her purple bra as Grey awkwardly maneuvers around her, trying to clip in her seat belt without accidentally touching her body or hitting her in the nose with his fist. His other hand is trying to block 2.0 from jumping up into Dany’s lap. Dany doesn’t seem comfortable around dogs. And that is fucking crazy because his dog is awesome. But he also doesn’t want her to sock his dog in a blind panic.

He says, “I’m reaching over you. I’m reaching over to grab the seat belt to buckle you in. My hands are over your lap right now. They are heading to the door.”

Dany probably feels the nervous motion of his hands carefully hovering around her body and her own hands collide with his midair, as she tries and wrestles the seat belt buckle away from him, kind of grumbling about how she can probably manage to belt herself. She says, “Are you always this awkward around people?”

He drops the thing and politely retreats back to his side of the car. He actually manages to not be that offended by her question — because of the way she posed it, so matter-of-factly. He says, “I’m kind of responding to the vibe you’re giving off right now,” as he watches her defensively clutch the band of the seat belt tightly in her fist.

“I’m stressed out right now because I’m blind! And Drogo’s working and not answering his phone!” Dany is needlessly trying to explain why they are in this terribly forced hang-out session — probably trying to explain away some of her own embarrassment. Her black shades are oriented at him, and it really does look like she’s staring right at him. “The surgeon’s office told me that I didn’t need someone to drive me home,” she adds. “Those fucking idiots.”

Dany goes on and tells him the story, bitterly and angrily. Dany got laser eye surgery. Dany planned on taking a cab home. Dany’s self-sufficiency managed to bite her in the ass. She got disoriented. And then she got scared because she felt physically vulnerable. A cab driver sassed her, and the altercation got unexpectedly racial and she tried to tell the guy he had completely misheard her — and she can’t actually see the color of his fucking face because she is currently blind — but yes, she can hear his accent but that is neither here nor there — and then he sped off after calling her a
fucking white bitch, which was fucking unprofessional and she’s going to call the cab company later. And then she found she couldn’t dial her phone. However, clearly she was able to yell, “Call Missandei!” into it.

Dany recaps this to him — very stiffly. Grey has to bite down hard on his teeth in order to not laugh out loud at the white bitch part. Dany tells stories without any embellishment — just the facts. It’s hilarious. He actually likes this about her.

“We’ve never spent one-on-one time alone together before,” Dany randomly observes.

This is true. Because why would they? He also does not even know how to respond to this. So he stays true to himself, and he remains silent. He starts pulling out into traffic — and it’s when he’s already merged a few lanes that he realizes he actually doesn’t know where Dany lives.

He says, “Where do you live?”

The doorman of Dany’s building is Black. The guy gives Grey a look and a nod in solidarity — as Grey parks the car and runs around to open the passenger side door. Grey doesn’t even have time to run over to the guy to tell him that the shrill blond woman he is handling is actually not his boss or a patron. She’s his wife’s friend and also his best friend’s girlfriend. But he can see how misapprehensions happen, from the way Dany’s hand is randomly pawing around, inadvertently at his face — from the way her mouth is agitatedly barking, “Grey! Where are you! Grey! I can’t see! I don’t know if you remember this! Grey!”

Grey quickly touches her elbow to let her know where he’s at — again, so she doesn’t freak out on him because she is kind of high strung and intense right now — and then he feels her reaching out for his hand so she can use to it pull herself out of the car.

He usually only holds Missandei’s hand. And usually not because she’s temporarily blind as hell.

Dany has forgotten that 2.0 exists — and that dog is obedient and excitedly watching him help Dany out of the car. He shoots out a sharp whistle — kind of startling Dany — and Momo 2.0 scrambles and darts out of the car. It really is too hot. And his dog will fucking die if he leaves her in there by herself.

Dany’s place is actually not as enormous as he was expecting it to be. But it’s definitely spacious, and it definitely reeks of affluence. And it is also psychotically neat and orderly. They apparently have this in common.

Dany loses half a head of height when she steps out of her heels and lets go of his hand. She says, “Alright, thanks for getting me home,” as she starts fumbling her way towards her bedroom — or he’s assuming.

“You have a nice home,” he says. “It’s very clean.”
“Thank you,” she says. “I can’t take credit though. Someone cleans it for me.”

Their interactions continue to be oddly fraught with weird hierarchical dynamics. Like, he just about expects her to shove her hand in her purse to grab some money to pay him with.

“If you want some water, there’s some in the fridge,” she mutters. “And if you don’t mind, I think I will be taking a nap for a bit. They gave me Valium. Do you remember the way out?”

Grey gives her this sardonic smile, even though she can’t see it. He can understand why Jaime is not always a fan. He can also understand why Drogo is. Grey says, “I do remember the way out.”

Momo 2.0’s nails click on the hardwood floors. That’s when Dany stiffens. She says, “Your dog is here?”

“Well, yeah, Dany. She’d be dead if I had left her in the car.”

“No, of course. I know. I just meant — I forgot that your dog was here. She’s a very quiet animal.”

When she meets him at his appointment — in the waiting room — he sees that she has stopped off somewhere to change her clothes because she’s not wearing what he put out for her in the morning. The skirt of her charcoal dress is tight and ends right above her knees. Her pumps are a patent leather, shiny electric blue. They make her legs look extra toned. He’s staring up at her from his seat — and he sounds under-impressed as he drolly says, “Did you dress up for this?”

“No, jackass,” she immediately hisses, garnering a look of curiosity from the receptionist-slash-office-manager. “I dressed up for you because we’re going out to dinner after this and I wanted to look nice for you, asshole.”

“Oh.” He pauses. “Well, thank you. You look great.”

She nervously takes the empty seat next to him, rubbing her hands up and down her thighs, presumably smoothing down the material of her dress.

She’s a little wired because there’s an insane part of her that is kind of scared that Grey’s therapist will take one look at her and declare that she is the reason Grey’s boners have completely gone extinct — it is because of her and the fact that she is shitty for him. She keeps fidgeting around on the sofa for this reason, crossing and recrossing her legs, clicking her fingernails together.

“You’re a little nervous?” Amari asks. “How come?”

“Oh,” she says airily, “because it’s the wife’s fault. They always say it’s the wife’s fault.”

“Who the hell is ‘they,’ Missandei?” Grey scrunches up his nose. “And of course it’s all your fault. That’s what I keep telling him.”

“He’s actually very effusive whenever he talks about you,” Amari interjects.
Grey frowns. “Okay, you’re ruining my street cred, man.”

After the initial anxiety, Missandei actually spends nearly the entire therapy session clawing her fingernails into Grey’s forearm because that is the way she has chosen to emphasize her utter and complete rightness. Every time Amari says stuff that she has previously said to Grey at one point, she digs her nails in deeper — he winces and grabs her wrist, trying to get her to loosen her hold.

She is right about everything, and she is a pro at therapy! She is so pro, in fact, that when Amari asks her if she feels responsible, in part, for Grey’s ED — she responds with, “Responsible how? Like I scared his erections away with the power of my mind?”

Amari suppresses a smile. He says, “Sometimes, women in your situation will blame themselves and question their partner’s attraction to them or their partner’s fidelity.”

“Oh,” Missy says. “No, I don’t worry about that stuff at all.”

“I didn’t think you did, but I just wanted to ask.”

Later, at home, in bed, he’s pulling at the tie on her drawstring pants and then pulling off the pants with intent and a singular sort of focus when she seriously places the entire flat of her hand over his face and pries him off of her pelvis.

“Um, hello?” he says, wincing. “That was very rude. Next time just use your words. You don’t have to physically slap my face away from your clit.”

She can’t help it. She starts laughing — giggling — as she shimmies down the bed to get face to face with him. “Baby, I didn’t slap your face away from my clit,” she says, pouting a little bit. “You’re so funny.”

“That’s all I have left, man — the strength of my personality. It’s probably the only thing keeping you around at this point.”

“Baby, shut up.”

“I’m joking,” he says, assuring her as he pulls her in closer. “People never get how funny I am.”

“I just said you were funny.”

“Well, yeah, Missandei. I know that you know I’m funny. I’m saying — other people don’t. Jesus.”

Her arms are curled around his head, hugging his face as she smears her nose into his cheek. She tries to hold as much of him as she can, as she kisses him with an open mouth, as his hand rubs circles into her back, as her hand runs up and down his chest. During a break, his eyes are simultaneously dark and bright as he grins back at her — she dips back in for a wet kiss — and after a deep inhale, pulling the smell of him into her body — and she says, “I’m just gonna touch you —
right here.”

Her hand is on his non-erect penis. It makes him tense up — an automatic and instinctive response still — and he wills his body into relaxing as she gently starts massaging. “Did you know . . . that your penis is really just one big clit?” she tells him.

“Nah, man,” he says, his voice croaking a little bit. “I prefer to think of the clit as a button-sized penis.” His finger traces over the tip of her nose, over her eyelids, and then his thumb digs into her lips. He says, “You’re funny, too. You always crack me up,” before he shoves his hand down into her underwear and finds that she’s wet and slick.

It makes him inexplicably laugh — it makes her laugh, too, through her teeth. She swings a leg over his hip to get their hands harder and tighter in between their bodies. She tells him she really wants them to cramp up. She really wants them to get some carpal tunnel. She resists telling him about all of the internet research she’s been doing about ED and the fact that male orgasms don’t require erections or ejaculation. She forgets to blather on about it because her shirt is getting pushed up with his free hand, and he’s mumbling something into her, against her breasts.

She throws her head back — she’s laughing silently and gasping as he lightly bites down on a nipple. Cool air follows soon after — soothing it. Her hand jerks a little bit, friction pulling on the delicate skin of the head of his penis.

He twitches — kind of spastically — which makes her pause. It makes her ask him if it feels good. He tells her it feels alright, which she assumes is a massive understatement because he’s sometimes a punk like that.

So she does it again. She softly strokes and massages him as she tries to pull his face off her tits, as she laughingly tries to get him to look into her eyes so they can make the sex intimate and full of connection.

Her ability to be hilarious dies a swift death after a certain point. Her brain becomes slow and languid and she finds it impossible to come up with one-liners. She just whispers for him to make a little bit more noise because she loves hearing him make noise. Faithfully, he softly says something to her. She can’t make out the words past the whooshing blood and her pulse banging in her ears. She sighs out a groan before she asks, “What did you just say?”

His chuckle is deep and pushing into the side of her head. She feels his hot breath on her skin. He says, “I was just asking you — what is a relationship between two people that is devoid of sex?”

“I want this!” Pia says, hopping up and down in her heeled boots, making booming noises against the hardwood floors. “I want this so bad, oh man! What do you think I should offer? Do you think I should go above asking price?”

The house is a small one-story on the east side, with two bedrooms and one bath. There is a small front yard and a rather expansive backyard. The kitchen has been recently remodeled, with all of the new fixtures that Pia likes. And the floors are a buttery golden oak, which Pia also likes. There are cracks in the foundation, which he pointed out to her, telling her that he’s also not really an expert on any of that shit — but it could be cause for concern.
Pia does not even give a shit. She’s too busy moving in, in her mind. She’s clutching onto his bicep, and she’s saying, “Do you think I’ll get it? Do you think?”

He’s a little irritated because this is the fourth house of the day and also perhaps the twentieth house overall, so he’s saying, “I don’t know. I’m not fucking psychic.”

He cannot even ruin her good mood. She’s still hopping up and and down and saying, “I \textit{really} hope I get it. I really hope I get it! Grey! I love this house! I really hope I get it!”
Chapter Summary

Grey continues to get his head shrunk.

Pia loses out on the house. It’s mostly because she gets outbid by a cash buyer who threw down a serious wad. Even though her losing the house isn’t her fault and the situation couldn’t have been avoided, Grey still takes the opportunity to fold in some feedback. He tells Pia that what also didn’t help was her pussy-footing around with the offer — all of the questions and all of the agonizing and all of the blubbering about whether her life was about to drastically change forever. While she was doing all of that bullshit — a rich foreigner swooped in and laid down cold, hard cash money. Grey tells her that in the future, she needs to be more decisive because typically, no one is going to be swayed by her sob story about a relationship that had run its course and a plucky young woman who is facing a brand new scary world alone and unloved.

“Hey, my life is super interesting and super tragic,” Pia says, only half-joking. “And why do you kick people when they’re already down! Do you get enjoyment out of this? I just lost the house of my dreams, Grey.”

“I’m just giving you notes, man,” he says. “How else are you gonna get better at this?”

Kind of ironically — because of his name — he re-discovers through his conversations with Amari that he is fairly binary in his thinking. To him, things are either right or they are wrong. Situations are either safe or they are dangerous. People are either worthwhile or they are worthless. He becomes more aware that he makes snap judgments about the intentions of other people, typically based on some very low expectations.

Amari has Grey recount what it was like and what he had felt when he first met Missandei, when he first met Drogo, when he first met Jaime, when he first met Addam, Barristan, Tanja, Daven, Sandor — all of the people in his life. Grey never felt the deficiencies of his thought process so baldly than when he had to tell Amari that when he first met Missandei, his first thought was that she was so fucking beautiful — and thus, one-dimensional, frivolous, superficial, surface-lying, narrow-minded, and probably annoyingly assumptive. When he met Jaime, he thought Jaime was a rich, racist bigot who wasn’t worth friendship. When he met Drogo, he was always stung by the betrayal and angry over how much Drogo tolerated rich bigots. When he met Addam, he thought Addam was a rich, worthless bigot. When he met Daven, he thought Daven was a rich, worthless bigot. When he met Barristan, he thought Barristan was a rich racist who was going to lord his nauseating power over
Grey. When Grey met Tanja, he thought she was trying to fuck with his mind and trick him into cheating on Missandei, and that is why he should never be friends with women.

The list just goes on and on. He actually feels pretty embarrassed — when he recounts the stories. It’s just equally as great when Amari asks him how the reality of the people in his life compare to his initial gut impression of them. It’s obvious that the point of this exercise is to reveal the patterns in the way he thinks — but Amari makes Grey verbalize it anyway. Grey tells Amari that everyone is immensely way less racist than he originally thought they were. Jaime and Drogo are like brothers to him. Addam and Daven are so great and so giving. Everyone just fucking cares so much about his well-being that it’s insane. And obviously he found something to like about Missandei because he’s shackled to her for life and such.

“Why do you think you started with such low expectations for these people in your life?”

Grey telegraphs his discomfort by shifting in his seat, shifting around on the overstuffed leather sofa. He says, “I used to tell myself that I was being efficient, and I didn’t want to waste my time with outcomes that I already could predict. But that was probably delusional because I was like, 19 years old and it wasn’t like I had a really jam-packed schedule to keep or anything like that. I probably was trying to keep everyone at arm’s length, reject them before they could reject me.”

“What were the outcomes that you predicted with Missandei?”

“Oh God,” Grey mutters. ‘Oh God’ has consistently been his preamble whenever he knows he’s about to say something whackadoodle. ‘I could tell she was into me — because she was really flagrant about it. And I . . . really wanted to have sex with her because, you know, hormones. But back then, I was really bad at sex, so what I thought would’ve gone down is that we’d go on a couple dates. It’d progress to the point where we’d sleep together. Or we’d try to, and it wouldn’t work. She’d flip out on me and hurt my feelings by saying mean shit. And then I’d have to continue going to tutoring sessions with her, knowing that she’s seen my dick and yelled angry shit at it. Or I’d have to shamefully quit tutoring sessions and just flunk the hell out of school due to embarrassment. So you see — it was imperative that I constantly tell that thirsty bitch ‘No, not interested.’” He pauses. “Which became more and more of a terrible and depressing endeavor the longer I knew her. We became friends. She turned out to be awesome. My insides just hurt all the time being around her. It was terrible.”

“What made you try and go for a relationship with her?”

Grey shrugs. “There wasn’t a proactive moment where I told myself, ‘Hey, this would be healthy for you.’ I just got jealous all the time. And I’d get angry at her over it. And then I’d become withholding. And then sometimes I’d be emotionally abusive to punish her because I was jealous and angry and bitter, and I didn’t know what else to do with those feelings. And then I was so weak and so needy that I accidentally had sex with her. And then it was really hard to get her out of my head after that because sex became really emotional for me. So I kind of dragged my feet into a relationship — expecting it to fail at some point, when she realized the fucking mess she got herself into.”

“Why did you think it would fail though?”

“Well, why wouldn’t it?”

“Right now, sitting here with me, do you anticipate it failing?”

He actually recoils — from aversion. He says, “No, of course not. It’s going to succeed. Forever.”
“What is the difference, Grey? What created this change in opinion, in you?”

“Um, God, I don’t know. All I can think of to say are jokes. To deflect. Jokes about Missandei’s mental stability. Jokes about her horrible taste in men.”

At some point, he and Amari talk about relaxation. Grey has started trying to meditate because of Amari, even though he is pretty sure he does not even know how it even fucking works. But he tries anyway. It’s supremely uncomfortable and seemingly pointless, much like the journaling he has been doing.

A lot of therapy pivots around Missandei, naturally. When Grey gets called on to talk about the space in which he feels the safest, he feels like a real stupid dork — his face is just scorching hot and he wants to hide it by pulling up the hood of his zip-up over his head and cinching the tie — it feels so embarrassing to talk about — but he does manage to choke out that he feels the safest when he is alone with Missandei and it’s quiet and there is nothing distracting them. He likes being with her when it’s either very late at night or when it’s super early in the morning. He likes lying in bed with her and just being able to just hold onto her body so easily. He likes closing his eyes and hearing the sound of her gentle voice in his ear.

He then mutters, “That sounds fucking dumb.”

Amari says, “I think that sounds very nice. It sounds very nice to have that kind of closeness with another person.”

Grey tells Amari that he can make the painfully obvious parallel between being ensconced in bed with Missandei and being held by his mother. He tells Amari that he knows that his fears of being abandoned by the people he loves — by the woman he loves — stems from the fact that he was abandoned by his family as a child. He tells Amari he’s not fucking dumb, but he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do with this information other than feel shitty about it. He tells Amari that it seems a little fucked up and Oedipal — that his mother and Missandei manage to connect in his mind like that.

Amari has told him that it’s not at all messed up or Oedipal. Most people derive comfort from being held by someone they love. Most people fear losing the ones they love. Amari actually rambles on briefly in this stream-of-conscious word vomit about Freud and Jung and how modern techniques don’t lean that heavily on those principles anymore — which is actually stuff Grey finds really interesting because he is constantly trying to intellectualize and rationalize and create distance in therapy — which, in turn, is a tendency Amari recognizes and thwarts. Amari always brings it back to feelings and emotions.

Grey still can’t talk about the darkest part of his history and his parents with much depth of feeling or depth in detail. He’s not at that point yet. He knows that is where they are headed. He has been told it could take years. The automaton part of him actually balks at that — that this process could take years due to this emotional inefficiency in him — but Amari tells him that it actually should not be qualified as an emotional inefficiency. Amari tells Grey that what he went through was something terrible and unfair and immense for a child to go through. Amari tells Grey that he thinks Grey is a very strong person.

The nice words makes Grey’s heart hurt. It makes his chest seize up a little bit in pain. It actually draws out this emotion from him.
Amari says, “I’m seeing this change — come over your face. What just happened? What are you thinking about this?”

With effort, Grey says, “I just have this urge — this belief — I just want to refute it all. I want to tell you that you’re wrong about me. You’re just spouting off some cliche because it’s the thing to say to someone. It makes me feel angry that you said that. I want to reject it and tell you that you don’t know me at all and you shouldn’t act like you know me.”

Real life is not at all like those anti-sexual harassment videos that she was shown in high school. Missy is not altogether sure what to think when the new creative director at work, Bronn, calls her sweetheart. Technically, he casually said to her, “Sweetheart, can you translate this for me?” Bingo winningly tried to quell her worries by telling her that at least the comments are quasi-sexist. They are at least not racist. Yet.

Missandei tries to crowdsource female opinions on this, giving the opinions varying weight based on who she’s talking to. Dany probably carries the most weight, and Dany tells Missandei that it’s most definitely sexist — but put up with it for now, for the sake of her career. The term of endearment is patronizing — sure — but it’s also fairly benign. After all, it’s not like the CD is telling her to suck his cock or else she is fired.

Missy dryly says that Dany sounds really progressive. Dany only sighs and says that Missandei is only about two promotions away from doing whatever the fuck she wants. Just wait it out. Such is the unfair nature of work and life and being female.

When Missy tells Brienne about how she was called sweetheart, Brienne actually releases the loudest scoff of indignation over the phone and declares that she hates that shit so much.

And then she has nothing productive or actionable to add. She actually asks Missandei if she’s talked to Dany yet, because Dany would be a good person to talk to — regarding this.

When Missy tells Grey about it, he naturally focuses on the wrong thing. He says, “I don’t even call you sweetheart, and I sleep with you. Does he think you’re like, sweet? God, he’s in for a rude awakening.”

“Baby,” she says, with so much fucking patience that it’s pretty much insane, “don’t you think it’s sexist? Like, he’s not calling the men sweetheart. Like, he calls them by their name. Or he calls them fucktard. He kind of uses a lot of abusive language actually. But I mean, the sweetheart thing is sexist, right?”

“Well, I suppose? But hey — he could be calling you the n-word. And he’s not. Right? Like, silver lining, right? I would not be down with him calling you the n-word. He’s white, right?”

She sighs now. “Baby, when you say stuff like this . . . it makes me wonder . . . if we are just throwing money down a hole by having you go talk to a therapist once a week.”

She’s already watched him train and run a number of marathons, both full marathons and halves.
This hobby is not as sexy and impressive as it used to be when he first adopted it. These days, she associates his training with long periods in which he eats stuff she doesn’t like to eat, periods in which he goes to bed super early and is super tired a lot of the time. He is kind of a boring old man when he is training. He also tends to lose weight and get extra lean to the point where her attraction to his body takes the barest of dips — negligible, but there is a dip.

Most of all though, her attraction to him is influenced by how much of a cranky asshole he tends to become during training because he probably has a tendency of over-training. But she cannot ever actually verbalize this to him or he will bite her head off and refute her observation with a bunch of random factoids that he has collected in the course of reading like, eight million running books.

Missandei is very relieved when his race goes off without a hitch. His time is pretty good — good enough for him to not berate himself over. He is down one toenail, he’s limping around the house because of blisters on his feet, and he has been peeing blood.

He actually had the gall to be completely unconcerned and act like she’s being a hysterical woman, when he mentions this fact to her and her jaw drops. He blithely tells her it happens to people sometimes. His body will right itself soon enough. He tries to joke with her, and he mentions that blood coming out of the orifices of his body is kinda normal for him.

She does not find him funny at all. She actually finds him to be idiotic. And when she asks him to get into the bathtub with her, so that he can have a soak and she can massage his muscles — he gets weird about it. Predictably. It deviates from his usual routine of sitting around the house in sweats for a few days, with a bottle of water that’s been dosed with electrolytes.

“How’s your deal, Grey?” she says, already running the water, already pulling off her clothes. “Babe, I see you naked like, all the time. I know you’re not shy with me. Or do you just hate baths?”

He groans. He says, “I don’t know what my deal is. I guess I just don’t see the point in baths, is all. Baths are for children.”

“Grey, just get out of your clothes and get your butt in the fucking tub. Jeez! What do you think is going to happen to you in there? Are you afraid relaxation is gonna happen? Are you afraid you’re gonna feel better? Sex? Are you afraid sex is going to happen? I can assure you, man — sex is not gonna happen at this rate.”

“How are you liking therapy?” she asks, taking a break from kneading the muscles in his back, leaning forward to rest her cheek against his warm spine — it’s so warm because the water is steaming hot. She reaches around him and gently hugs him from behind. She’s still holding onto him when she quietly says, “Are you finding it useful?”

“It feels weird still,” he says, touching her clasped hands at his stomach. “It’s crazy to spill all your secrets to a virtual stranger and trust that it’s going to make you feel better eventually.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” she says. “I remember how uncomfortable it can be sometimes. I remember sometimes being scared that I would be found out as a loser who doesn’t deserve love, so I was afraid to say certain honest things.”

“Like what things?” he asks quietly.
“Oh, well, back in the day — sometimes I worried that my grandma was right. You know, like when we were broken up, I sometimes wondered if she was right in saying I drove you away because I didn’t like, ah, defer to you because you were the man in the relationship. And sometimes I kicked myself and had these regrets — like I wished I was cooler and more carefree and less emotional and sensitive. Like, I wished I didn’t come across so desperate and needy and clingy all the time. Sometimes I still feel embarrassed remembering it all.”

The water sloshes around, slipping over the edge of the tub and onto the tile floor as he flips around to face her. Her own face feels a little hot — from the steam of the water and also from just being a bit self-conscious. She looks at his face, and she says, “You don’t have to kiss me. I didn’t say all of that to get reassurance.”

“I know,” he says, as he cups her cheek, smoothing his wet thumb across her cheekbone.

His body is deliciously warm and wrapped up in thick sweats, which smell like laundry detergent. All she is doing is just wasting time talking about nothing, cuddled up in bed with him even though the sun hasn’t even gone down yet. She keeps murmuring to him that he smells so good, that he feels so good, and that she loves him so much.

To her, he recaps the story of them. He tells her he’s been talking a lot about her in therapy. He’s also been writing a lot about her in his journal. He tells her that it’s a difficult endeavor because he still largely operates under the baseless belief that if he opens his mouth and talks about how much he loves her — then the universe will know how much he needs her. And then she will get taken away. He tells her he keeps trying to track this irrationality back to his childhood and his family. He tells her that he must have really loved them, and it must’ve just been heart-crushing, to have been so young and to have lost them. He tells her there’s so much his mind refuses to remember.

He asks, “How much does it bother you when I get touchy and cranky? Like, how do you feel and what are you thinking when I’m being a real downer?”

This is therapy’s doing. She can tell — this line of questioning is something he has only recently decided to focus on. She touches his face and says, “Honestly? I get really frustrated sometimes. It’s really annoying and sad for me when you act really pessimistic because sometimes it feels like you’re just giving up because you don’t see the point in trying anymore. Like, trying to meet me in the middle, I mean. Trying to work on us.”

“Oh.”

“But then I tell myself that I’m just taking it all too personally, and I am reading too much into it — that sometimes you are being kind of short with me or snappish simply because you’re physically tired or I’m bombarding you with too many questions. And I remember that I tend to be pessimistic, too. I tend to assume the worst about what you’re thinking. So I just tell myself to try not to do that anymore.” She sighs, burying her face into his sweatshirt. “And sometimes you are just legit funny. And it doesn’t bother me at all. I like that your jokes don’t sound like jokes. It’s cute because they’re kind of mean.”
The thing about engaging in a lifelong friendship is that sometimes there is not a need to say sorry — sorry for calling friend’s husband emotionally stunted because one was embarrassed over being caught with one’s pants down.

Like, when Jhiqui cryptically texts Missandei after a few weeks of not talking to each other at all — weeks of giving each other space — Missandei immediately starts calling Jhiqui’s phone. Jhiqui picks up right away. Missy says, “Are you okay?”

Jhiqui immediately starts sobbing on the other end.

Missandei says, “Babe. It’ll be okay. You’ll be okay.”
one-fifteen

Chapter Summary

Missandei is such a stud. And Grey is a pretty good babysitter.

Grey unintentionally lies to Nick — something that Grey realizes after the fact. It takes Grey a few lines of conversation before he can hear the treble in Nick’s voice, hear Nick’s concerted efforts at holding it together. Grey’s in the middle of an easy run with 2.0 when he stops to answer his phone. Grey is lightly panting when he answers the phone. The first thing Nick asks him is if Grey is with Missandei.

Grey immediately responds with, “Huh?” because he thinks that Nick is asking him whether he’s in the middle of sex with his wife, which Grey finds to be a real fucking weird question.

Nick then tells him nevermind. And then Nick lets out a shuddering sigh — Grey is picking up on another kind of weird vibe from the conversation now. And then Nick asks Grey if Grey has seen Jhiqui or Arqo around in the last few hours or so.

Grey blurts out, “No, I haven’t seen them.” And then hesitantly, he adds, “Is everything okay?”

Which results in another tension-filled sigh.

Half an hour later, Grey lightly jogs up to his house and sees Jhiqui’s car parked in his driveway.

They both glance at Jhiqui’s stuffed leather bag on the floor in the foyer. Arqo is sitting in Missandei’s lap, but is restless. He also keeps smushing his face into her boobs. He keeps shoving his hand underneath her shirt. He keeps squeezing her breast in his small hand. He’s doing all of this with childlike impulsivity and an inability to detect Missandei’s extreme discomfort. It’s honestly bugging the shit out of her. It’s creeping her the fuck out. She’s kind of repulsed by him, and she wants to shove him off her lap and watch him hit the floor and then cry.

His mom is like, currently going through some shit though.

And Missy knows that Arqo was weaned fairly recently. She knows how agonizing it was for Jhiqui. Jhiqui has dropped all of these statistics on Dothraki women and breastfeeding, whenever she felt even slightly scrutinized over the length of time in which she breastfed Arqo. The stats honestly sounded made up half the time, but Jhiqui always has some sort of vendetta against what she calls “the mainstream” way of raising kids.
Missy knows that the way Arqo sees boobs is different from how society and most adult men sees boobs. She can sense that the right response is probably not to freak out and scream rape and punch him in the face every time he grabs her tit and giggles to himself.

But that is kind of what she wants to do.

Missy has no freaking clue how to talk to someone else’s kid, if she’s even allowed to discipline someone else’s kid. It was a different story with Hassan, because Moss is kind of a holdover from another time. Moss is this relic with one foot in the old ways and his other foot oriented at the West. Hassan never grabbed Missandei’s boobs, but once, as a really young kid, Hassan kind of spied on her as she changed her clothes. She only found out because Moss caught his son and then proceeded to publicly humiliate his son in front of the whole family by publicly screaming at him, threatening to beat Hassan’s ass if he insisted on being a fucking pervert. Moss also forced Hassan to apologize to his aunt for his disrespect of her. Missandei thought that that part was really awful — for the both of them.

While time will tell what kind of man Hassan will eventually become, Missandei is already not really a proponent of that kind of heavy-handed response to children who don’t know boundaries. Part of that is it’s just who she is. Another part of it has to do with Grey — not that he’s a perv. Rather, being with him has sort of conditioned her away from knee-jerk assumptions.

Missy also knows that Arqo has probably been dealing with his parents’ unhappiness for a while now, so she feels bad about that, though she really doesn’t think her empathy for this kid translates to giving him the go-ahead to grope her. She keeps crossing her arms over her chest, to at least deter him from nipple. She keeps wishing Jhiqui would pause in her emotional but very coded storytelling to take a look and see what her son is doing. But Jhiqui has been too distracted to notice.

Jhiqui calls herself a cliche. She tells Missy that she has all of these memories of her mother angrily packing a suitcase and screaming at her father. Jhiqui’s mother was always threatening to leave Jhiqui’s father. Over what — Jhiqui says she can’t really remember. Her parents have been married for nearly forty years now. But she says she remembers how scared she used to feel, every time her mom started to pack a suitcase. She was scared her mom was leaving her. But her mom always took her along. It was this weird Dothraki female point of pride. Jhiqui tearfully says that’s why she had to take Arqo with her, even though it must be really hurting Nick to see them gone.

They jolt when the garage door whirs open. Missandei blearily says, “Oh, Grey’s home.”

Jhiqui blinks. And then she says, “Oh.”

They wait, and then they see the door swing open. Then they see Grey walk into the house with Momo 2.0 zipping in ahead of him, eager to see Missandei, nearly making him trip. He grabs onto the door jamb with a loud thump and then he says to the dog, “Crap! Mo! You’re gonna kill me one of these days!”

“Ah!” Arqo yelps, kind of kicking at 2.0’s face as she gets on her hind feet to get closer to Missandei. “Calm down, doggy!”

It’s actually getting a little crazy now. Missy says, “Oh, jeez!” as she rolls Arqo around to her other side so that he would stop kicking her dog in the face. With her other hand, she is trying to push 2.0
off of her so that her dumb furry face doesn’t continue to get battered by a child’s foot. On the other side of the table, Jhiqui is calling out and saying that Missy can send Arqo back to her if she wants to.

At that, Grey reaches down and plucks Arqo from her lap, making this very uncharacteristic, very loud mock-growl sound. They apparently have developed a whole schtick at some point because Arqo shrieks and immediately covers his giggling face as Grey suspends Arqo in mid-air and pretend-bites him.

It is crazy. Missandei doesn’t even know what the hell she is watching.

Grey situates Arqo on his shoulders and tells Arqo to hold on carefully to Grey’s head unless Arqo wants to eat floor — and Missandei’s stomach lurches as she watches Grey completely let go of the child, letting the kid balance on his sweaty shoulders as he walks over to the fridge to open it. He pulls out their filtered water.

Jhiqui is completely unfazed.

He’s pouring himself a glass of water and plucking a banana from a bunch on their counter — Arqo is having the fucking time of his life balancing on Grey’s shoulders — as Grey casually says, “Hey, so Nick called me earlier looking for you guys. I told him I didn’t know where you were. He sounded concern. Do you want me to text him to tell him that you’re over here?”

Jhiqui’s eyes flash to her kid. And then she says, “Sure. Thank you.”

“Yeah, no prob,” Grey says, breaking off half of his peeled banana. He holds it up to Arqo, who takes it in his fist and starts shoving it into his face. Grey finally claps Arqo’s shin with one hand — Missandei lets out a breath she didn’t know she had been holding in — and then he says, “We’re gonna go play in the other room, if that’s okay?”

He’s talking to Jhiqui — who now looks kind of shellshocked. However, she does manage to say, “Okay. Sure. Thank you.”

When he walks past Missy with Arqo still on his shoulders, he reaches out to touch her cheek — to lightly pinch it in between his thumb and forefinger.

With a little bit more privacy, with Grey and Arqo playing in the living room, Jhiqui’s face kind of screws up in tension momentarily before she tears up a little bit. She’s been doing that a lot. She sniffles and then she blinks rapidly. She whispers to Missandei that she feels so awful — she feels like a terrible mother and she is a terrible person and a shitty wife. She tells Missandei that this isn’t the life she had envisioned for herself. She whispers to Missandei that this isn’t the life she had envisioned for herself. She tells Missandei that she’s been unhappy for a long time now — it just took her a while to actually realize it. She cries a little bit as she says she’s really sorry for being a shitty friend for a while now.

Missandei’s eyes are wet, too. An entire kitchen table is separating them. She says, “It’s okay, babe. We’re good.”

Jhiqui mutters, “I’m just like my mother.” She rubs her face and she says, “This is exactly what I didn’t want to happen.” She keeps her voice low — probably to prevent her kid from eavesdropping, not that he would understand at this point. She whispers, “It’s not even the whole fucking packing a
suitcase and running away. It’s more than that. It’s the whole sitting at home, barefoot and pregnant. It’s letting myself get lost. It’s letting myself lose my identity and who I am. I just don’t recognize who I am anymore.”

Grey’s reclining on the floor with Arqo and Momo 2.0. And there’s this conflict inside of him. This kid is being very sociopathic with his dog — Arqo keeps trying to hit 2.0 because he thinks he’s funny. And Grey’s natural instinct to slap Arqo in the face and then ask him how he fucking likes it.

He finds his ability to rationalize with this kid is nonexistent. This is hard for him because typically, all he can do to appeal to other people are rationalizations. He grabs Arqo’s wrist and he says, “Come on, man. Not cool. Why do you want to hit her? She’s a good dog. Can’t you see?”

“She scary wolf,” Arqo says, rapidly inhaling as if he has just finished a run. “And big bad wolf blow the house down. You have to fight big bad wolf!”

“Um, no,” Grey says, tightening his grip on Arqo’s hand. “Veto that, man.” And then, to his dog, he says, “Sorry, baby. Go to mama, okay? Save yourself. Go to your mama.”

This is actually a command that neither of them have actually taught the dog. The dog doesn’t get what he means, so she just wags her tail and lightly pants and continues to be bad at dodging Arqo’s punches.

“Jesus Christ,” Grey mutters.

He acts unfazed when she tells him that Jhiqui and Arqo are spending the night. They only have one extra toothbrush, not two, so he actually volunteers to run to the store for a few toiletry items and also a few snacks. He actually says, “Oh, cool. So we’re having a slumber party?”

She runs her hand down his bare arm, still kind of sticky from dried sweat. He is being really fucking cool about this — very deliberately because usually he is full of suspicious, reasonable questions — and she is really aware of his efforts expended towards going with the flow. She mouths thank you. Then out loud, she says, “It’s not gonna be like the kind of slumber parties you and I used to have.”

He kind of laughs quietly at that. He kind of sheepishly rubs the back of his neck and says, “Ah, no. Not like those.”

“You’re being so fucking cute right now,” she whispers, stepping in closer to grab hold of his shirt.

“Not on purpose,” he assures her, grinning. “Whatever you’re feeling right now — it’s purely accidental on my part.”

She drops her head back as she pushes her body into his and stares up at him. She lightly sways on her bare feet. She smiles at him. She says, “You’re so cool. I think you are so freaking neat.”

He looks amused. “Neat? Okay. I think you are swell.”
That makes her laugh, which in turn, makes him tighten his grip on her. He pulls her in close and cradles her head, planting a short kiss on her cheek as she shakes from giggling in his arms.

When Missandei pulls away from him so he can actually go to the grocery store, they both catch sight of Jhiqui — watching them from the other room — like an intruding weirdo.

As he wrestles with the needlessly complicated car seat in Jhiqui’s car and pops Arqo into it as Arqo babbles a mile a minute about some crazy inane shit that is really uninteresting, Grey tells himself that he is pretty sure he is a fucking saint. He is a hero among heroes. He’s actually pretty tired and he’s still unshowered and he had different plans for his night — plans that didn’t involve a lot of babysitting. Funnily enough — the last time he drove a car that belonged to Jhiqui, he ended up sleeping on Missandei’s floor and starting the sequence of events that would result in his fucking love-induced obsession with her. It’s funny how the present likes to echo the past.

“Grey, do you know that I see wolfs in my house!”

“Oh my God,” Grey mutters. “You’re such a liar.”

“I’m not lying!” Arqo insists, as Grey clicks him into his seat. “There was a wolf in my bed! And he growl like this! Grr! And I scream and tell my mommy the wolf — the wolf is getting angry. He's running around the bed! And the wolf is brown and so scary! The wolf —”

Grey slams the door shut on Arqo, muting his story in an instant. And it feels so good.

With a very modest glass of wine in her hand — Jhiqui nudges Missy’s thigh with her big toe on the couch. And then she says, “Okay, he is awesome. I get it. And I’m sorry for ever implying otherwise.”

Missandei, so distracted with her beautiful pinot, actually quizzically says, “Who?”

“Oh my God, your husband, you bitch. Grey. Grey is awesome.”

Realization dawns on her face. Missy says, “Ohh. Yeah. I know. He’s great.”

“He’s really good with Arqo. It’s so weird. Because Arqo talks so much.”

Missy nods. “Arqo is also like, obsessed with boobs.”

Jhiqui looks alert. She says, “What? Did he touch you?”

“Oh my God, how did you not see!”

“Oh my God! I’m sorry! Oh my God, I have been having conversations with him about boundaries and not touching other people’s parts without their permission. Oh my God. I’m so embarrassed!”
Besides this hairy moment where Arqo kind of loudly asks Grey why a non-pregnant woman at the grocery store has such a big tummy — spending time at the store goes off without a hitch. Arqo generally listens to Grey when Grey tells him not to grab shit off the shelves without intending to buy because it’s a dick move to do that. Arqo’s legs are swinging and lightly smacking the back of the cart as they leisurely look for the right toothbrush that Arqo thinks his mom will like. He picks a super pink, super princess one — and Grey is pretty sure that it’s not Jhiqui’s style, but he lets Arqo drop it into the cart anyway.

A text message beeps in and rattles his phone in his pocket. Grey plucks the phone from his shorts and unlocks it to read the text, kind of dodging Arqo’s pawing hands.

The text is from Jaime, who is checking in, who is reporting that he has finally made his way all the way over to Nick’s house. They are about to grab dinner together.

“When he tries to initiate sex, my skin literally crawls,” Jhiqui plainly admits, with her eyes heavy. “The last time he tried, I actually got so angry at him for touching my butt unexpectedly that I yelled at him. And he just like — deflated. And I felt pretty terrible.” She sighs. “But you know, he’s a really amazing dad, and he’s a really good and loyal and responsible guy.”

Jhiqui has told Missandei that she is kind of lonely. Her house is so big that it’s ridiculous. She is fighting with this fantasy of who she thought she’d be at this age. She has to force herself to have sex with Nick, about once or twice a month. That is probably why that random history with Drogo especially stung, when it was brought up. The fact that Nick was so forgiving of it actually made her feel such anger toward him.

And Arqo just loves him so much that it breaks her heart — and it makes her wonder if she can hold on for another fifteen more years, until Arqo is old enough and out of the house. Jhiqui confesses that she will always love Nick — but maybe she’s not in love with him anymore. She feels protective of him sometimes. She thinks he’s cute sometimes. But largely in the same way that she thinks her son is cute, in the same way she is protective of her son. Nick feels like her family, but he doesn’t feel like her life partner. He is so passive. He is so risk-averse. She has started interpreting this as cowardice. He lets her make all of the decisions like he doesn’t even have the ability to take charge of his life. He is kind of boring. They have the same superficial conversations constantly. He is uncreative and not very spontaneous. He doesn’t strive for more. He is so content with what they currently have — and it doesn’t at all sound like a terrible thing — but to her, it has become something really suffocating and oppressive.

And he doesn’t really acknowledge that there is a problem here. He doesn’t fully acknowledge her unhappiness. He never acted like she meant it. He thinks they are happy. He has suggested to her that maybe she should go back to work. Maybe she will find fulfillment in this way. He has told her she can go back to school, if she wants. He would gladly put their money toward whatever future she wants for herself. He insists that her unhappiness is a phase, and it is easily fixable.

“And then before I knew it, I was just losing my mind and shoving clothes into a fucking suitcase,” Jhiqui says. She shakes her head. “And I took his kid. And he probably has no idea what the fuck is going on, right now. But the thing is — I’ve told him. I’ve told him that I’m unhappy.”
After an hour with Grey, Arqo is done with his pal and he’s getting a little cranky and tired. He keeps asking about Nick and Jhiqui. He keeps whining and telling Grey that he wants to be with his mommy, his daddy, or both his mommy and daddy. Grey is trying to drive as safely as humanly possible — as he reassures this kid. He keeps telling Arqo that they are like, minutes away from reuniting with Arqo’s mommy.

The kid completely loses it — kind of randomly — but probably not randomly. Grey just doesn’t have the insight required to completely understand what is going on with this kid. Arqo starts crying in the backseat, in the dark. It starts off quietly and experimentally, and then it gets louder and more pained.

Grey knows it’s not the right thing to do, but he starts bargaining and bribing the kid. He offers the kid money to stop crying. And then he offers the kid candy that he doesn’t have on him. And then he throws a Hail Mary and offers the kid whatever he wants — Arqo’s choice — which doesn’t work either. Arqo just continues to whimper and cry back there.

And then Grey says, “Do you want me to call your dad?”

Which works. Arqo shuts up immediately and eagerly says, “I wanna talk to my daddy.”

Grey’s not one hundred percent sure, but he is kind of sure that he has fucked up. He has no fucking clue what is going on with Nick and Jhiqui. At the same time, he also talked to Nick earlier in the day and he thinks it’s really fucked up to leave the guy in the fucking lurch and not tell him where the fuck his child is.

Grey is wincing over his decision-making when pulls the car over to the side of the road — they are seriously like, five minutes away from the house — and he dials Nick’s number on his phone.

He lets Arqo sit on him, in the driver’s seat, as he listens to Arqo talk to Nick. It is fucking terrible because Nick is drunk — because Jaime thought that would be a good idea apparently. Arqo is used to iPads, so he doesn’t know how to hold the phone up to his ear. He is used to FaceTime, so Grey has to put Nick on speakerphone.

It is terrible to listen to. The kid is actually impressively steady. And Nick is very emotional and very drunk. There are long pauses in the conversation, intersperse between moments when Nick urgently tells Arqo that he loves him more than anything else in the whole world. There are also bewildering moments when Nick profusely apologizes to Arqo — just abstractly.

Grey really loves that he is returning a tear-streaked child to Jhiqui. Best babysitter. Ever.
Grey transfers Arqo from his arms directly into hers. He winces as he quietly says, “He wanted to talk to Nick on the phone on the way home.”

“Makes sense,” she says tiredly, hugging Arqo to her body. “Thanks, Grey. I really appreciate the help tonight.”

He’s had quite a day, so he has to pee sitting down. This is the position Missandei finds him in, when she walks into their bathroom to get ready for bed.

She stops in front of him, with her arms crossed over her chest. She says, “Is there still blood in your pee?”

He doesn’t know. Because he hasn’t looked yet. Instead of answering her right away, he spreads his legs out so he can peer into the toilet bowl — she’s looking, too — and then he says, “It’s a little orange-y.”

She sighs. And then she shakes her head. And he thinks it’s the end of her disappointment in him, but then she spontaneously reaches out to slap him harshly on the shoulder, making him jump in surprise. Her eyes are bugging out as she shouts, “You fucking get your ass to your fucking doctor! Tomorrow! I am telling you, this isn’t fucking normal!”

“It’s Sunday tomorrow, babe.” Also, he really loves how she is fucking overreacting to a little bit of blood in his urine, but she is completely and relentlessly unconcerned with his inability to achieve an erection. Upon her blank look, he slowly explains, “The doctor’s office is not open on Sundays.”

“Oh my God,” she whispers to herself. “You are trying to make me kill you.”

He’s still damp from his shower when he crawls into bed. She rises up into sitting position to grab at the hem of his shirt and pull it off and over his head. She tosses the shirt on the ground and then she pats his stomach and lightly laughs. He smiles in the dark as he collapses down next to her. He murmurs something they already both know. He says, “You like it when I sleep with my shirt off.”

“You’re skin is like, seriously so soft,” she says. And then, putting on an affectation, she says, “What are your beauty secrets, Grey?”

“I sweat a shit ton,” he mumbles into the pillow. “Nature’s lotion.”

“Thanks for being a champ tonight, babe.”

He clears his throat. “Yeah, well. It’s a shitty, sucky situation.”

“That it is.”

“Promise me you will never ever do that to me.” This is not particularly something he thinks he ought to say to her right now — and perhaps not in this way — but he has said it anyway. He has
decided not to overly moderate and edit down what he is thinking. He can feel her stiffen next to him.

“Do what to you?” she asks.

“Never just pack your bags and leave without a word, even if it’s just temporary,” he explains. “Never take the kid without telling me where you are going with our hypothetical kid. If you need space and time alone and away from me — that’s fucking fine. Or it’s not fucking fine, but I can make myself be okay with it. But you need to tell me you’re gonna be leaving for a while — before it happens.” He clears his throat again. And then he says, “I’ve gotten so used to having you be a part of my life.”

“I’m never gonna leave you, Grey,” she says. “I swear to God, babe. I don’t know how else to say it.”

“Okay, never say never,” he volleys back.

“Okay, Justin Bieber.”


“Does Jaden Smith even sing-rap one goddamn thing in that song?”

“Oh fuck yeah he does. It’s a really ridi verse, though.”

She rolls over on top of him, burying her face into his neck. She says, “Our hypothetical kid, huh? I have to say, I couldn’t help but notice the way my ovaries got a boner watching how good you were with Arqo.”

“Are you serious,” he says incredulously. “I really don’t think I was the best babysitter. That kid cried his ass off under my care. And he also fat-shamed an innocent woman at the grocery store.”

“Oh my God, that predator was grabbing my boobs constantly! And all I could think was, this is how it starts! This is how men’s entitlement to women’s bodies starts!”

“Do you think Jhiqui knows she needs to teach her son not to rape?”

“Oh my God,” Missandei says, gasp-laughing. “Will you say that to her tomorrow? I feel like it will go over really well, given her current emotional state.”

He’s softly laughing, too. He says, “We’re fucking terrible.”

“Hey,” she says, licking her dry lips before she presses them to his mouth. “Do you wanna have sex really quietly right now? With me?”

He chuckles lowly, pushing her body down a bit, maneuvering her so she is straddling his hips and sitting on top of his penis. He says, “I love how you clarified that the sex would be with you. And you know I want to. So quietly.”

“Shh, so don’t say another word.” She pulls off her shirt without preamble. And then for good measure, she also frees her hair and tosses her scrunchie on the floor. She fluffs her curls around her head and then reaches over to turn on the lamp on their nightstand. This signals to him that she is pretty fucking serious about sex and that the sex they are about to have is gonna take a while.

“Ah, fuck,” he says, staring up at her naked torso and then her smiling face and then the fluffy halo
of hair and the entire fucking effect of it all, lit up all golden and soft. He is bouncing her around on top of him as he expends effort at kicking off his pants and getting full-on naked. He says, “No, but seriously, you’re kidding right? About the quiet, not the sex. I mean, obviously we’re having sex. But I also have stuff I wanna talk out with you.”

“Oh, well whisper it to me, babe,” she says, as she leans down and smears the front of her body against the front of his body. He suppresses a groan — he thinks that her mood is really fucking great. Really sexy and fun and just awesome. And then she says, “Jhiqui and Arqo are in the guest room. I don’t want her to hear us having sex. She and Nick haven’t been having sex, so I don’t want to like — shove our happening sex life in her ears.”

He groans, momentarily dropping his roaming hands from her body. “This is actually precisely why I bought this house with you — so we wouldn’t have to be fucking so quiet during sex all the time.”

“I thought we bought this house because it was a good investment.”

He kind of looks up at her in awe. He says, “Will you shut up?”

“But baby,” she says coyly — pouting. Her hand is all over his dick right now, which is kind of a semi right now. Kind of. That is promising. “I thought you had stuff you wanted to chat about?”

“Oh my God,” he grunts out. “I fucking love you. You drive me fucking insane sometimes. In a really good way.”

“I’m about to put my mouth all over you, man. I’m glad you just took a shower. Did you scrub all your nooks and crannies? No wait. No spoilers. I’ll figure it out, soon enough.”

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah, you’re gonna be saying that to me a lot tonight.”

“Oh my God. Missandei.”

“I know! I am killing it right now! My game is so strong, baby!”
Chapter Summary

Black masculinity gives Grey a complex. Some difficult stuff comes up in therapy. Missandei meets a new tall, dark, and handsome.

He and Missandei grab Arqo and give Jhiqui and Nick privacy as they talk in the living room. He is pretty burnt out over the emotional investment required of him, to constantly engage with a young child in a way that will distract said child from the tension rolling off his parents in the next room. Grey is so burnt out that he has resorted to mindless physicality. He keeps reaching out to randomly tickle Arqo as Arqo eats his cereal, for instance. Grey keeps jokingly pulling Missandei over by the elbow and placing her in front of Arqo, as if presenting her. In Summer Tongue, so that only she can understand him, he keeps telling her that maybe if she bends over a little bit and puts her tits within reach of this child, it will keep Arqo occupied for at least five minutes. Grey tells the joke twice in a row because he thinks she didn’t hear him or the joke the first time around. She cuts him off in the middle of the second telling and firmly tells him that he’s currently not funny — also in Summer Tongue.

It might actually be the first time in years that they’ve spoken Summer Tongue to each other — an observation that he notes out loud in shock. Usually there’s not a reason to. Usually with her family, they speak Low Valyrian. Usually when they are alone together, they speak English.

Grey is blindly pawing at Arqo’s face and letting Arqo try to punch his hands when he says to her, “English is the only language where I actually feel on even ground with you. You speak everything so well and beautifully. English is the only language that I’m fully fluent in.”

She furrows her brows. She says, “You actually mean that you are a native speaker of English. You are actually fluent in Low Valyrian. You are proficient in Summer Tongue. And you are conversational in High Valyrian.”

Grey lightly chuckles. A part of him wants to compliment her for unwittingly doing that really spot-on impression of him. Another part of him also wants to pet her face and tell her that he gets it — it is actually kind of irritating to be corrected based on a technicality. He says, “Thanks for giving me that last one. I feel like I struggle real hard in High Valyrian.”

“I prefer to speak to you in English, too,” she offers. “Culturally, it’s a better fit for us. It’s more egalitarian. I don’t have to constantly refer to you as a superior being when I address you in English, for instance.”

“Shut up,” he mutters, before he lightly reaches out and rapidly taps Arqo’s belly with his fingers. Arqo giggles.
“Grey. Tell me to shut up one more time.”

He laughs. “Sorry. You know I don’t mean shut up like, shut your mouth and don’t share your thoughts. But still — you’re right. I’ll stop saying it.” Then, he palms Arqo’s head, and turns it so the kid is facing Missandei. Grey says, “Does this little guy know any Dothraki?”

“I don’t think so,” Missandei says hesitantly, stooping down a little to peer at Arqo’s face. Then she gently says a few words to him in Dothraki. Grey gathers that she is probably saying hello or asking Arqo if he understands her.

Arqo says, “Arqo!” And then he says, “Blue!”

Missandei cups Arqo’s cheek to keep his attention, and then she says more stuff to him.

Arqo shakes his head and then he says, “No. I don’t want more.”

“Oh, honey,” Missandei says, straightening up to her full height. Then to Grey, Missandei says, “His comprehension is pretty good. But he doesn’t seem to know how to speak it — or he hasn’t tried very much.”

Grey watches as Missandei gently pulls the empty bowl of cereal grains and remnants of sugary milk away from Arqo and places a napkin and a glass of water in its place. She asks Arqo to please wipe his face before she walks the bowl to the sink and turns on the water to wash the bowl and spoon right away — a habit that she has picked up because of Grey. She has one eye trained on Arqo, who is busy trying to convince Grey to hand over his phone so that he can play a game on it. Grey is distractedly trying to tell Arqo that there are no games on his phone — at which point Missandei pointedly reminds Arqo to wipe his face with the napkin.

Watching this entire scene unfold in front of him inspires Grey to say to her, “Hey, would it be important to you to teach our hypothetical kid Low Valyrian?”

She doesn’t miss a beat. She says, “Hello, have you met me? Obviously it’s a requirement for our hypothetical kid, or else we’re tossing him. And obviously he’d also learn Summer Tongue. He’s going to go to all the language classes and then completely resent me for forcing them on him.” She pauses. “We’re pretty lucky. We have a good setup here, in which both parents speak the languages. It’s probably hard for Jhiqui to teach Arqo Dothraki because she —”

“Grey!” Arqo interrupts, screaming it out. “Grey! Do you wanna be my friend!”

Grey’s about to actually answer this kid’s question — the answer is a joking no — when Missandei cuts in and says to Arqo, “Hey, honey, if you have something to say, you have to wait your turn. You have to wait until Grey and I are finished talking. And only when there’s a quiet moment, then you can ask your question. Do you understand?”

Neither of them really know what is going on with Jhiqui and Nick, but everything seems relatively peaceful as they start gathering up all of Arqo’s things — his strewn clothes and some of his toys — putting it back into Jhiqui’s leather bag so that the family can ready themselves to go back home.

Nick looks weary and a little rough, as he gives Grey and Missandei a quick hug and apologizes to them for the inconvenience. Naturally, they quickly reassure him and tell him that none of it was an inconvenience.
They have levelled up in their friendship with Tank, or Tank has resigned himself to their presence in his life because Tank’s fiance is friends with their significant others, or Tank actually really likes Grey but is only putting up with Jaime for Grey’s sake. In any case, when they roll up to the house — they see a number of Tank’s friends talking amongst themselves in Tank’s driveway.

Tank originally called them up and told them to come on by his place for a get-together with a few people. In the past, it has always been dinner parties with their comfortable and familiar group of friends. When they pull up to Tank’s house and see really clean SUVs littering the block, Jaime gasps.

“Oh my God it’s a Black barbecue!” Jaime squeals when he realizes where he is. He’s looking around the yard, avidly taking in all of the sights. “Oh my God, I am so excited! Yay! I’m so glad I brought potato salad!”

“Can you be cool?” Grey gripes. “And I think it’s called a cookout. Because a barbecue —”

“Is the fine art of smoking meat,” Jaime interrupts, as he scrambles to get out of the car and into this party. “Come on, don’t forget who you are talking to here.”

“Great,” Brienne says sarcastically, leaning forward from the backseat to peer out the front window. “A new environment for me to feel social anxiety in.”

Grey silently snickers at that. Because he can relate.

Grey flinches and immediately grabs his bicep. Because Jaime had rammed his fist into it. Jaime completely randomly says, “You better not be a punkass bitch at this party. You better look like you’re having fun.”

“Hey,” Missandei says to Jaime, from beside Brienne, reaching out to comfortingly run her hand up and down Grey’s arm. “Just let him be himself.”

He’s having a terrible time at this party. He actually feels completely fucking lame based on everything — from the shade of his skin color to the way he walks to the way he sits to the way he talks to the way he answers fucking questions about himself in monosyllabic grunts and then belatedly realizes that he sounds like a complete unfriendly jackass. He doesn’t remember being this awkward at being around people of color in college. However, in college, he was blitzed out of his mind half the time and he also forced himself to not give many fucks.

In contrast, Jaime is having a really great time and is befriending just a shit ton of new people. Brienne’s pregnancy, which is showing, has resulted in her being handled with extra care, and it has also become a conversation topic with a small subset of women congregated around Brienne, Missandei, and Doreah, all trading stories.

Like, when Tank introduces Grey to a guy named Reggie — Reggie is taller, darker, and bigger — Grey can actually see this dude innocently sizing him up before he cracks a wide smile and slowly
reaches out in greeting. The handshake that follows is terrible and awkward and full of stumbles because Grey has been shaking hands with white guys for the better part of a decade now. He is so fucking stressed out. It’s completely his own fault that he doesn’t have Black friends.

When Jaime brings up two of his favorite games — the stuff white people like game and the stuff Black people like game — Grey more or less wants to scream out NOOO and slo-mo jump in front of the incoming bullet like how heroes do in movies. But it’s too late. The blurt has already flown out of Jaime’s dumb face.

And amazingly — because Jaime is just so blessed all the time — the entire thing goes over pretty well. People are laughing. People are adding in their two cents. People are debating whether it is actually a white person thing, to like microbrews. Tank pretends to be offended and lifts up the lid to his cooler to display a bunch of hyperlocal beer brands. However, he also opens the lid to another cooler to display what he calls, “light lager shit.”

Grey doesn’t know this — or maybe he does know it but they haven’t talked about it — but she has been applying a fair bit of effort trying to figure out sex, or figure out more stuff about sex. She reads a lot. She also crowdsources some opinions from her friends and finds that the way other people have sex is really not very relevant to what she is trying to achieve and what she is trying to do.

She has this general thought, that a lot of his issues in the bedroom stem from just how tightly he’s been clenching up his ass during normal things — like going to a friend’s house for a get together and just relaxing in the back yard. Somehow, doing that fairly simple activity resulted in a few hours of semi-insane silence from him as he internalized everything.

She has suggested acupuncture. He told her he doesn’t buy into it. She suggested a massage from a professional. He had told her that it’s a waste of money, and he doesn’t like to be touched by strangers. She suggested going into a deprivation chamber thing and seeing if it relaxes him because she saw a Groupon. He looked utterly unimpressed and needlessly reminded her that part of his childhood was spent locked up in dark, quiet rooms in between sessions where he was just fucking terrorized and traumatized, so why the fuck would he want to shove himself in a deprivation chamber?

That had stung. A lot. She had been too stung and guilt-ridden to remind him that they once had a conversation a long time ago when they were first starting to date, about how the things that used to terrorize him as a child have sort of become the things that he derives comfort out of, as an adult. She remembers his apartment with no furniture and cardboard cut-outs to delineate space because too much open space freaked him out. She had an entire well-thought out logic for this deprivation chamber thing, actually. But he just stared at her like she was dumb. Which actually made her feel a little bit dumb.

When they have sex, she starts by going down on him for as long as he will let her — for as long as it takes for him to become discouraged and angry with himself for the lack of response from his penis. His self-sabotaging approach to this is not at all what she wants. She stops herself from
snapping at him. Instead, she presses her palm to his thigh, and she asks him to just relax and just enjoy it — without worrying about outcome. He tells her he can’t disconnect like that. It is all about results and outcome. What he is saying to her is so in line with his personality that it’s hard for her to find things to say to him that would convince him to just let her touch him aimlessly for a while. He’s in a cranky mood today.

She can’t use her old tricks. She can’t talk dirty to him because he likes to shit all over how strategic she is in her vagueness regarding his dick. She can’t bring up memories of really great sex they’ve had in the past because it’s something that currently stings for him. She has to focus a lot on the here and now. She can feel herself and him sometimes falling into some old patterns — her being extra optimistic and bright just to compensate for his utter lack of belief in himself.

In between kissing him, she whispers, “You’re so beautiful.”

It garners this look from him. He actually sarcastically says, “Okay, thanks.” He’s acting like everything she is giving him is out of pity. He is acting like she is forcing him to have sex with her. It’s another blast from the past, and she hates it. He is actually being the very fucking worst. She has to keep reminding herself that she loves him more than anything else and she has vowed to always love him, in spite of all of his fucking bullshit sometimes.

In the past, she might’ve responded in a more volatile way, even in the recent past. Today though, she is kind of tired, and she is really not lying. He is beautiful. And complicated. As she smooths her hands over his back and neck, she says, “Do you just wanna talk and cuddle? Are you not feeling it tonight, babe?”

She hears him sigh. He says, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me. And I mean in the head. I actually don’t mean in the dick, in this instance.”

“What’s wrong? What are you thinking right now?”

“I’ve been thinking that I feel bad for you because you signed up to be stuck to some asshole with the body of a 70-year-old. And it’s making me feel so pissed.”

Her scoff feels natural and very honest. She looks down at the body in question. She looks at its tightness and its strength and its athleticism and its ridiculous youthfulness. He looks different from how he looked when they first met. In a good way. He’s probably healthier than he’s ever been in his life, right now.

She can’t help it. She sometimes has trouble taking his problems seriously. She also sounds a little sarcastic when she says, “Maybe you should talk to your therapist about your body dysmorphia.”

It’s surprising to her, when he responds seriously. When he says, “Maybe I should.”

Grey’s comfort-level and trust in Amari gradually builds — to the point where he stops thinking about therapy as something he has to make himself show up for and act engaged in, but rather now a routine of his life that he has folded in with all the other stuff. He tells Amari that in the past — probably still now — he sort of has had trouble empathizing with other people. He can be an extremely judgmental person. He’s pissed off Jaime and Drogo loads over the years because of this trait. Missandei used to be pretty skittish and nervous around him because of this trait — and then
they broke up and she started making all of these positive changes in her life. When they got back
together, she made it pretty clear to him that she was real sick of putting up with that shit from him.
Grey tells Amari he sometimes slips into old habits. He tells Amari that he’s so grateful that
Missandei puts up with him as well as she does. He explains to Amari that it’s not that he can’t
understand other people’s emotions. It’s that he just doesn’t want to — or he thinks other people’s
feelings are frankly stupid. He says this with what he thinks is an odd mixture of shame and also
defiance.

Because Grey asks for this semi-regularly, Amari runs down a list of observations and conclusions. Amari lays down some real talk.

He tells Grey that he’s not surprised that Grey has an inability to empathize sometimes because —
due to his experiences growing up in foster care — he lived in a very insular environment, which
tends to breed judgmental thoughts and ideas. Amari tells Grey, straight up, that his tendency toward
lacking in empathy comes from insecurity. Amari tells Grey, straight up, that his tendency toward
lacking in empathy comes from insecurity. Amari tells Grey that only insecure people lash out and
harshly judge others because that is how the insecure manage their own anxieties and their feelings
of their own perceived inferiority. Ironically the defense mechanism of suppressing an inferiority
complex is to act superior. Amari then points out that Grey comes off as fairly arrogant and fairly
cold and as fairly superior to people who do not know him — so he is behaving in a way that is
predictable. Amari tells Grey that this defense mechanism is also probably a survival mechanism,
because of his history of trauma.

Amari tells Grey that people with a history of violent sexual abuse in childhood tend to have such
emotional issues as PTSD, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse and addiction,
attachment issues, sexual dysfunction, and also tend to engage in violent and abusive behavior that is
very similar to how they were victimized when young.

Amari stops speaking after that. A long moment of uncomfortable silence ensues as Grey tensely
flicks his eyes back and forth across the length of the room.

“How often do you masturbate?” Amari asks.

Grey stops himself from rolling his eyes. He says, “Maybe about once a month.”

“Well?”

“Is that weird?”

“No.”

“Oh, well, the way you said ‘really’ sure made it seem weird.” Grey is currently just full of pointless
defensiveness and pointless anger. He is full of negative feelings that have no definitive source or
root cause. It is like nothing is different about him and therapy is not making a single dent in
anything.

Amari continues on. He says, “Do you use porn when you masturbate?”

“No. Porn honestly makes me uncomfortable, actually,” Grey says pointedly. “I just use my
imagination.”
“Okay, here is what I would like for you to do. It’s going to sound a little odd, but try it for the next week. I want you to try and masturbate every day, or every other day. When you masturbate and achieve an erection, you should stop before you orgasm. Then you should wait until your erection softens. And then you should touch yourself again and resume masturbation until you get an erection again. And then stop again. Repeat this cycle at least three times in a row.”

“Okay, this sounds really fun,” Grey mutters.

“I would also like for you to pay close attention to how you are masturbating, how it feels, how you are touching yourself — pay attention to what feels good and what is working well for you. Just keep that information in your head and let it percolate. Also pay attention to what you’re imagining or thinking about — when you masturbate. What kind of imagery elicits arousal.”

In the deadest deadpan, Grey says, “Why do I get the feeling that a week from now, I’m going to be back in your office, telling you that I have discovered that I get the hardest erections when I beat off to images of decapitated children because I’m apparently now a fucking psychopathic pedophile?”

“Grey, you are angry. I am hearing that. I know this is deeply uncomfortable work. You’re doing a great job. You’ve been doing a great job, and I’m proud of you. And it’s okay to feel angry.”

Grey actually has these plans to come home in the foulest of moods so that she’d know that a lot of great shit is going on in therapy. He had these plans to metaphorically shit on her face and, without any prompting at all, tell her that he will be back downstairs for dinner in about twenty minutes. He has to fucking go jack off in the bathroom by himself for a bit.

But when he gets home — she’s actually not there. The house is dark because it’s late — and little 2.0 is running up to him and smacking him in the butt with her paws. When he checks his phone, he sees that she sent him a text that says she has a client dinner come up last minute and that she’ll be home late, so he’s on his own for food.

She realizes too late that she maybe should’ve worked in a sly way of telling the new client that she is married — and she realizes this must be partly why women sometimes wear rings. So other men will know she already belongs to someone and will step off the other guy’s property.

She feels this way — very nervous and self-conscious — because the man she is having dinner is handsome. But she knows a lot of handsome men and it’s not just that, he is friendly and they just met that morning, but he has this manner about him — she felt comfortable around him almost immediately. And when he smiles at her — she can actually feel her heart beating a little bit harder because there must be something exhilarating in his newness and in all the things she doesn’t know about him. She knows pretty much everything about Grey at this point. And he’s like, also so friendly and so easy going.

She feels kind of like crap over it all — even though she can hear Dany’s voice in her head, telling her that she should relax because it’s just a fucking harmless micro-crush — because she hasn’t felt
the butterflies in her gut for anyone else in so many years. It’s so surprising and unexpected that she feels a shitty person about it.

When Gendry asks her if she’d like another glass of wine, rakishly noting that they can expense it, Missy blurts out, “I’m married. I don’t know if you know that. But FYI.”

He blinks hard. And then after he recovers, he says, “Okay. Congratulations?” Then, after another short pause, he says, “I have a girlfriend — if that’s what you were worried about.”

Her face is just fucking burning right now. She says, “Oh. That’s embarrassing.”

With an arm slung over the back of the empty chair next to him, he chuckles. He says, “No, I get it. Thank you. Thanks for ripping off that band aid.”
Grey is bad at masturbation

Chapter Summary

Grey has a self-esteem and a jealousy issue. Missandei is really bad at placating him.

They deviate from business and devote the last ten minutes of dinner — the time in which they have to wait for the server to pick up the credit card and then come back with the receipt — to light conversation about their significant others. Gendry tells Missy that his story is very boy-meets-girl, very rom-com. His smile is sneaky — so she knows he’s messing around a bit. He finally cracks and says that perhaps more accurately, the story is very boy-meets-boy. It’s a cute story with a little bit of cross-dressing.

She doesn’t know what he’s talking about at all — this is clearly an inside joke for himself, and she is excluded from the details. But the entire effect is still lovely. She still finds him charming.

“And you?” he says. “How did you meet your husband?”

Missy’s smile is kind of blinding. She was encouraged to have two glasses of wine. She says, “Oh! I was his language tutor and had such a crush on him. And he had a really hard time even admitting to other people that we were friends. Another tale as old as time!”

His masturbation habits and history — which he has already detailed to Amari in gruesome length — follow this narrative of shame. It took the step-by-step verbalization of it for Grey to be able to qualify it as such. Before he had to talk about it fully, he just shrugged it off and qualified his feelings on it as slightly depressing, but normal.

His early prepubescent erections, which he jokingly called proto-erectsions in therapy until the term stuck and became benign to his ears, were these confusing and complicated occurrences for him. He was never afforded any privacy in the places he lived, so it was sometimes mortifying and sometimes terrifying when he could hear the adult voice of a man nearby and always — always, always — very isolating and made him feel alone and helpless as a kid.

After puberty, the first time he had sex with a girl was for all the wrong reasons. He had these friends with certain ideas. He felt motivated to prove something. And then he was very mean to her afterward because he was a little fucking asshole.

He had asked Amari if there is ever a right reason to have sex with a girl for the first time. It was supposed to be a rhetorical joke, but what has been happening with frightening frequency is that all of the shit that comes out of his mouth just sounds so fucking bent and incorrect. He’s been telling Amari that he keeps re-realizing, again and again, that he has learned all the wrong things about life.
He admits that the circumstances of his first time with Missandei were not ideal. He was raging, and he was so blind with jealousy. She deserved better than what he gave her.

He has a problem with terminology and with timelines. He has abstractly talked about the concept of virginity and when anyone is supposed to start counting anyway. He has talked about how it’s fucking weird how the things that used to be nightmarish have become a big part of his life. He has said that sex is sometimes fucking weird. The concept of sex is just weird — that being intimate with her can just gut him with such happiness and how it’s so bizarre that such happiness can be derived from a thing that was fucking terrible for him at one point.

He has talked about these abstract fears inside of him. He has said that sometimes all he can focus on are his losses and what he still stands to lose — it’s immense. Sometimes sex doesn’t feel tangible or real, because it’s currently out of his grasp. He has said that he knows his view of sex is currently so narrow and so dick-centric. He can’t make himself not think this way, as much as he would like to.

Grey thinks this masturbation exercise is fucking dumb — frankly — but it’s out of his deep respect for his therapist and his love of her, that he goes through the motions. He does it at home and on the toilet, because he’s trying to let this be as clinical and as cold as possible. He doesn’t think he requires or would particularly benefit from the comfort of a bed. He doesn’t want to ritualize this or create a place of permanence here, so he purposefully imprints this randomness, these micro-bits of spontaneity, in the way he undoes his pants and shoves all the fabric down.

He hates the look of his dick. He hates looking at himself naked sometimes.

He doesn’t particularly like to masturbate for a bunch of vague reasons that he is terrible at examining in depth. It makes him feel bad. It makes him feel weak and dumb and pathetic. He typically masturbates with purpose — like when he has to pump and dump in a fertility clinic for instance, for the sake of the future. Most of time, he masturbates to check in on himself, to assure himself that vestiges of what it used to be is still there and there are still some things that still work. There have been sparse moments in the past — mostly when he was in his teens and maybe a few times when he was in his early twenties — when he touched himself out of desperation and then got so pissed at himself afterward because he thought he was so fucking weak and disgusting. There was that whole terrible period in life when jacking off was kind of a big part of his life because he had just met her and he thought that she was hot as shit and there was just fucking nothing he was ever gonna be able to do about those feelings.

The whirring of the garage door opening knocks him out of his concentration.

It’s priceless. He thinks it’s for the best anyway because he was getting fucking nowhere anyway. His head is full of thoughts that are not conducive to this anyway.

She can hear him walking around upstairs — the floorboards are creaking a little bit. She runs her teeth over her lips, unconsciously trying to suck off the final traces of red wine — like she’s trying to hide the fact that she had fun without him. She turns on the camera on her phone to check out her face, which is still nicely made up. Her lips looks pinker and attractively puffy — she’s a little loose and glowing from the alcohol — and the entire house is dark behind her. She smells remnants of garlic in the warm air and she swallowing the lump in her throat when he descends the stairs. She flips on the light in the kitchen. He materializes, right at the foot of the stairs. His expression is tempestuous — which is actually not at all out of the ordinary. He often looks like this — intense and
deeply unhappy about something.

She still smiles at the familiarity — of his body and his gait as he comes closer, of his general physicality and his really lovely face. She hasn’t seen him all day.

And she is so fucking relieved that his presence still manages to drag out that feeling of want and of nervousness and of hunger from her. Her heart is pounding already. She says, “Hey, baby.”

His mood is so terrible that he cannot empathize or fathom why she would be in a good mood. In his estimation, nothing has changed. Life is oppressively stagnant. He is still jobless and worthless. He is still fucked in the brain. He still cannot have proper sex with her. She looks beautiful and happy because she’s been apart from him. He bitterly observes to himself that she doesn’t need him — she doesn’t need him at all.

He smells her perfume when her warm body slowly and tantalizingly presses into his, when her arms come around him. He hears her groan softly and sees her eyes flutter shut for a bit when they make contact with one another. He feels her hand on the back of his neck, lightly pulling him in as she inhales and kisses him on his jaw, the tip of her tongue falling on his skin before her lips do.

“You look so freaking yummy,” she murmurs into his cheek after she licks him. “I can just eat you up.”

“How was dinner?” he asks, his voice a low timber.

“It was fine. We ate at that one steakhouse near work. It was, you know, a steakhouse. So just okay. But his company was footing the bill, so I was like — oh, one T-bone, please! I finished it all by myself, too.” She reaches around and squeezes his butt. She bounces on her feet as she holds onto him, suppressing this squeal pretty badly. She’s baring her teeth — he belatedly realizes she is smiling at him — and then she says, “I’m so full from all the meat. Feel my tummy.”

She actually grabs his hand by the wrist and leads his hand to her stomach. She puffs out her belly a little bit, but to him, it feels the same as it always does. And he’s about to comment on this, but then she licks her swollen lips and then drags his hand up to her cleavage. He looks at her kind of dumbly as he holds onto her breast, warm and soft in her bra, as she starts breathing heavily and unbuttoning her shirt. He doesn’t understand. He doesn’t understand at all — why she came home and is so randomly into him. Based on his current impression of himself, it doesn’t make any sense.

He lifts his hand off her chest. He says, “You had dinner with a man? Just the two of you?”

She doesn’t pause from unbuttoning her shirt. She says, “Yeah, Gendry. The new client. He’s really awesome. Babe, do you wanna take off your pants? Do you want to go upstairs? Has little girl pooped yet? Oh my God, I need you.”

Missandei finally gets a clue when she reaches for him — more specifically when she makes an aggressive grab for his belt and he actually steps backwards in response — out of her reach.

Her eyes snap up to his face, wide and surprised.
He looks really tortured and really upset. The expression is rare enough on him that she’s just frozen standing next to the kitchen island with her shirt undone. Her breath is caught in her throat. And a few long seconds tick by as her mind starts whirring with all of the terrible possibilities.

She actually starts to cry. Her eyes sting hotly, and she feels stupid as she raises her hands to dig the heels into her eyes, to smear away the tears. She is struck with a not-so-random memory — of him with a similar look of tension and guilt, right before he despondently told her that he kissed someone else, someone who isn’t her.

She knows that can’t be the situation here, though. She just knows it with everything inside of her.

She sniffs. She says, “What’s going on?”

She sits naked on their bed, save for her underwear, as he comes out of the bathroom closet and tosses one of his white t-shirts to her. She pulls it over her head tiredly before she collapses backwards onto the mattress. Her nose is still a little stuffy, but she can smell the laundry detergent and the clean linen smell. She rubs at their comforter with the back of her hand. He recently did laundry and washed all the sheets. Her feet are sore from her shoes, because she had stayed an extra three hours in them. She is kind of too tired to continue having the same conversation with him, over and over and over again. She is starting to think that she can’t make him believe what she believes — through sheer optimism or through sheer force of will. She actually entertains the idea of just giving up and leaving him to it for a bit. She is thinking that there is only so much she can give, and that it’s also hard to continue to give and to feel that it makes no difference. She also admonishes herself and tells herself that this is what love is. Love is a marathon.

He hates that metaphor.

And if she’s honest with herself, the whole situation with Nick and Jhiqui actually shook her up more than she has let on. She does not want to end up where they have ended up at all.

His voice is quiet and very moderated when he says, “I’m supposed to beat off, all day everyday now. That’s my therapy homework.”

She kind of chokes on air, staring up at the ceiling. She says, “What?”

“Yeah. That was my exact thought, too, when it was brought up.”

“Wait — seriously, what? What are you talking about? You’re skipping over a lot of details.”

She keeps kissing him as they lie in the bed talking — just chaste little pecks on the mouth and all over his fucking face — which makes it kind of hard for him to talk at times. She always makes him feel so fucking vulnerable and cut open, like a raw nerve. She keeps making soft empathetic sounds
from her throat before she purses her lips and rubs them all over his skin. It’s making him feel so
dumb and pitiful. And it’s also really, really nice and lovely and comforting.

He tells her about all the masturbation he’s about to do and how the thought of it is, of course,
driving him fucking insane. They’ve actually never talked about this before, so she is deeply curious
and asks all sorts of questions and is eliciting all sorts of sad sex stories from him. He tells her, for
instance, that once when he was about twelve years old, he woke up to a girl — another foster kid
with emotional issues — and her hand was down his pants. And he freaked out so hard that he bit
her and it was a bloody mess and chaotic. She cried like she was dying. His foster mother ran into
the room and demanded to know what had happened. He couldn’t get any words out of his mouth.
He couldn’t make himself explain. And then the girl told their foster mom that he had tried to touch
her — sexually — and when she refused him, he bit her.

He tells Missandei that his foster mother beat the crap out of him and told him he was a godless
pervert — because she didn’t even know what else to do with him. And he was just so angry about it
— how unfair it was and how people are liars — and he knew in his heart that he hated them all.

He says, “But she was honestly in a pretty tough position. It’s hard being in charge of young kids
like us. Who knows how I’d respond, if I was put in that position today, right?”

Missandei sighs. She reaches over to squeeze the shit out of his hand, like she thinks he is fragile.
She says, “That’s why you never wanted to sleep in the same bed as me. It was because you were
afraid I’d sexually assault you in your sleep.” She sighs again.

“No, man,” he says, correcting her. “I really was afraid I’d hit you or hurt you in my sleep.”

“Maybe it’s a mixture of both reasons,” she whispers.

She’s trying to be diplomatic. He knows this much. He knows that there is so much more stuff she
wants to say about this, but she is holding back because she anticipates that he will not want to hear
what she has to say — what she believes to be true. It makes his body get incrementally warmer —
maybe he is starting to feel anger toward her again, for her confidence in knowing things about him.
He sighs, too.

He asks, “Why do you say that?”

Issues of masculinity are never really issues she can empathize well with — being a woman and also
being the recipient or victim of other people’s overflow of masculinity. It must be easy and
comforting for him to tell himself he was protecting her from him, instead of protecting himself from
her.

She used to get told what to do, all the time. She also used to get told what to feel, all the time. She
used to rebel hard against it — and then she was told not to rebel because she was railing against
them as if they were vindictive and meant to do her harm. Her brothers and grandparents basically
conveyed to her that their oppressive supervision of her was born out of their intense love for her.
They love her so much and they worried about her so much and they feared for her so much. She
was told that she can’t hate that they love her so much. She was kind of made to think that it was the
right thing to do, to submit under the weight of their love. She tells him it was a complicated thing
and to this day, she feels so much guilt all the time, this survivor’s guilt — because their lives were
very hard and her life is comparatively very easy.

She says, “No, really — how do you speak up against people whose terrible flaw is that they just love you so fucking much?” She touches his chest with her knuckles. She kind of smiles at him — she hopes really hard that he understands the joke. She asks, “Have you figured it out yet?”

He apparently understands the joke — and even if he doesn’t — she has apparently touched something inside of him. Because he grabs onto her hand, and he uses it to help drag her body completely on top of his. He holds her face as he kisses her deeply and carefully.

“I hate that I’m asking you this — I really hate it,” he tells her. “But shit — I’m gonna ask it. Did you really have to stay late for work? Did you really have to have a last-minute client dinner?”

He almost expects for her to scoff and act self-righteous because she deserves to have that response, and he deserves her condemnation. Because he is a dumbass. But instead she just snuggles deeper into him and she says, “Yeah. I really did have to work late. Why do you ask?”

She has been kind of applying immense emotional brain power into reading his layers-deep shit — she’s kind of nailing it.

He says, “I thought it was kind of weird that you came home in such a good mood. I thought it was odd that you were like — really revved and ready to fuck.” He sighs. “I got jealous. Because I had this idea in my head that you were with someone deeply interesting and charismatic and good-looking, and it was probably stimulating for you. And then I felt sad for you, that you had to come home to your fucking lameass husband and make do.” He pauses. “No, wait, I said that wrong,” he says, interrupting her before she can respond. “I actually felt sorry for and unhappy with myself, because of how that thought made me feel. I think that is what actually happened.”

She tells Grey the truth — all of it. She figures that she has to be consistent and she has to do right by him. She figures that there is no point in fucking lying about things because she has done nothing wrong. But it’s still with a little bit of anxiety in her stomach and in her voice, as she tells him that she was physically attracted to her handsome client. And dinner was great. And it was stimulating. It did put her in a good mood. Which did bleed into how she approached him, when she got home.

And all the stuff she is saying is not sounding very awesome to her own ears — he’s very quiet lying next to her, taking it all in — so she switches gears. She takes a different approach. She mines the past, and she asks, “Do you know what my very first thought was, when you introduced Drogo to me at my twenty-first nameday?”

“No,” he says, forcefully keeping his voice bland. “What?”

“I looked at him, and I was like, holy shit, this motherfucker is so fucking hot that I’d totally let him slap me in the face during sex.”

“Okay?” Grey actually does not sound surprised. “What is your point here, Missandeï?”
“That I’m not blind. I still have eyes. I’m still a person — a woman. I still feel things.”

“Okay?”

“Over the years though, though, Drogo has done an amazing job at iteratively making himself less and less attractive to me. I honest don’t know how Dany does it. Sleep with him, I mean.” Then she snickers. “Just kidding. I know how. I bet they do some weird power stuff in the bedroom, don’t you think?”

“Missandei,” he says patiently. “Which part of that was supposed to make me feel better about being insecure as shit?”

“Oh, was I supposed to reassure you and make you feel better and tell you that you are the fairest of them all?” she says. “Yeah, no. Sorry. I’ve played that game for years and how you like to respond to that is that you like to roll your eyes at me and remind me constantly that I have horrible taste in men and that I must be a little fucked in the head for being so attracted to you. I already know the script, Grey. I’m tired of the same song and dance.”

“Are you — are you doing some reverse psychology bullshit?” he asks, kind of hesitantly. “Like, what is this? This is new.”

“Why don’t you tell me?” she says challenging. “You know me best. Why do you think I came home ready to fuck?”

He doesn’t take the question seriously at first. He changes the subject and she straight up tells him she doesn’t want to talk about what they are going to eat tomorrow. When he realizes that she really intends for him to actually answer why he thinks she came home ready to pound — he tries to play it off — he tries to joke. He sarcastically tells her that she probably came home ready to fuck because the stench of his mental anguish is probably just so fucking arousing to her.

She is dead silent in response — and kind of disappointed and dissatisfied with his answer — which results in his own disappointment in himself. Habits are hard to break. His defense mechanisms have been entrenched for years. He can’t just stop being himself — and he wants to tell her this because he kind of feels this urge to defend himself.

“I can’t read your mind, Missandei.”

“You’re being so lame right now.”

“Oh, are you just gonna insult me into doing what you want then?”

“Maybe I should go friggin’ sleep in the other room.”

“Is that a fucking threat?”

“This is escalating.”

He says, “I know what you want me to say. I’m not stupid. You want me to say that you fucking love me and you’re fucking attracted to me and you wanted to fuck because you thought I was cute and hot when you got home because you are so fucking in love with me because I am awesome.
“That is what you want me to say. There. I said it. Are you happy now?”

“Yeah, man, ecstatic,” she says, pressing her palm to her cheek. “What’s your endgame here? When you mock how I feel about you, what is the point? Do you even know? Why don’t you just go get a fucking job, Grey! Just go get a job if it means you’ll stop being such a fucking jerk to me whenever you are in a bad mood. I’m sick of this!”

“Why don’t you also tell me how you wanted to bang Jaime when you first met him, too!” he shouts. “Maybe you should rub my face in that now!”

“I don’t even remember when I met Jaime, you psycho!” she screams back.

“How was your week?” Amari asks, leaning forward, smiling gently.

“Oh, awesome,” Grey says sarcastically, already waving his hand grandly in front of him as a precursor to what he’s about to say. “I jerked off probably more times in the last week than I usually do in an entire year. My penis is like, so chafed. And I fucking keep getting yelled at by a woman who confessed to me that she wants to have sex with all my friends — no I am joking. That last one was a joke. She really did yell at me though.”

Amari, evidently now very used to Grey’s disorienting asides, tilts his head a little and says, “You’re chafed? How often were you masturbating?”

“Once a day,” Grey says, already defensive. “Like you said to. Why? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, not at all. Did you use lubrication?”

Grey looks perturbed. “Uh, no.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t need to be romantic with myself.”
Chapter Summary

The gals and lads and Drogo segregate and get their party on.

She hasn’t seen Terri since before the wedding, when “all of the patriarchy” was driving her a little nuts. She ostensibly visits her therapist for a “brain tune-up,” but what ends up happening is that it becomes a long-winded vent session, which Terri is very gracious about absorbing. Missy realizes belatedly that she might just need to unload a little bit, because a result of her gargantuan efforts in respecting his privacy more is that she cannot really tell her friends all about his dick issues because her friends see him on a semi-regular basis and she doesn’t want him to feel awkward or uncomfortable. She also doesn’t want the loudmouths to say the wrong thing to him and then to have him feel upset about it. He is already plenty touchy about his penis.

Missy’s vent is largely one-sided and incredibly biased. She knows it, but she allows herself this. She declares to Terri that she’s been a motherfucking MVP in the bedroom. She has been giving it up — offering herself up to him on practically a daily basis — and she has been pushing herself toward a bunch of scary and new sex stuff, working overtime to make it fun and sexy and great for him. She has been working sixty-hour weeks for the last three months, slaying it at work — and she’s so physically spent when she gets home, but she finds it within herself to shoot come-hither looks at him as she strips naked and lets him do whatever the fuck he feels like to her body — in this insane and desperate hope that her unending love and her unconditional acceptance of him will finally worm their way into that fucking thickass skull.

Missy says, “I am a motherfucking hero! I am the fucking king of my house! He’s so mired in his stupid man-bullshit that he doesn’t even get how much I am killing this shit. Do you even know the kind of emotional fortitude a woman has to have, to present her tired, naked-ass, vulnerable body to a man all the time and then wait as that man decides to either reject or accept that body, based on his fucking mood? Like, do you know how rock-solid my emotional core is, to roll with the punches like that and to not let my self-esteem get battered constantly? I am a fucking hero, Terri!”

Terri laughs. “You are. You are a hero.”

“I know! I want a fucking medal or something.”

“It sounds like you actually want acknowledgement from him,” Terri says simply. “It sounds like you actually want affirmation that he appreciates and understands the work you’ve been doing for your guys’ relationship.”

Missy scoffs, dramatically dropping her head almost down to her knees. She’s been going to this therapist for far too long. She groans — a long drawn out one that transitions into a whine. She says,
“Yeah, maybe. Probably. It would be nice to get a thank you sometimes.”

Missy sees Drogo’s disgustingly wide and victorious grin and Grey’s stone-cold staring right through the window of the food truck. She ran over on her lunch break — she has half an hour to visit and eat with them before she has to hightail it back to the office. On a scale of one to ten, she wants to be here about a three. It degrades to a two soon after, because she can actually see these bitches talking about her as she approaches Drogo’s new, shiny food truck.

“Hi, Grey! Hey, Drogo!” she calls out, trying do her best impression of someone who is way chill and not at all high-strung, stressed to fuck, and strapped for time.

“Hey, wifey,” Drogo drawls, sounding a touch too amused and self-satisfied.

She chooses to ignore that. The first step up into the truck is huge and just about impossible for her to step on in her tight pencil skirt. She has to struggle trying to do some upper body pull-up stuff that only results in her awkwardly hanging from a hand rail as the toes of her pumps try to lift up as much as they can to get up to the metal rung — without being able to bend her knees.

She finally says, “Help, please!” holding her arms up like a baby. It gets Grey’s attention from where he was chatting with Drogo inside the truck. He stoops down to grasp her forearms tightly in his hands. She then says, “I don’t think this is gonna work,” but then he lifts her and drags her up into the truck, her legs banging a little against the rung before she steps onto it.

She gets the grand tour. The kitchen space is understandably and predictably tight and tiny.

Next to the fryer, she neatly smacks the tip of her nose into Drogo’s chest because he suddenly stopped and turned around and the space is so tight. He’s trying to show them his very specific set-up — he’s very proud of it — and the body contact makes his stream of words stop up. Missy feels his strong hands bite down on her hips a touch harder than they need to, steadying her. She hears his chuckling.

She nervously says, “Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to collide into you like that.”

“Oh, no worries,” he says smoothly, his smile creating these wrinkles around his eyes.

“You told him,” she says to Grey as they stand outside on the asphalt, pressing her palm against her hot cheek as Drogo continues to putter around in the truck, making them food. Drogo insists on them being his very first customers.

“You told him what?” Grey says, under his breath.

Missy likes how he has to defensively play dumb all the time even when he must know exactly what she is talking about. She likes how he is always wheedling out clarification and extreme attention to detail and extreme accuracy like the way she naturally is, is not good enough. She says, “You told him I was pining for him back in the day! Which is not at all accurate!”
He actually snorts. “You don’t even know what I told him, man,” he mutters. His arms are crossed over his chest. He’s in a t-shirt and jeans. He’s wearing one of Jaime’s old hats, but still blinking against the sunlight. He refuses to look at her for longer than a glance — and she’s pretty over this. She’s pretty over what a fucking baby he is sometimes. “What is even the big deal?” he says. “You share personal shit about me to your friends all the time.”

“No, I don’t,” she says pointedly. “Anymore. And his ego is so massive.”

“Missandei, it ain’t like that.”

“What isn’t like that?”

He looks at her sharply. “Are you correcting the way I talk?”

“No, man,” she says, the sarcasm just flying out of her mouth now. “I’m just trying to get you to sound whiter so I actually can take you seriously.”

“What the fuck? Okay?”

“It’s a joke, Grey.”

“Miss —” He sighs. “Your fucking jokes —” He stops himself again, grunting off some energy as he bounces on the balls of his feet. He raises his hands in front of him and he looks tense — he groans again — and he clenches his fists in the air. “I’m stopping myself from strangling you, babe. Admire my self-control right now.”

She gives him an unimpressed look. “Oh my God, I dare you. To lay a hand on me. See what happens to you.”

When Missandei has to leave, there’s an awkward moment where she clearly doesn’t know how to say goodbye to him, and it’s so obvious. She goes to hug him just as he leans in for a kiss, which makes her freeze in stunned silence with a wild expression on her face before she self-corrects and gets on her tiptoes to press her mouth against his for a second.

Right as she’s out of earshot — she’s not even to her car yet — Drogo says, “Man, don’t let me and my fine-ass body cause friction in your guys’ relationship.” Then he pauses. “Or shit, feel free to let my fine-ass body be the reason you get some friction in your relationship.”

“Are you done yet?” Grey says.

“Nah. I have other stuff to say about this.”

Drogo needs to gloat about how good-looking and beautiful he is for another five minutes before he calms down enough to have a real conversation. Drogo is laughing so much today. He is in a great mood and everything terrible and embarrassing that Grey has told Drogo is met with chuckles and a hand swat, like Drogo is swatting away the seriousness of how Grey is perceiving his own issues, like Drogo finds Grey’s paranoias to be real cute and novel. Grey cannot climb out of the hole of his debilitating self-perception — and part of it is that he doesn’t really want to that badly — another part of it is that he thinks he is deserving of self-punishment — and so Drogo’s laughter is kind of disruptive. It’s making Grey feel self-conscious and vulnerable.
Like, he didn’t really want to tell Drogo what Missandei said. Because why would he want to tell Drogo that while his own penis is not working? But therapy is fucking with his mind, and he keeps doing stuff that he normally doesn’t do in the hopes that he is following the right formula — in getting better. He keeps reasoning out and remembering how he was told that relationships, of all kinds, need effort and maintenance. He actually wants to be a better friend to Drogo.

He tells Drogo that he been feeling pretty gross and disgusting lately, because of all the masturbation he has to do. It feels really gross and discouraging, which is a description that puzzles Drogo. With a lofty amount of carelessness, Drogo responds by telling Grey that beating off is actually supposed to feel great. Drogo also tells Grey that all shitty jokes aside, Grey is super cute — super good-looking and handsome.

“Like, man, if I were a woman — a hetero one — I would date you. I think you’d totally be my type. Like, you have a really nice body. And a really nice face. And you don’t talk that much.”

“Oh my God,” Grey mutters.

“Man, don’t make it weird! I’m just giving you a compliment!” Drogo says, grinning. “Like, if I were a woman, I would want to be held by you. Because you have strong forearms, the kind that would make me feel protected.”

“Oh my God,” Grey grinds out, swatting Drogo with a discarded hand towel. He’s laughing now, too. “Shut up!”

“I also hear you’re really good at oral,” Drogo adds. “And before you go home and chew out Missy for being a blabbermouth, I gotta tell you — she wasn’t the one who told me. It was Jaime. Now — how Jaime even knows this, I don’t know, man. That’s your guys’ business. It’s just unfair that I am always left out of your guys’ obnoxiously close shit.”

He tells Drogo that he just wants to make her happy. He tells Drogo that it seems he is bad at making her happy because she keeps telling him that she is unhappy. That statement makes Drogo frown, and it drags out this sound of disbelief. Drogo actually tells him he has to be wrong because Drogo has never seen anyone so devoted as Missandei is to Grey.

He tells Drogo that it’s hard for third parties to get a good impression of what is actually going on in a relationship. He kind of brings up Jhiqui and Nick — muttering that the whole thing blindsided him. It wasn’t predictable, and he knows that he is observant. He reiterates that none of them know what goes on behind closed doors.

He says, “I don’t want to be the kind of person that refuses to hear her when she says she’s unhappy and sick of me. I want to hear her.”

“Man, I don’t want to minimize how you’re feeling,” Drogo says, leaning backwards against the counter. “But I honestly don’t believe what you’re saying to me. I keep thinking that you are mistaken.”

Grey changes the subject. He says, “I was supposed to take six months to figure out my shit, to figure out what greater meaning my life is supposed to have. Everyone has that but me. Missandei has that. You have that. Jaime has that. Brienne has that. Dany has that. There’s something up with
me — I don’t have that. We’ve already passed six months. I am still in the dark about everything. In fact, I actually feel like I’ve taken steps backwards. I don’t know what great career I’m supposed to have. I don’t feel very secure with her. I constantly feel re-traumatized because of fucking therapy. I don’t get why something that makes other people feel better only succeeds in making me feel terrible. I suck at everything. But what am I supposed to do at this point? Just fucking quit therapy so she can affirm to herself that I don’t care and that I refuse to change? I just don’t see an end in sight to any of it. I see a downward trajectory until she gets tired of this shit and is just done with me. Knowing this — of course I’m in a bad mood all the time. I know I’m self-sabotaging — but what the fuck else am I supposed to do? Just be deaf and be blind like Nick and pretend that everything’s great until my fucking wife ups and decides to devastate the shit out of me by leaving? I don’t know how to feel better because I don’t think it’s gonna get better.”

Doreah and Tank have their respective bachelor and bachelorette parties on the same weekend. Drogo has to make what he calls a fucking agonizing decision — which is to skip out on a weekend of debauchery in Highgarden with his boys — because the casinos and the bars and and the cigar club and the strip clubs are going to be triggers for him. Doreah really kindly offered up a spot in her party for him — because she says she’s not wrapped up in gender roles — and because people felt sorry enough for Drogo to throw him a bone.

It becomes a slight thing. For a few days, Jhiqui isn’t sure if she is going to do the bachelorette party thing, citing various weak excuses. It is fairly obvious that someone — either Jhiqui or Nick or both — is a little uncomfortable with Jhiqui hanging out with Drogo for an entire weekend.

It becomes more dramatic when Drogo becomes self-pitying and tells them that he just will sit it all out. He tells Missy he’s terrible at wedding shit anyway, referring to how his alcoholism disrupted her wedding reception. In Missy’s point of view, she already has to contend with one melodramatic bitch all day every day already, so the sight of Drogo’s self-victimization is just utterly disgusting to her. She tells him just get the fuck over it — she says this in front of Doreah, for Doreah’s benefit. Because Doreah has been getting stressed out over how self-involved her friends are acting.

Drogo ends up coming to the ladies spa and wine weekend. Jhiqui also ends up going. Pia kindly asks Drogo if the wine tasting will be a trigger for him, trying to respect his healing and his well-being. Drogo is squished in the backseat with Missy and Clea, and he is a little cranky due to some serious FOMO — he keeps checking his phone for text messages from Jaime — and he says, “Pee, I will be okay watching you guys taste and spit out wine. That will not make me lose my shit and go on a crazy bender. Thanks for asking.”

“I really like how you’re treating us like we’re the C-team,” Missy says.

“Miss, look up and smile,” he says, holding up his phone in selfie mode, framing a photo of them together. “I wanna send your man a picture of us having fun together. He’ll love it.”

“Oh, okay,” she says, plastering a smile on her face. And then, through her teeth, she asks, “So when’s the fun supposed to start? Like, when do you plan on being fun?”

“Ugh,” he says, readjusting his camera after snapping a pic. “Don’t talk. You made your face look weird.”
All of Tank’s other friends are Black. They have segregated themselves naturally. Nick comments that it’s like high school all over again. Nick says that he moved schools right before freshman year, and it was hard to make friends because everyone at his new high school grew up together, and he was this interloper. Jaime pretty much thinks he’s the most hilarious person in the world, when he says that he’s pretty sure the segregation is racial, like all the best kinds of segregation are. Grey can detect it’s his turn to share something, so he says that he didn’t belong in a clique or have close friends in high school on account of his substance abuse and a whole host of behavioral issues.

“Dude, we all had our issues in high school,” Jaime mutters, looking kind of intensely at the way Tank’s friends are glomming onto the man of the hour. “Like, I shattered my arm and Brienne had to do all my homework and take my tests for me. That was like, a really dark period in my life.” Jaime chuckles. Nick doesn’t quite get it — he doesn’t get Jaime’s very sardonic and very specific sense of humor sometimes — but he smiles politely anyway. Grey actually knows the real story of Jaime’s first broken arm.

Jaime clears his throat, still looking at everyone else having fun. “I feel sorry for you, Grey. Because me and Nick and your proximity to us are ruining your ability to amass street cred with these guys so badly right now.”

“I grew up in the ‘burbs,” Grey reminds Jaime, for probably what is the billionth time in life. “What are these ‘streets’ you are constantly talking about?”

He feels his phone buzz in his hand, and he immediately flips it over to view the text message that just came in. He sees a picture of Missandei with Drogo. He saves it to his phone because it’s a nice photo of them.

After getting a full-body massage and a facial, Drogo toasts the rest of them with his bottle of spring water and tells them that they’re alright. This ladies weekend is not as terrible and weird as he was expecting it to be. Doreah manages to be very pleased by the kinda-compliment and Missy has to swat at her, to get her head back on right.

Drogo also asks them if they would prefer for him to go chill with the foot soak thing some more, while the rest of them get their sauna on.

“Huh?” Doreah says. “Don’t you wanna hang out and chat some more?”

“I mean, I don’t want to make you guys uncomfortable,” he says.

“Why would we be uncomfortable with you in the sauna with us?” Doreah asks quizzically. “Are you planning on doing something weird? Like, just don’t fart in there, and we’ll be alright.”

“Guys,” Missy interrupts, already smirking a little bit because she can speak Drogo. “He’s worried that the sight of his beautiful naked torso will make us lose our minds.”

Doreah looks stunned. She says, “Wow.”
Before they dropped off Momo 2.0 at her doggy hotel and parted ways for the weekend, she had made this nervous joke to him. She joked that he better not get a boner from a stripper if he knows what’s good for him. The smile actually dropped off her face for a second after she said it, and it made his gut kind of flip — in guilt. He felt bad enough that he ended up pressing her up against their fridge and making out with her for a little bit, all the while pretty aware that the clock was ticking and they needed to get a move on.

It turns out all of Missandei’s insecure worrying was really for nothing. Because he does not find this shit stimulating. At all.

He does not like casual nudity. He does not like hanging out with a bunch of men, in the midst of a bunch of casual nudity. He does not like that sex is commoditized and transactional here. He does not like the way Reggie talks about some woman’s “fat cooch.” He does not like tits smeared in his face for no reason. He mildly likes watching the athleticism and the impressive upper body strength of the women on the poles, but he does not think they need to be completely naked, and he does not like all of the jiggling ass shit. And he really, really does not like how much crap he’s been getting for his lack of cool. He already knows he’s not cool.

“All right okay okay, lay off John for a sec,” Tank slurs, smiling at Grey earnestly, trying to grab at his head. They’ve started calling him John. Which is short for John Legend. Because he is light-skinned and emotional and sings romantic songs of love as he cries himself to sleep, much like John Legend.

The call comes in when they’re all getting gussied up for dinner. Drogo takes considerably less time to get ready, so he’s helping her with her hair on the bed, braiding a ring around her head. He sold himself up, telling her he has sisters, come on — and she has learned that he isn’t lying.

On the other end of the line, Grey tells her that he’s at the strip club. Well, he’s actually outside of the strip club standing around where people are taking smoke breaks — and there’s talk of going to another club before the end of the night. He tells her he’s currently miserable. He tells her he should’ve joined her and Drogo for the ladies weekend. He tells her he keeps getting triggered inside of the club and he really wants to just go back to the hotel and watch TV for the rest of the night, but he can’t go back to the hotel if he really wants to maintain his reputation as a pussywhipped little bitch — which he kind of does because he senses that he still has a way to fall — like there’s probably a rich and fertile area below pussywhipped little bitch.

Her face is tingly, and she is hyper aware of Drogo’s fingers combing through her curls, which prevents her from lowering her voice and being girly and telling her husband that she really misses him, and she also wishes those dickless assholes he’s with will stop giving him so much grief because he is amazing and they are chauvinistic pieces of garbage. However, since he is overly concerned with being viewed as a pussywhipped little bitch by his new friends, she should not play into that.

Instead, she tells him all about spa day. It is boring as hell, but it’s something distract him and to pass the time.

Their conversation gets interrupted when Grey pulls the phone from his face — his voice is loud yet
also far away — and she can hear him shout something in the other direction. It’s an indecipherable, angry retort of some sort.

When he comes back on the line, his deadpan voice tells her that one of Tank’s friends was just asking him if he was talking to his woman to ask her if he can please get his testicles back.

“What did you say back to him?” she asks.

Grey tells her that he said something dumb. And then he casually asks her if he can — have his balls back at some point? And then right after, his tone darkens, and he gripes that everyone is so fucking annoying right now.

She suppresses a laugh. Instead, she says, “It’s hard being you sometimes, isn’t it?”

He tells her it is so hard being him sometimes. He groans into the phone, and speaking of hard, he tells her that he knows he’s been a real dick to her lately. He tells her that he’s sorry for this. He tells her that testosterone is gross. He tells her that he has all of these things he wants to tell her and all of these ideas for sex — and not because he’s at a strip club and deriving all sorts of inspiration from this terrible place. It’s because he’s at a strip club, and he has this new perspective on what he doesn’t want. He tells her he understands now — how convoluted the trail from point A to point B can get, when it comes to sex. He tells her he is so fucking emotional when it comes to sex, but whatever — it should be emotional. He tells her he probably has a pretty good idea now — why she came home ready to fuck. He tells her he’s very sorry for how he’s been testing her patience. He tells her that he is so lucky to have her.

“Baby.” Her voice is tight and a bit strangled. She pauses. And then she says, “I’m sorry, but I’m not alone right now. I really want to talk about this, but I can’t right now. I just love you, Grey. Like, so much.” Behind her, Drogo freezes momentarily — he’s obviously trying to eavesdrop — and then he quickly recovers and continues braiding.

Drogo says, “Hey, I’m almost done. Like, in two minutes. So if you want some privacy . . .”

He feels really bad and upset. He gets why he has no Black friends. It’s because he’s fucking such a dork and so uptight. He wants to own up to his lack of cool and reject what those other guys are about — as he simultaneously feels asshurt that they don’t like him very much. This is probably what Nick feels like, all the time.

He ponies up a bunch of Missandei’s hard-earned money for his share of bottle service even though he doesn’t even get the fucking point. He watches as Big Ben — real name Benjamin — stares down the female server with this intense and very uncomfortable aggression. Grey keeps hovering too close to Jaime because Jaime has become his safety blanket — because he is a child now. Jaime is similarly tense — so they can’t even ease into their jokes. Jaime just keeps responding to him with such seriousness, talking about work and talking about human trafficking like it’s a spigot that his brain cannot ever shut off. Grey keeps responding to Jaime’s statements with bewildering honesty.

He tells Jaime that he’s been doing some reading, which he realizes is a pretty vague statement — so he clarifies. First, he tells Jaime that he’s been having a shit couple of weeks. It was probably all of the masturbation that kind of triggered all of these latent anxieties he has about sex and brought them up to the surface. Grey says that his brain feels cyclical sometimes — that it has to go through an
entire season of shitastic depression before he gets a reprieve and gets a month or so of momentary uplift before it all tanks again. He says that he’s been looking back on his life and he has seen this pattern recur, over and over again.

He says, “I was reading this news story about an NGO in the Summer Isles that takes in kids who have been victims of sexual assault, young girls mostly. The family of these kids basically hand over the kid to live at this school where they learn how to read and write and they get a chance to play with each other and just generally be like, you know, kids. The article talked about how amazing and resilient these kids are, in spite of their experiences.”

“Yeah?” Jaime says, tilting his head toward Grey.

“There was this bit in the article though, about how parents who send their kid to this school are also the same parents who sold their kids’ virginity to the highest bidder. And I thought that was real weird. Like, what is even the point in educating a child that you have already royally screwed up? So the article went on to say that a lot of the times, parents need education themselves. In addition to schools, this organization also goes out into remote villages and does in-language presentations to adults. Like, a lot of the time, people just don’t realize the kind of harm they are doing to their kids with this practice. It’s just an accepted practice — and they just think that they need the money, and it’s easy money. The article said that when presented with an alternative — like, educate the kid instead of traumatizing the fuck out of the kid — parents will nearly always choose educating the kid.” Grey pauses. “That is just fucking insane to me.”

“That the parents would choose education over violence and fear for their children?”

Grey shakes his head. “No. That the parents didn’t know that it’s not a good idea to hand over your kid to a fucking stranger for chump change in the first place,” he says bitterly. “That’s crazy to me because I feel like that information is fucking intuitive and obvious.”

“Are you talking about your own parents right now?” Jaime says.

“Maybe,” Grey says. “I actually never thought much about their motivations. I thought they were just shitty opportunists for doing what they did. I never considered that they were just ignorant and didn’t know any better.”

Right before they leave for dinner — waiting in the lobby of the hotel for the others — Drogo touches her shoulder and asks her if she’s okay.

Missy nods, as she crosses her arms over her chest, as if cold. She’s wearing a slip of a dress. She hasn’t presented herself like this in a while — she hasn’t dressed herself so boldly and so sexily in a minute. She realizes that it’s because Grey has been picking out her clothes. She can see people placing these glances at her and Drogo as they walk past — probably because he is so good-looking. He probably gets stared at all the time.

People stare at her and Grey when they are out together, too. Probably for similar reasons. Sometimes for something more. Sometimes it’s a point of pride for people like them. Sometimes it’s aspirational and it’s comforting and it’s empowering, that they are together like how they are.

Her face feels tense and it aches, as she says, “Sometimes when he’s sleeping, I hold onto him.”
Sometimes I hold onto him so tightly that it’s like I’m not even letting myself breathe. And sometimes there are nights when I cry as I hold onto him, because I can’t hold in my admiration or my pride in him or my fears that he’s gonna give it all up because he’s so hard on himself sometimes.”

“I don’t think I even know what that kind of love feels like,” Drogo admits. “But it looks nice. It’s been really nice, watching you guys over the years.”

She sniffs, reaching up to gently swipe her eyes, careful to not smear her makeup.

“Christ, Drogo,” Jhiqui says, walking up to them. “What did you say to her?”

Drogo scoffs good-humoredly, reaching out to lightly punch Jhiqui in the shoulder. “Man, I’m not the bad guy here. I’m the good guy here.”
Chapter Summary

Jaime fights for Grey's honor, even though Grey never asks him to. Missy gives her lady some real-talk.

Missy is a witness to an ill-conceived and ill-timed comment from one of Doreah’s coworkers, Mandy, who slaps Doreah on the ass in appreciation and remarks that the gold sequined dress Doreah is wearing gives her the ass of a Black girl. Missy can feel a very modest number of eyes on her — exactly two people, Brienne and Jhiqui — waiting for her response as the Black representative of the group. Their expectations are inexplicably immense and rather misplaced. Missy has a whole lot of nothing to say about this because it’s not a habit of hers to go all aggro on strangers about Black people stuff — only with her closest friends. Missy’s a little more passive than what is probably ideal, when it comes to these matters. She keeps worrying that stuff’s gonna get all awkward. And it’s Doreah’s party.

Which leaves pregnant Brienne to valiantly take on the mantle. Brienne kind of stutters and before she finishes kinda strongly. She says, “H-hey, that’s not really a cool thing to say —”

But Mandy has already moved on, talking about splurging for caviar and champagne at dinner.

“Like, okay, but I hope that the sturgeon is farm-raised and sustainable,” Brienne mutters. Missandei actually cannot tell if Brienne is being awkward on accident or if Brienne is actually trying to be a dick, in her very low-key Brienne way. Brienne adds, “I don’t think I can eat caviar by the way.”

Missy reaches out to lightly grasp onto Brienne’s hand, getting her attention. Missy kind of laughs quietly.

After dinner, Drogo tries to circumvent potential awkwardness by announcing that he’s gonna take Brienne back to the hotel where they are gonna hang because she is tired. Brienne kind of tosses Drogo a look, like she knows that she’s taking a hit for the team and that she accepts that her pregnancy is being used as an excuse for him to bow out. Drogo is essentially telling the rest of them to go nuts and to go out to the bars and to do whatever it is that bachelorette party goers do.

Missandei kind of looks at them longingly outside of the restaurant after dinner, as they wait for their cab. She wouldn’t mind going back to the hotel, donning some pajamas, and just watching movies with her buds for the rest of the night.
“You are not fucking autistic,” Jaime says vehemently to Grey, right after they get a moment of privacy, right after overhearing a couple of guys talking some pretty light smack about Grey as they were coming out of the men’s room. “That’s a fucking bullshit thing to say about you,” Jaime spits. “Oh my God, my blood pressure is going up.”

“I know I’m not autistic,” Grey deadpans. “This amazing personality happens by choice.”

Honestly, Grey is not all that offended by the comment. He gets why it was made. It generally makes sense to him. But Jaime is pretty riled up and from past interactions, Grey knows that he just has to let Jaime ride out his emotions. Or else Jaime will shift over and start angrily bitching about how Grey never appreciates the shit that Jaime does for him like the freaking basketcase that Jaime is sometimes.

“They are so fucking unnecessarily harsh with you,” Jaime grinds out. “Ever since the start of the trip, it’s like you’ve had a target on your back. They are so nice to me and Nick, and we’re white! What the fuck, right? Is it okay to mock people for being a little bit different? Is that the fucking cool thing to do, now? To make yourself feel fucking big and bad? It’s fucking pathetic, and you don’t deserve it. Why do they think it’s so funny to call you John Legend? What is wrong with John Legend? That motherfucker is a hit machine.”

“Yeah, I dunno,” Grey says, trying lilt up his voice to convey a general sense of engagement. “I don’t know why they call me John, Jaime.”

Grey is remembering that Jaime grew up a popular, good-looking blond boy. Grey remembers that the longest bout of ostracism that Jaime kinda suffered lasted for a few short months. And it was also kind of self-enforced. These are just random dangling factoids he has compiled about Jaime, which are usually benign and mean-nothing. Until a moment like this one arrives. Then their difference in experience and personality kind of becomes apparent. Grey doesn’t even have the energy to get all offended that people are being dicks to him because they think he is weird. It happens.

“Also, in what fucking world are you emotional?” Jaime rants, gesticulating abstractly but wildly. “I feel like within two seconds of meeting you, I got all alarmed because your fucking face doesn’t change expressions enough. Like, that John Legend shit is so comically off-base and stupid. I feel like it’s just stupid and random. If you’re gonna be an asshole to someone, at least be an accurate asshole. And how are you fucking John Legend and autistic. Does fucking John Legend read as being on the fucking spectrum?”

“Reggie is actually the one spearheading the John thing, not Cam and Mike. And I’m pretty quiet, and I have no swagger,” Grey says, shrugging. “Maybe that’s why.”

“Jesus fuck. Shut up. Stop making excuses for them. You’re swaggy as fuck, in your own way. Will you stop killing what I’m trying to do here? I am so over your constant down-on-yourself shit.”

“Jaime, I really like how you’re talking to me like this — but when you talk to them, you sound like you’re ready to do their taxes.”

Jaime’s eyes go wide — immensely so. He’s still being melodramatic as he reaches out and grabs
onto Grey’s shirt, winding the t-shirt material into his fist. Jaime says, “Please do not point that shit out to me right now. I’m gonna lose it. I already know, and I don’t want to look at it too closely right now.”

“Oh my God, she is twerking,” Jhiqui says, voice pitched very low, hugging Missandei sweatily and tightly because it’s so loud and this is the only way they can carry on a conversation. “Someone should tell her to stop because it does not look good.”

“It’s okay. She’s just having fun,” Missandei replies, pushing the words into Jhiqui’s ear. Changing her tone, Missy then asks, “Do you think Mandy said that because Doreah is marrying Tank? Or do you think it was just a random blurt?”

“I don’t even fucking care about that racist bitch’s racist logic,” Jhiqui says bitterly.

“Okay. Good talk.”

Jhiqui is going through some shit. This has been Missy’s mantra lately, whenever she observes her friend behaving in a way that goes against her own self-interest — like Jhiqui doesn’t even care about being likable anymore. Jhiqui has just been itching to fight lately. All Jhiqui does is toss out baiting comments, just daring people to say the wrong thing. And then Jhiqui gets kinda pissed when people don’t meet her challenge. She gets pissed when people are overly nice to her. And Missandei is probably the only person that Jhiqui consistently treats with a modicum of respect. Well, Missy and Brienne.

When Jhiqui went to go pee, as they were waiting for the check over dinner, Doreah actually frowned and said something a little negative, which is unlike her. Doreah said that the universe has revolved around Jhiqui since they were all in college — so she’s used to it all.

For this reason, Missandei thinks it’s perfectly okay to send the gals a text message to tell them that she is taking Jhiqui and her shitty mood off of their hands. She gets a combo of frowny faces and hands clapping emojis in response.

They actually just walk next door to a quiet bar to grab a drink.

Missy sits and listens to Jhiqui vent — about a whole spectrum of things. Jhiqui talks about how she’s sick of the friends that she and Nick have accumulated. She’s sick of having conversations about home improvement and the modest accomplishments of their children. She’s sick of fucking dinner parties. She’s sick of the way she has to work so hard to prove to people that she’s not a dumb housewife, when she is actually just a dumb housewife. She resents the fact that Nick gets to go out and lead an exciting life where he is not someone’s husband and someone’s father. He gets to be
himself and his expertise is respected. She’s sick of the way Nick keeps fucking telling her that his life is actually not that exciting and he actually gets less respect than she is assuming. She’s also sick of the way he keeps telling her to go back to school or to go get a job, like either of those things are so fucking easy when they have a fucking young child and childcare is always something to consider. She will feel so guilty and terrible to leave her child with a stranger in order to find some fucking abstract personal fulfillment.

Jhiqui says she’s sick of Nick always thinking that the problem in their marriage is that they are not having enough sex, when her problem with their marriage is that she constantly wants to cram her fist into his face. Jhiqui is particularly vicious, when she talks about how she is sick of his face, sick of his body, sick of his whiny voice, and completely bewildered that his method of soliciting sex from her includes being a fucking whiny little bitch about how she is always tired all the time. Jhiqui says she is sick of their very bland, very boring conversations.

“So why not make a change?” Missy cuts in. “If this is the pattern, and if you don’t want to get a divorce, then why don’t you do something different? Like, why not try to go back to work and see how it feels?”

Jhiqui scrunches her face distastefully. She says, “I can’t believe you are taking his side on this.”

“Whose side?” Missandei says incredulously. “Say he works out and gets healthier and better-looking. Say he starts reading shit so that he can have better conversations with you. And say he stops agreeing to dinner parties that you hate. If he does everything you want — are you gonna be happier? I don’t think you are, because it’s just him going along with everything you say again and you say that you hate that he’s so submissive. What are you gonna do to change? Are you perfect?”

“Oh my God, I can’t believe you are saying this to me!” Jhiqui shouts over the din of the bar, dropping her drink on the counter. She actually doesn’t sound angry as much as she sounds shocked and in disbelief. “Who are you right now!”

“I’m still me. Just older.” Missy shrugs. “I’m surprised you’re not throwing the fact that I’ve only been married for less than a year and my non-expertise on marriage back in my face.”

Jhiqui’s mouth curves into a smile. Then, teasingly, she says, “You’re married to Grey. You’ve been with him for ten years. Respect, girl.” And then Jhiqui immediately shields her face with her arms. She says, “Don’t hit me. I didn’t mean to imply anything disparaging about your man to you.”

It’s no longer in his wheelhouse of unhealthy hobbies, to get insanely plastered at a bar and then wake up the next day hungover and pissed at himself. He ends up getting really bored at the end of the night and sitting by himself quietly, waiting for time to tick by, waiting for when they head back to the hotel to sleep. He keeps getting repeatedly told that he is so uptight and not very fun. He keeps finding no words to dispute the kinda good-natured accusations with. He keeps wondering what he would’ve been like, if his childhood wasn’t like how it was. He keeps wondering how much of a different person he’d be, if he grew up into adulthood with both of his parents' love and their care. He probably would have so many Black friends, and he probably would be into strippers and putting his wife’s hard-earned money into the g-strings of strippers. Actually, maybe he wouldn’t even be married to her, if he had had a really healthy upbringing.

Which is a thought that just makes him so fucking monumentally sad, actually. It feels weird, to be so
grateful for his shitty childhood because it led him to her.

He sleeps peacefully enough, in the same hotel room as Jaime and Nick. He gets up early the next day, to run before the day gets hot and too sunny. He is freshly showered and a little bit late to the brunch buffet. And when he arrives there, he starts loading up on fruit and veggies for the first round, because it’s what he feels like eating. And as usual, a bunch of dudes just stare at him like he’s some fucking alien from another planet.

“Are you on a diet or something?” Reggie asks, right before sipping from his glass of water.

“He likes vegetables,” Jaime cuts in, always so prone to defending him.

“I didn’t mean any offense?” Reggie says, his deep voice cracking — maybe from tiredness or a hangover. “I was just asking.”

“I just like vegetables,” Grey echoes, setting down his plate and pulling out his chair.

He can’t wait for the day to end. They have an easy few hours at the pool, before a quick lunch and then they will pile into cars that will take them to the airport. Then they don’t have to see each other again until the wedding.

With towels on their shoulders, as they pass by the adjacent golf course, Nick actually murmurs out loud that Grey is really, really good at golf.

“Of course he is,” Cam cracks. “I bet he’s also great at tennis.”

“Well, he’s really good at racquet sports,” Nick says hesitantly, now aware that he has inadvertently made Grey the butt of yet another joke.

“I bet he’s great at polo and hockey, too.”

“What the fuck, man?” Jaime growls suddenly — aggressively — getting into Cam’s face. “What is your fucking problem with my friend?”

“Jaime,” Grey says warningly, refraining from sighing. Because he saw this coming. From miles away.

Cam can only manage to look very amused as he stares back at Jaime. Mike’s hand is already on his shoulder, kind of pulling him backwards. And Cam smoothly says, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, bud. I have no problem with your friend.”

“It’s your fucking loss,” Jaime says, forcefully quiet. “He’s an amazing person. And you keep giving him shit because you are insecure, and he makes you feel inferior.”

Cam’s suddenly arm flies out and slams into Jaime’s chest, sending him toppling backwards into the pool, atop of a bunch of young girls who are tossing a beach ball around. Grey tries to grab for Jaime, but he can’t get ahold, and Jaime’s arm slips out of his grasp. Grey winces as he hears the girls release high-pitched screams, as Jaime falls on top of them.
Cam seems to be laughing so that he doesn’t get insanely pissed over all of the trigger words that Jaime said to him, and Jaime looks really thunderous as he pulls himself out of the pool, dripping wet with blotches of red on his skin — from the sun and also from the anger he is holding inside.

“Truce?” Cam says, offering out his hand to Jaime.

“Okay. Sure,” Jaime says, kind of despondently, reaching out to take Cam’s hand. “Truce.”

The bachelor party from hell finally ends when they arrive at their terminal. Grey is actually a little ticked off at Jaime because Jaime behaved in a totally typical way. It’s a very old conflict, and they both know the well-worn beats of it — Jaime is pissed that Grey never seems to want to speak up for himself, and Grey is pissed that Jaime is always trying to speak for him like some white savior — so they don’t even bother fighting about it with each other. They just give each other some space for a few hours. It leaves Nick a little bit torn in his loyalties. He has been using the both of them as a point of distraction from his marriage problems — and now, with both Grey and Jaime occupied with how unhappy they are with the other, Nick is left with a lot of quiet time to reflect and to think.

Grey feels a heavy hand on his shoulder and looks up to see Tank’s smiling face before Tank collapses down into the empty seat next to him. Grey pulls out his earbuds and turns off the music piping out of his phone. He says, “What’s up?”

“Sorry you had to deal with Cam all weekend,” Tank offers, still smiling. “You know. Issues. But he’s also a really good guy.”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Grey mutters. “No big deal.”

“You know,” Tank begins conversationally, “Cam gives me shit all the time, for being with Doreah. For marrying her. Because she’s white.”

Grey sighs. “Yeah?”

“Mostly it’s just talk, you know?”

“Yeah.”

Tank laughs suddenly, with his face pointed at the ceiling. “My man, it is sometimes like, so fucking hard to talk to you.”

Grey quietly chuckles a little bit, too, just to relieve the tension he feels. He says, “Sorry. I know. I know it’s hard to talk to me sometimes.” He pauses, deeply inhaling. He glances at Cam, who is slouched in a chair a few rows over, chatting with the other guys. And then Grey says, “You know, he was actually a fucking asshole to me from the moment we met. And I don’t think it was just all in good fun. I think there is something about me that really pisses him off. And I don’t really care what that is because he’s a fucking asshole. And the only reason why I fucking put up with it is because it’s your party, and I didn’t want to make it hard on you. But I’m saying — your friend was real shitty to me, and I think I kind of hate him.”
“Yeah, man,” Tank says. “I had a talk with him after the pool thing. And I told him what’s up. And you’re right. He was a fucking piece of shit. I’m sorry you had to deal with all of that.”

He’s already home when Drogo drops her off. Drogo insists on saying hello to Grey, which Missy tries to quietly discourage, but Drogo picks up on none of her hints. It’s her fault, because she should know that Drogo requires some serious explicitness. She should’ve told him to get the fuck out of her hair so that she can properly get reacquainted with Grey in private.

But Drogo basically marches into her house and starts screaming Grey’s name, telling Grey to get his ass down the stairs. The commotion riles up 2.0, who comes barrelling down with her nails furiously clicking.

“Baby!” Missandei coos, stooping down to pick up the dog. She flips 2.0 onto her back and starts rubbing her chest. Missy didn’t realize Grey had already picked up the dog from the doggie boarding place. “Oh my gosh, did you have fun this weekend? Did you make new friends? Was any of your new friends mean to you?” 2.0 is trying to squirm out of her grasp, because the dog actually doesn’t like being held like a baby.

She puts the dog back down on the floor when Grey catches up, when he hits the bottom of the stairs. She immediately starts beaming at him — just beaming sunshine and happiness. She says, “I know she can’t talk back to me.”

His eyes soften at that. And before he can say anything back to her, Drogo, with his impeccable timing, careens right into Grey, grunting out this loud hug, lifting Grey off his feet.

Grey mentions to them that he and Jaime sort of had a little bit of a fight, and it’s really stupid, which interests Drogo enough that Drogo invites himself over for dinner. Drogo eagerly tells them that he has to go give Dany a quick call to tell her he won’t be seeing her tonight, and then he’ll be back to get the rest of the deets from Grey. Drogo kind of loves it when Grey and Jaime fight. Because it means he temporarily gets promoted to first best friend with both.

In the short time that Drogo takes his call a few feet away, in the semi-privacy of the foyer, Grey reaches out for her. He pulls her over for a tight and warm hug and she is such a freaking squishy sap for this person all the time. She likes how she was away from him for all of two days. She rubs her face against his stubbly chin, and she presses kisses into his jaw, and she doesn’t even have the time to say much to him.

She just holds on until Drogo comes back and says, “So what did Jaime do to you?”

They are sitting on the floor with a bottle of wine and takeout as Drogo cackles over how their tiff
was so typical — it’s so typical that it’s almost painful. Grey sheepishly and adorably admits that he knows he is too serious and severe and quiet sometimes. He knows it drives people nuts. He starts laughing, too, his body bouncing up and down from the effort of controlling himself, as he says, “I can still hear the blood-curdling screams of the girls — as Jaime fell on top of them and ruined their game. After, one of the girls was screaming that Jaime got her hair wet and Jaime was like, so comically pissed and trying to look cool and pissed — as he doggy paddled in the water.”

“Oh my God,” Drogo breathes. “I can see it in my head, clear as day. Jaime loves getting pissed over things so much.”

It’s dark out and they have cleaned all of the paper containers and taken out the trash, by the time Drogo is ready to vacate their house. He stands on their stoop and unlocks his car with the key remote, watching as the light comes on in the interior.

To both of them, as he hugs them, he says, “Thanks for having me over. I had such a great time! I’ll finally get out of here already, so you guys can finally fuck each other.”

“Drogo!” she says immediately, inexplicably embarrassed and shocked, swatting at him. His laughter reverberates in her head.

“I feel like Drogo totally ruined the mood.” she says stonily with her arms crossed over her chest, watching 2.0 hop around in the dark, looking for a good potty spot in their backyard.

He reaches over, and he holds her hand. He says, “No, he didn’t.”

Naked, in bed, she exhales underneath him, feeling his body compress hers just a little bit more. He blandly whispers to her that it’s been about half a year since they’ve had penetrative sex — and he lets the statement kind of hang.

For once, he doesn’t sound like he’s full of these bitter recriminations and self-hatred. She still finds him a little difficult to read, but she smooths her hands over his cheekbones and down his neck and she leans up to kiss him. She opens her mouth and she touches her tongue to his. She groans out her neediness for him, as she hooks a leg over his hip and just grinds softly a little bit.

She quietly says, “I hate it when people aren’t nice to you.”

“I know,” he says back to her. “It’s okay. Thank you.”

“Thank you?” she asks, orienting the words into the shell of his ear. “What are you thanking me for?” She says it as her hand wriggles its way in between their bodies, making the descent down to
his penis.

He kind of laughs like a lunatic when he feels her grab hold, when she starts slowly massaging. He grunts, and then he giggles again. She thinks he’s the fucking most amazing person ever. He then sighs in a positive way, as he rolls off of her and onto his back, to give her better access. He says, “Thanks for this?” He groans again.

She’s making out with him as she’s feeling him up — or feeling him down depending on the perspective — when his hand softly comes down over hers. She feels him press down a little bit on her wrist.

She breaks the kissing with a gasp and then a thick swallow. She’s looking at him in the face — all cute and attractive and kind of nervous-looking.

He says, “It uh, you should — maybe try — um — it’s not so delicate as all of that. Can you, uh, slow it down a little bit, um, like this?” He’s showing her — very anxiously and strung up very tightly. She already knows what he must be thinking and what he must be feeling about himself. “With a little bit more pressure?”

On her end, her body has bloomed with this insane heat. She is sweating and her heart is slamming in her chest and her pulse is a jackhammer. She feels so fucking honored and special and humbled. She also thinks he is fucking beautiful. She is dying because she gets to have sex with this person. She can barely hold it all in. She bites down hard on her bottom lip and she is breathing hard. She looks down at his hand on top of hers — on his penis — and she grits out, “This is so fucking hot. Oh my God.”

“How was your week?” Amari asks.

“Dude, I have so much to tell you,” Grey says. “I don’t think we’re gonna fit it all in during this session.”

Amari smiles. “Do you want to just pick what you want to start with?”

“Well, Jaime and I had a little tiny fight over the weekend.”

Amari is barely pausing, but Grey takes the opportunity to fill the space with a laugh anyway.
Chapter Summary

Drogo is number-one best friend for the time being and he loves it. So much.

Grey is already halfway through the story of his stupid thing with Jaime when he suddenly stops to ask Amari what Amari is. Grey means ethnically, culturally, and racially. Amari is ambiguous-looking. Perhaps not used to such bluntness from clients, Amari takes a little bit of time to figure out exactly what Grey is asking. After a pregnant pause, Amari finally unloads a startling amount of information. He tells Grey that his father was from a north coast city in Sothoryos, and his mother from Lys. They met at university. They never married. He was raised by his mother by herself, and his father was not really ever in his life.

Amari says, “I was a biracial Black kid raised by a single white mother. Does that give you enough context about me?”

“When I was looking for a therapist, I asked about you because Jaime told me you weren’t white at one point.”

“That does not surprise me,” Amari says.

“We haven’t really talked about race with any depth yet — here,” Grey says.

“Do you want to talk about race today?”

He comes across the property in the course of looking for houses for Pia to check out. It’s located further north, is in a good school district, a little close to the street, and it has four bedrooms. It was previously foreclosed on, but then it was bought and then flipped. Pia keeps orienting herself toward high-rises and condos because she has suddenly decided she likes amenities and paying a lot to the HOA. He tells Pia she should reconsider and check out the single-family home. She tells him that she has no need for four bedrooms.

He’s so frustrated with Pia and her millions of stupid stipulations. He’s so frustrated with her tendency to idealize and romanticize everything, from where she lives to who she wants to date to where she wants to vacation. Sometimes he imagines what it’d be like, if he was intimately involved with someone like her, instead of someone like Missandei. He’s so frustrated with Pia’s inability to make a decision.
“Ugh, Grey!” Pia calls out from the other room. “You’ve got to come here and see this accent wall! Why would anyone paint a wall black? I don’t get it!”

He doesn’t let himself tell her that she can buy a fucking bucket of paint and make the walls whatever the fuck color she wants. He doesn’t let himself articulate this because he knows he will probably end up savagely screaming it at her. Her feelings will get hurt. She might cry and start melodramatically apologizing to him for being so annoying and for wasting so much of his time.

The thing about Pia is that she keeps apologizing profusely for all of this shit — but the shame of inefficiency has not lit that fire under her ass. He is almost fucking convinced that she just wants to keep renting out an apartment forever and whine about how it’s such a waste of money, and she just wants to whine about how it’s so hard to find someone to love her — forever.

He’s prepared a lot of spreadsheets. He’s in the midst of looking over his tabs on the couch when he hears the garage door whir open, and 2.0 starts going nuts.

Her heels click on the ground. He doesn’t have to turn around to know that she is heading straight toward him. “Hey,” he says, leaning forward and up to kiss her on the mouth in greeting when she gets to him. “I have a lot of stuff to tell you, and I’m not gonna ease into this because I don’t feel like it, so you’ll have to keep up with me, babe. First, Amari wants to put me on an antidepressant, but not the antidepressant that Dr. Thompson prescribed for me. Something else. Wellbutrin.”

Missandei blinks. “Okay, first don’t be talking to me like I need to keep up with you because I’m slow. I’m not slow. You’re very confusing, and you have a tendency to withhold information. Secondly, okay. Sounds good about the meds, baby. I’ll be interested to see how your attitude adjustment goes.”

She’s snickering at her own burn, so amused with how funny she finds herself, which he is ignoring. Instead, he says, “Hey, can you also look at this thing I made?”

She purses her lips. “What did you make?” she says suspiciously. Her wariness drops off her face when she realizes that he is referring to a spreadsheet. The sight of the spreadsheet is comforting to her, and she’s still standing — staring down at him expectantly.

He pats the seat on the couch next to him. She looks a bit more alert, as understanding hits her face — but probably the wrong kind of understanding. She slides in next to him and ducks underneath his arm, which goes over her shoulders. She playing with his fingers absently and pressing open-mouth kisses on his face because she’s in some sort of mood, as he tries to swivels the computer to face her. She completely doesn’t care. She’s not looking at it. She’s making these cooing noises as she undoes the button on his jeans and pulls down his zipper.

“Missandei,” he says, frowning a bit, trying to tug her face by the cheek, away from his face, trying to subtly knock her hand out from in between his legs. He doesn’t get what it was about his request for her to look at his spreadsheet, that makes her think he’s trying to get some sex thing going.

“Missandei, I appreciate the attention. But I worked really hard on this stuff, so can you look at it? For just a second?”

She pauses. And then she extracts her hand. She says, “I apologize,” before she focuses her attention on his computer screen. “Those are a lot of numbers,” she says. “What am I looking at?”
She doesn’t even let him go through half of his entire presentation. He doesn’t even have a chance to get to the really emotional part of his spiel, the part in which he tells her that he has this compulsion and he feels this duty now, to take care of her and ensure that she will be comfortable and okay no matter what — and he means financially. Just in case something ever happens to him, he wants for her to be comfortable and to never have to struggle for money. He doesn’t want her to have to give up a job she loves and is passionate about to go work in some terrible corporate office just so she can pay their mortgage. This is sort of one thing his unemployment has made him realize — how much they have taken two salaries for granted. They are not going to be slaves to their jobs. They are going to inch their way toward a kind of independent financial stability. He’s a numbers nerd, and this is one practical way that he can act out his love and his commitment to her.

He actually only gets to the part where he explains to her that he’d like for them to buy another house — an investment property, actually.

After he articulates this, Missandei says, “Okay. Sure.”

He laughs. Because he thinks she is joking. He goes back to his spreadsheet and shows her his cost benefit analysis.

She interrupts him. She says, “Grey. I said okay. Let’s do it. You don’t have to keep selling me on this.”

“Missandei, you don’t even know why I think this is a good idea, yet.”

She scrunches up her face. She says, “Babe, I know that you think it’s a good idea. And I can see that you’ve already obsessed the shit out of this. Your spreadsheets are very pretty. I trust you. Let’s do it.”

“What the fuck, Missandei? We’re so tight on money right now!”

“But you’ve budgeted it out? And it can work?”

“Well, yeah. We might have to borrow against our mortgage. Or cash out a few accounts. The severance package is gonna help a lot with this.”


“Missandei!” he shouts, jostling her body right next to his.

“What!” she shouts back. “Are you really getting upset that I am not fighting you on this, that I’m agreeing with you really fast?”

After he gets his head back on straight, after he explains to her that he constantly doubts his own brain and his own ability to make proper decisions and he really needs for her to be that steady compass that points north for them — after she tells him that she’s always thought that he’s actually
true north for the two of them and not her — well, he rewards her trust in him by flipping her onto her knees. Her face is pressed against the arm of their couch as he palms her nice, round ass through her skirt. Her heels are still on and it makes him think about that one time they had breakup sex in his bed with her on top and how she had left her heels on back then, too.

He keeps muttering that he loves her, as he feels around underneath her skirt, pulling her tight underwear down a bit. For once, this isn’t tinged with even the slightest bit of his depression. For once, he doesn’t feel self-pitying and limited by what he cannot do. For once, the sounds coming out of her don’t sound patronizing and put-upon.

Her skirt is too tight so he can’t get it down and over her hips without tearing it. He doesn’t want to unzip her because he thinks that it’s real hot, the way it’s already going. He likes that it’s hard to see and that he has to go about this by feel alone. She’s warm, and she’s wet, and it’s easy for his fingers to get inside of her, feeling around for the right spot, settling into the right strokes. He uses both hands, the other running slow circles around her clit, and he hears her hit her face on the couch and mutter, “What the fuck, man? Oh my God.”

He watches the arch of her back, and he can actually smell the arousal kind of superseding the smell of her perfume. He smiles in self-satisfaction, feeling safe about it because her face is oriented away from him. He says, “Do you like this?” He’s a little doped up on feelings, too. He’s a little outside of his own head and what he is saying.

“Oh my God,” she whines. “Yeah. I like this a lot.”

“Why do you like it?”

She lets out a shuddering, uneasy laugh. He knows her very well. She thinks his question is weird and also difficult to answer. “Man, if you were a woman, you’d know how this feels. It feels good.”

“Yeah? In what way?”

“Baby —” She’s trying to protest. She’s trying to tell him that she’d rather focus on getting off, and not on answering his stupid questions.

“How does it feel?”

“It’s, ah, it’s hard to describe.”

“Try.”

“Grey. Babe, I’m really close. Please.”

“Oh, okay.” And then he pulls his hands away. He smears fingertip trails of her arousal down her thighs as he extracts himself from her body.

There are a number of things she has picked up about him, when it comes to sex. Obviously. She’d have to be a real dunderhead not to have observed his patterns. He does not role-play ever. He does not like to be held down. He does not like to be tied up or restricted in any way — one time she suggested it and he completely, completely picked a real fight and ended the sex that way. He is bossy when it comes to his hands or his mouth on her body. He goes everywhere and generally is
really free and open when it comes to her pleasure. He is the total opposite when it comes to his own pleasure. He has to be in the right mood to let her mouth touch his penis. Lately, he has to be in the right mood to even let her hand touch his dick. And he happens to be into orgasm denial or orgasm delay.

He is lucky because she’s generally into all the things that he’s into. Except for how he is so picky about her face on his dick. Except how shut down and harsh he is with himself sometimes. But she is always glad that he’s not into anything super dysfunctional — because that would make her feel very sad. She is frustrated, but also kind of glad that what he is most into is conventional and typical as hell — putting his dick into her vagina.

A really belated realization she is suddenly making is that he probably likes it when they fight or argue during sex. He likes the conflict and the heightened emotional state that results from fighting.

How this usually goes is that he pulls away from her and he’d wait for her to start negotiating or begging for him to touch her. Then he’ d start it up again. Then it’d probably stop again. Then it’d start up again. Then he’d finally let her finish before collapsing into a pile of goo.

She decides to fuck with the routine — for no real reason. She isn’t mad at him. She isn’t upset with him for real. She really loves him. She’s kind of tingly and excited for sex. But she can hold off for a bit.

She rolls off the couch, with her panties cinched around her thighs. She awkwardly yanks them back up, wrinkling her tight work skirt. Her feet are sweaty and slipping inside of her shoes, and so it’s very uneasy, getting back to her feet. She has to grab onto the arm of the couch in order not to trip. She’s pretty sure she looks like a real mess right now. She’s also pretty sure that he is into how she currently looks. She can tell from the way he is staring up at her, with his dark eyes and all of the sexual tension. She’s really into him, too. Sometimes it’s like Jhiqui is speaking another fucking language, when Jhiqui talks about how her skin crawls when her husband touches her. Missandei can’t imagine that feeling with Grey, not at all.

Missy sometimes wonders if his issue with his penis is actually the thing that has kept their sex life kind of smoldering and burning the way that it does. It’s impossible to fall into a routine and a rut with him. As long as she is keen on problem-solving with him, they will probably continue to have pretty good sex.

“What’s for dinner?” she asks.

His mouth curves into a knowing smile. “If I were someone else, I’d say something really fucking corny in response to what you just asked. But dinner is a green salad with yesterday’s leftover skirt steak. I bought avocados, but I don’t think they are ripe enough yet.”

“Sounds yummy. And healthy,” she says. “I’ll change out of my work clothes, then we’ll eat?”

“That’s where you wanna go with this?” he asks.

She smiles back at him. “Maybe.”

“You’re so cute. Look at you, trying to be the boss.”

“No,” she corrects. “You’re the fucking cutest. And I am the boss.”

He chuckles. And then he pushes himself off of the couch. Standing up, he’s taller than her again. His proximity is close and his hand lightly digs into the small of her back. She’s swaying on her feet. He says, “I love you,” right before he drops a kiss on her lips. And then he mutters, “I gotta go wash
my hands.”

Drogo asks Grey if Grey remembers that one time in college when Jaime was super heroic and spoke up against injustice at a country club because Drogo wasn’t getting his water glass refilled.

“You keep forgetting, but I actually wasn’t there to witness all this, man,” Grey says, chewing around a mouthful of meat. They are eating dinner. It’s been years since they’ve been able to go out and have a proper dinner together at a proper time. He really digs Drogo’s new normal-person schedule. “But yeah, I remember the story. Because you talk about it all the time.”

Drogo audibly sucks air through his teeth, before licking fat from his lips. “I was so pissed at him. I told him we weren’t gonna be friends anymore, if he pulled that shit on me ever again. And he hasn’t.” Drogo snickers. “Have you tried that with him? Have you tried telling him that the friendship is over, if he keeps pulling that shit on you?”

“Well, no, D,” Grey says. “Because it will really hurt his feelings if I say that to him. Also, I wouldn’t actually mean it.”

Drogo laughs for real now. “So what’re you gonna do?”

“Fuck, I don’t know,” Grey says. “Probably have a conversation with him about this like a fucking mature adult and shit.” He pauses. “I kinda want him to apologize to me first though. Is that petty?”

“Nah, man. It’s not petty,” Drogo says. “Sometimes I think — I think that he knows so much about you. And he’s the kind of person that just feels that kind of thing deeply. He just loves you — a lot. And that’s his problem.”

“You know, Missandei said something to me recently. She said that it must be really hard to speak up against people whose greatest flaw is that they love me a lot. She was actually referring to herself at the time. But you know, it’s applicable to Jaime, too.” Grey shrugs. “I don’t want to make him feel bad.”

Drogo scoffs. “Man, whatever. If you can’t have a conversation with him where you tell him what’s up, I can do it for you. I will gladly do it for you.”

Grey rolls his eyes. “D, you are so heavy-handed sometimes.”

“Only sometimes? Man, I must be losing my edge.”

Then, the server comes back to ask Grey if he’d like another beer. Grey looks across the table at Drogo, just a glance, before he says that he would like another beer. This is something they’ve only skirted around — not for any heavy reason, but because Drogo has said that he gets fucking tired of being seen as walking trauma. He articulated it so purposefully, that Grey had to completely understand where Drogo is coming from. Drogo has gruffly mentioned that it won’t break him — not at all — if his friends feel like having a drink or two at dinner.

It’s never about breaking Drogo or sparing his feelings, for Grey. It’s about distance, and creating expanses of it. He knows that feelings of alienation can be very subtle and quiet sometimes. He doesn’t think he ever needs to drink that badly. But then, on the flip side, he can see how his abstinence is giving Drogo a bit of a complex. He can see how his abstinence makes Drogo feel
He asks Drogo if Drogo remembers what it was like — right after Drogo’s DUI and right after Drogo moved back to King’s Landing.

A mask comes over Drogo’s face, tense and kind of aggressive, before he says, “Of course I remember.”

“Have I ever told you that I’m sorry? For how I treated you back then?” Grey’s asking this question, even though he already knows the answer. He keeps a pretty tight count on all of the times he has admitted that he has fucked up and he was wrong.

The aggression drops right off Drogo’s face. In its place — he looks very uncomfortable. “Oh shit, no big deal,” he mumbles, trying to play it off. “I was a fucking mess back then so you were right to give me shit.”

“I really am sorry for how I talked to you and the things I said to you. I think about it all the time. I also think about my wedding night a lot and how you made it clear to me that we weren’t close anymore — and how it was kinda my fault.”

Drogo breaks eye contact. His fork is dangling in his fingers, teetering limply. “Man, I like how you think of me — when you think back to your wedding night. Good job, Missy. Way to bring your A-game. Am I right?” Drogo is trying to lighten the mood — because he doesn’t want to talk about this.

“Drogo,” Grey says steadily. “You get me in ways that Jaime never will. You always have. Thank you.”

“Oh my God,” Drogo says, kind of orienting his face up to the ceiling now. “You need to stop. I’m about to cry, ’cause hearing you say these things makes me so fucking emotional.”

He’s actually watching Drogo bake cookies. Drogo invited him over and because Drogo can no longer offer anyone a night cap in the form of drinks, Drogo can only offer Dany sex and the rest of them food. He offers Grey dessert. Grey didn’t initially realize that dessert meant more hours with Drogo, because Drogo is going to bake shit from start to finish.

He’s in the chaos of Drogo’s brick-lined studio apartment — trying not to frown too obviously and think too hard about how it’s good that they never cohabitated for very long because he’d go fucking nuts if he had to put up with Drogo’s mess for a while. Drogo lives a lot under his means because he is really scared that his business is going to fail, so he is working really hard to save money.

“How are things going with Dany?”

“How’s going with Dany?” Drogo mutters, scooping dollops of butter onto wax paper, atop a scale, with his pointer finger. “Good — great. No complaints. The relationship has been going really good ever since I stopped drinking. Is that crazy or what?” Drogo laughs at that, rolling his eyes at himself. “It’s kind of nuts, how she put up with that for as long as she did. She’s not the kind of woman to put up with that kind of shit for very long, so I must be extra special.”

“How does she feel about your apartment?”
“She thinks I live in squalor, and it drives her nuts, how messy I am — and I know you are fucking talking through her, fucker. I know my apartment drives you nuts, too, psycho.”

“Can I like — can I clean it for you?” Grey tensely looks around the room — at the stacks of magazines and mail and also the piles of dirty cups littered all randomly. “Is that weird? I mean, I have the time. I can come over while you are working and clean it for you.”

“That is a little weird, but sure. You can clean it for me if you really want to, if it will make you happy.”

“Holy shit, D,” Grey says, lifting up a dinner plate only to reveal another plate growing green mold. “I’m going to actually start cleaning it right now. Your apartment makes my OCD flare up so hard, man.”

Grey’s sweaty and coming back from his third trip down to the dumpster and recycling bins when he catches Drogo cracking up and talking on the phone as he peeps into the oven to check on the status of the cake — Drogo made a last-minute change because when he realized Grey was serious about cleaning his apartment, Drogo understood that he had been afforded more time to make dessert. He can go a little more fancy.

Drogo pulls the phone from his face and directs his attention to Grey. He says, “I’m talking to your wife. And I’m telling her to drop whatever shit she’s doing and to grab 2.0 and come over to have some cake.” Drogo flips his glowing phone screen around. “I texted her a picture of you sweeping shit out from under my couch, with your ass in the air. And she was like, what the fuuuck? And then called me to tell me to stop making you my maid.”

“Man, if she’s coming over, can you tell her to bring my mop? And the floor cleaner? Oh! And also that jug of vinegar in the pantry and some microfiber cloths.” Grey pauses. “Your windows, man,” he says in explanation.

Drogo descends into his manly giggles again before pulling the phone back to his ear. Into his phone, he says, “Did you hear that, babe? He wants you to come over, and he wants you to bring his mop and the floor — man, just come over, Missy! God, why are you always talking back to me, woman! Just get your ass here. And gotta go! I gotta pull my cake outta the oven! Bye!”

Drogo hangs up on Missandei and then slides his phone on the tiny kitchen counter before he shoves his hands into some mitts.

“She loves when you talk to her like that,” Grey mutters, grunting as his shoes grip the floor, as he heaves his weight against Drogo’s bed and gets it to bounce and rattle against the wall. He had a problem with how it was slightly pulled away and not quite centered.

“Yeah, no shit,” Drogo says, grinning. “That’s exactly why I talk to her like that. It’s funny. Until she cries. Then it’s not so funny.”
She tries to get everything up to the third floor in one fell swoop, which means she is overloaded with shit in her arms and tightly gripping the blue leash of her puppy because one time, 2.0 was off-leash and they ran into a husky that was also off-leash and the husky tried to eat 2.0’s face off and Missandei had to refrain from slicing that fucking dog’s throat in front of that dog’s shitty owner. She didn’t tell Grey that story because he’d probably freak out. She just constantly harasses him to keep 2.0 on a leash.

2.0 will always be an anxious dog — they cannot teach this dog to chill the fuck out in new places any more than they can teach Grey to enjoy nameday parties and social obligations. 2.0 keeps running circles around her, cinching her legs together with the leash.

“Baby!” Missandei barks down at the dog. “You are gonna kill me one of these days! Come on! Look at what you’re doing to your mommy!” They both say this to the dog a lot. They both accuse the dog of near-murder a lot. “Fuck!” She hits herself in the face with the handle of his stupid fucking mop.

Missy is pretty pissed by the time she drags herself and all of the shit that he asked for out of the tiny elevator. She is pissed at Drogo for all of the obvious reasons. He is sometimes inconsiderate and arrogant and caustic and too high on his own man shit. She is pissed at Grey for another slew of very obvious reasons. She doesn’t think it’s fucking reasonable at all, to have her drag his cleaning supplies across town because he had the urge to act out his controlling obsessiveness. She is only here because they also sounded really cute together on the phone, and she wants him to be happy and to have a good relationship with his idiot friend. She is sweating and red hot, as she kicks her foot out and knocks on the door with the toe of her sneakers.

Grey opens the door. He’s sweaty. She actually thinks he looks so fucking good and masculine.

He gives her a once-over. “Oh, man, I didn’t want the orange microfiber cloths,” he says plainly like she’s some kind of idiot. “I wanted the white ones. They are bigger and also cheaper.”

That triggers her. “Am I a fucking mind-reader!” she screams back at him.

“Damn!” Drogo says from behind Grey. “So angry already! Dial it down a notch, Missy.”
Chapter Summary

Grey and Drogo work overtime trying to piss Missandei off. And when it works, they manage to be kinda surprised by it.

Drogo makes a poppy seed pound cake with a clementine glaze — from memory — using flour-coated half bags of baking paraphernalia that he stores in his messy makeshift pantry. He proclaims that desserts are not his forte. Missandei is in a bit of a defensive mood, so she interprets this statement as Drogo barely stopping short of stating that he’s not womanly enough to be good at desserts.

His apartment is sweltering hot from the heat of the oven and the fact that the air circulation in the building is terrible. He tells them this is why he opted for a glaze and not like, a buttercream. He says it like he is mourning the fact that it’s not a buttercream and that he’s expecting them to smile back at him, like it’s a joke. He’s talking to the wrong two people. She doesn’t smile back at him and neither does Grey.

It doesn’t faze Drogo, though. He also tells them that this is exactly how he got fat — it’s because he’s so good at making food and he has a personality prone to addiction. He tells them he doesn’t get people who don’t love food. He admits that Dany might be one of those people. He tells them he loves Dany anyway, which doesn’t change the fact that she’s fucking weird for not obsessing over food the way that normal people do.

“Oh, sad,” Drogo says, staring down at his phone screen. “Jaime just liked the photo that I posted up of the cake.”

“Why is that sad?” Missy asks.

“Because I tagged you guys in the photo so he knows that we are hanging out without him — and we’re doing cool shit like making a bombass cake together.” Drogo is being a dick on purpose. Soliciting a response from Jaime is precisely the reason why he posted up the picture and tagged them to begin with.

“Man, you are really milking the shit out of this,” Grey mumbles, through a mouthful of cake. He’s so stingy with compliments, so little has been said about the cake. But it is his third slice.

“Do I love that we’ve been hanging out so much lately, just the two of us?” Drogo asks rhetorically. “Yeah, I really fucking do.”

“I mean, I’m here, too,” Missy offers. “Like, I’m in this room with you guys right now, in case you’ve forgotten, D.”
They all end up lying down on the very clean hardwood floors, smelling of lemon, after Grey washes the dishes. They invariably end up on the floor together when the three of them hang out. Missandei grew up eating dinners on the floor. Grey loves lying down, but he has very specific criteria before he will lie down in front of other people. Most of his criteria are sex-related. Some are doctor- and health-related. The last is that everyone must be lying down in order for him to also partake, as exemplified by the times he napped or slept in the same bed as his friends. He has issues staring up at people.

And reclining without any self-consciousness among a group of people is one of Drogo’s talents in life.

She’s lying on her side and playing with the dog, trying to get the dog to spoon with her. 2.0 will only spoon with Missy for a few seconds before she starts squirming away, more interested in sniffing the apartment instead. Missy was actually in the middle of texting with Brienne, when Drogo’s obnoxious call came in. She was in the middle of talking to Brienne about how upset Jaime has been — about the bachelor party and what went down with Grey.

She feels his calloused hand lightly drag down the side of her face, damp from sweat, gently pulling her hair from her sticky neck. It makes her twist and orient her body so she can look at him. He’s so anti-PDA that this is always a little more than novel to her. He’s smiling at her, in such a soft and sweet way. She’s already affected by the way he is looking at her.

“Yo, tell me if this is too personal, but how have you guys been having sex lately?”

She shuts her eyes at that. “Drogo,” she says through her teeth. “That is too personal.”

“Mostly hand stuff,” Grey says, right after.

Grey tells them that, according to his therapist, the point of all the masturbation is to retrain himself psychologically — for his brain to understand that erections come and go, and it is okay and natural. He can lose erections — and he can also gain them back. It is the circle of life.

Another point of the masturbation is to learn to be cognizant of what turns him on and what kind of touching works for him. He tells them that he has discovered a shit ton of new information about himself that sounds too basic to verbalize out loud — but he has, verbalized it. A lot. To his therapist. It is weird. Or actually, the point is that it’s not weird. His therapist has repeatedly told him he’s pretty ordinary and normal — because Grey’s worries are always that he is a freak of nature. Grey tells the both of them — he’s actually telling Missandei this for the very first time — that he’s into yoga pants, low-key frustration with him when he’s purposely trying to frustrate, and nudity in general, but he particularly likes upper body nudity with an arched back and raised arms.

The specificity at the end makes Drogo huff out a short laugh, and it makes Missandei’s cheeks grow hot. She actually is trying to quantify in her head, how much he is actually talking about her. A lot of women wear yoga pants.

He tells them that Amari is not a sex therapist, but Amari has had some training, obviously. Grey tells them while it’s possible he could benefit from going to a sex therapist by himself or going to a sex
therapist with Missandei, he honestly cannot bear going to a therapist who is likely going to be a white woman.

Grey starts to explain to them why he has such an aversion to this — because he is currently primed to talk out all the instincts he has taken for granted.

“You don’t have to lay it all out, man,” Drogo cuts in. “We get it.”

“It’s kinda weird that you can get hard by yourself, but not with Missy. Because Missy is not too hideous, ya know?”

Drogo is baiting her, like he’s been doing all night. She is not falling for his dumb trap. She’s keeping her mouth shut.

“Ah, my issue has nothing to do with how hideous she is,” Grey says. “And I don’t think it’s that weird, because I’ve always been —”

“I mean it’s weird to me,” Drogo interjects. “You’ve lived with this your entire life, but what I saw was — well, I saw an unrepentant slut in college.”

“Oh God, yes. Let’s talk about Grey’s favorite hobby during my favorite period in life,” Missy says sarcastically. She belatedly realizes she fell right into one of Drogo’s traps.

Drogo ignores her with a smirk. To Grey, he says, “How were you getting down so much back then if you had troubles getting it up?”

“Oh, I’d literally go down,” Grey says blankly. “Or I’d have to be jacked out of my mind.”

“Man! That’s why you’re so good at oral!”

“Probably.”

“Practice makes perfect, and alla that huh?”

“Yeah, man. If you wanna get good at something,” Grey pauses, as if he is thinking about this. “You just have to commit to doing it a lot, I guess.”

“Man, do you remember the one girl that hit you hard in the face during sex and kept calling you Daddy?” Drogo is laughing now, lightly touching his stomach as he rolls fully onto his back. “You were so pissed afterward. Man, you were always messing with the crazy ones.”

“Well, yeah. They were the ones that were A, emotionally messed up enough to actually have sex with me and B, uninterested in a relationship after they had sex with me.”

“Man, it’s not a perfect formula. I cannot even tell you how many times I’ve been slapped or scratched or had a drink thrown at me because some girl got a little attached.”

“Yeah, I dunno, D. I am not sure I had that same problem. Most of crazy women I’ve slept with were cool parting ways afterward.”

Grey hesitates. Before he says, “Yes, except her.”

On her part, she actually thinks that she’s being insanely cool about this fucking conversation right now. Like, she is being quiet and she is letting them have it in her presence even though it feels a touch disrespectful. She is letting them bond and talk about how shitty they were to other women like they don’t even care about other people’s feelings. She is letting them bond by talking about how pathetic and looney she was when she was younger. She is letting them bond through ignoring her. She is a really fucking cool wife.

Drogo rolls over onto his stomach and gazes at the both of them. “Have you guys thought about using a strap-on? Ya know, if you’re missing the ‘tration.”

She doesn’t say anything. She’s not letting herself say anything. She’s just staring back at Drogo, watching that smirk on his face stretch out even further. He knows he has rattled her.

“Nah, I don’t like extra stuff,” Grey drawls. “I don’t even care for like, fancy underwear. I am a simple man. I just like very basic, very boring sex.”

She pulls her eyes away from Drogo. Her face is hot, and she hears him snicker. She hears him say, “Ya know? That doesn’t surprise me about you at all. You’re a control freak minimalist. Now let me ask you guys this — are you guys just doing a lot of scissoring then?”

Something inside of her finally snaps. She breaks out a vicious, “Drogo!” before anger and tears just sting the back of her eyes. Her nose immediately gets stuffed up, and she knows she’s about to cry like a stupid baby about this. She pushes herself onto her feet.

Drogo’s cracking up now, rocking back and forth on the floor. “Missy! I’m messing with you!”

“Yeah? No shit,” she bites out. “Your purpose was obviously to make me upset, so congrats. You did it.”

Grey tries to reach for her. He says, “Missandei, it’s all good —”

She yanks her arm out of his grasp. She snaps, “You’re a jerk, too!” She doesn’t feel like listening to anymore of their stupid bullshit or look at their stupid faces, so she quickly walks over to grab her keys from the table. She ends up calling out, “Momo!” too harshly. Their dog gets scared, as she predictably does with this particular tone of voice, and Momo starts scrambling over to Grey, kind of squishing her furry body into his hip. His hand comes down on the dog’s back.

It really stings.

She sighs. She says, “Whatever. I’ll just see you guys at home later.”

“Missandei,” Grey says. “Don’t leave. I don’t want you to leave. I don’t want you to drive home while you are upset like this.”
Drogo releases a loud groan and slumps his body down a bit. “I told you. It’s only fun until she cries.” He looks over at Grey. Quietly, he says, “Where do you think I went wrong? Do you think it was it when I said you only bang crazy chicks, implying that Missandei is a crazy chick?”

In spite of everything — in spite of Missandei locking herself in the bathroom to get away from them — Grey can’t help but smile. He fucking knows it only spurs on Drogo. He knows that he’s a fucking moron. But he catches that twinkly look in Drogo’s eyes, and he immediately presses his hand over his mouth, stop himself from fucking laughing. He tries to keep his voice barely a whisper. He tries not to move his lips at all, as he whispers, “I think it was when you brought up the strap-on. She really did not like that.”

“Oh my God.” Drogo groans quietly, trying to suppress his smile. “Yesss. That was a great moment.” He clears his throat. And then he reaches out and knocks on the bathroom door. “Missandei!” he calls out. “Are you okay in there? Missy, I’m sorry! I was being a real bastard! I’m sorry!”

Her voice is stuffed up and muffled through the door, but also very clear, when she says, “Fuck you forever, Drogo.”

“Missandei, babe,” Grey says, trying. “Can I come in and talk with you for a bit?”

“Dude, fuck you, too. You are both assholes.”

It feels weirdly juvenile — on both sides — but he and Drogo end up just throwing a rolled-up stinky sock ball around with 2.0, as they wait out Missandei. Drogo tells Grey that this shit used to happen all the time to him — with his sisters. They’d all be having fun together, until somebody freaked out and started crying and rampaging and promising him that she’d hate him forever. Drogo shrugs, quietly telling Grey that he gets this shit a lot from women. Drogo sardonically tells Grey to go have a chat with Dany, see all the stories she has to share about his inability to let a fucking joke go for the sake of keeping the peace.

They keep coming up with fun things to do with the ball — like, they both grab spatulas from the kitchen and start creating this points system. They start trying to whack the sock ball against the wall. They keep adjusting the rules on the spot. Like, if 2.0 catches the sock in mid-air, then it’s five points. They actually keep marvelling at how fucking awesome they are at creating this game — and they are trying to do it very quietly because they both suspect that the fact that they are playing around and not sitting quietly, thinking about what they did, is gonna really piss off Missandei.

Drogo has to lose his shit very quietly after Grey slams his spatula against the sock ball on a rebound and sends it ricocheting off the far wall before 2.0 elegant leaps and bites down on the sock in the air like she’s a fucking Hollywood stunt dog.

They are breathing hard and are flushed in the face when Missandei randomly and finally opens the bathroom door.

Grey immediately drops his arms. He looks at her teary face — and her inability to look him in the eye.

“It’s late. I’m okay to drive home now,” she says.
Grey insists on going home with her, even though they drove separately, even though he is clearly having the fucking time of his life with freaking Drogo and she is a total killjoy. He quickly gathers up his cleaning supplies and runs around the apartment with his shoes still unlaced. Drogo appears completely unrepentant for the most part — he dares to give her a bear hug and shake her around in his arms even though she gave him some clear signals about how she’s still mad at him. Drogo tells her he loves her and that he always has a lot of fun with her — and she is just staring at him in disbelief.

She watches as Drogo slaps Grey in the ass really harshly, making Grey yelp and jump and drop his mop. She watches as Grey tries to retaliate by trying to punch Drogo in the balls. She doesn’t even know why he’s bothering to go home with her. She doesn’t get this shit whatsoever.

Her eyes and her body are sore by the time she slips into bed. She can hear the faucet running in the bathroom as he’s finishing up. He ended up putting away the cleaning supplies and also preparing 2.0 for bed by himself, probably to try and atone.

She pulls the blankets up, tucking an edge underneath her chin as she snuggles deeper into her pillow, which smells like it was recently washed. The bedroom is already dark, save for the slice of light underneath the bathroom door, and she shuts her eyes, trying to even out of her breathing. She hears the faucet shut up. She hears him wrench the door open.

She kind of jolts when all the lights in the bedroom come on. She’s lying stomach down in bed, and she twists her neck to look at him quizzically — to ask him what the hell — as he kicks the dog out of the room. Her mouth actually drops open at that — as she watches him shut the door in 2.0’s face, before he turns back to her. She watches as he reaches behind his back to starts pulling up his shirt, baring stomach, then baring chest, then pulling it over his head.

He drops his shirt on the floor, and he’s working on taking off his pants when she says, “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting naked.”

She stares at him dumbly. “Why?”

He kind of laughs, as his pants drop to the floor. “You know why.”

She’s staring at him — and his bare body — in disbelief. “Have you lost your mind?”

He pulls the blankets off of her, tossing them on his side of the bed. He uncovers her body, in a t-shirt and her underwear, and then he runs his hand up and down her exposed thigh, making her shiver. He says, “I’m sorry about tonight — for riling you up on purpose like that. But as you know, it’s one of my turn ons.” He hooks his hands underneath her knees, pulling her pelvis down the edge of the bed. “I didn’t think you’d get upset the way you did. I actually thought you’d find it funny.”

“Why did you think I’d find it funny?” she asks blearily, not stopping him as he pulls off her
underwear. Her legs are dangling off the edge of the bed.

“Because,” he says simply, dropping cleanly onto the bed, propping himself up with his elbow, hovering hotly over her body as his hand travels down her stomach before his fingers gently press in between her legs, with the intent of surveying the state of things down there. “It’s obvious I’m so in love with you. And it’s obvious you’re not fucking hideous. And it’s obvious the sex that we have isn’t boring.”

She spreads her legs out a little bit wider, just instinctively tilting her hips into his hand — she watches as a smug grin spreads over his face. She shakes her head at the same time her hand smooths over the column of his neck. She says, “You shouldn’t get let off the hook so easily just because you’re good at oral.” She scrunches up her face and gasps as he starts drawing these slow circles, as he pushes two fingers inside of her.

“I don’t even know how that unsubstantiated rumor became such a talking point,” he murmurs, looming over her as her eyes flutter shut. He drops his mouth to her neck, with such intent. “Sorry, you had a shitty night because two assholes were inconsiderate,” he mumbles into her skin. “Can I make it up to you?”

She doesn’t even get a chance to answer him before he yanks a pillow from his side of the bed and drops it on the floor — for him to kneel on. She wants to tell him that her night wasn’t all that bad. She liked a lot of things about it. She likes that he was able to chat about sex so casually and with such ease. She likes that he can talk about sex with someone who isn’t her. She liked all of the moments when he looked happy.

His mouth starts moving south.

He throws the tablet of generic Wellbutrin into the air and he catches it in his mouth before gulping down water. He told her that the sexual side effects are statistically less common with Wellbutrin, and that’s why Amari put him on it. He told her that he has cracked plenty of jokes, about what adverse sexual side effects can possibly be left. But Amari schooled him into shutting his mouth. Amari said that Grey still can stand to lose more. Like, he can lose some of his sex drive, his desire for sex, for instance.

He groans as he circles his arm around her and cups her left breast through her sports bra, lightly squeezing. She just came home from the gym and he took off her shirt so he could look at her, even though he’s on his way out. They had really, really nice sex the other night. When they have good sex, he is schmoopy and cute the next day. When they have good sex, he is schmoopy and cute the next day.

His voice is low and thick as pinches a nipple, as he says, “We’re still good,” referring to his sex drive. He’s been constantly checking in on himself since starting the medicine. He’s been extra gropey with her as a result. “I still think your body is so fucking sick.”

“So gentlemanly,” she says dryly. “You make me feel really cherished sometimes.”

He chuckles, letting her go so that he can raise his arms up in the air to stretch out his muscles. He says, “You love it when I handle you possessively like that, don’t even lie.”

“Babe,” she says, casting her eyes to his face. She shakes her head, and then belying her actions, she
says, “Obviously I like it.”

She reaches out to tickle him — she doesn’t know why she even tries because he’s a robot who doesn’t know how to be tickled, but she digs her wiggling fingers into his stomach anyway. As predicted, he doesn’t laugh at all.

Her hand meanders down his shorts, without much derailing intention. She just gives him a soft squeeze and holds him in her hand — he’s been letting her touch him like this more often lately. She says, “Bye, babies. Have fun at racquetball.”

“Babies?”

“I’m talking to you and your penis.”

He and Jaime have not seen each other since Tank’s bachelor party. Neither of them have reached out for their typical dinners or anything like that. Neither of them have sent out text messages to randomly strike up a conversation.

Jaime ends up pairing up with Tyrion. He ends up pairing up with Drogo. It all happens without a lot of lengthy discussion or argument.
After Jaime and Tyrion handily lose — which Grey suspects is due to Jaime’s heart just not being in it to win it — Tyrion is kind of annoyed at his brother and Drogo is running his victory laps with his arms in the air and his cackles reverberating against the walls.

In front of the other guys, because he has no shame about this and gives no shits, Jaime glumly walks up to Grey and says, “Dude, can we stop doing whatever it is we’re doing? I’m really miserable, and I miss you.”

That statement makes Tyrion immediately turn his back and start walking away, presumably to go retrieve his bag. He finds these kinds of outward displays of emotion awkward to witness.

“I’ve miss you, too,” Grey admits.

“I’m sorry I made you mad at me,” Jaime says. “Again.”

“Yeah, man — it was like —”

“Yeah, I know. I knew you wouldn’t like it, and I did it anyway. It was ‘cause —”

“I know why.”

“It just made me so mad.”

“But it like, made you madder than it made me, so —”

“Yeah, I know. I made it about me. I like to do that.”

“Yeah.”

“I was also really stressed out because I am so white, and I felt bad about that. So I was overcompensating.”

That actually garners this snort-laugh of surprise from Grey, who is looking at Jaime’s miserable and downturned face. Grey says, “I thought you were my Blackest friend.”

“Man,” Jaime croaks, deepening his frown. “That was a really dumb thing I used to say.”
Jaime wants to end their little tiff with a hug, which Grey is very awkward about. He kind of blinks blearily and bends his knees as if he’s stooping down to hug a child — even though Jaime is his height. For this reason, his face gets buried in Jaime’s chest, and Drogo, across court, cannot let it go. Drogo is hollering, “What are you doing? Are you trying to squat-hug? It is not a good look, man!”

“Dude,” Jaime mutters. “Ignore him and his desperate jealousy.”

Grey actually has pretty low interest in Brienne’s pregnancy, which he is confronted with when the conversation turns at lunch. Jaime seems a little amped about it — this combination of stressed out and also excited and also nervous. Grey doesn’t even know how to respond to it, so he doesn’t really respond or contribute much to the conversation. Most of Drogo’s sisters have had babies already, so he knows all the important questions to ask Jaime. It carries the conversation for long minutes.

Tyrion actually seems to have no interest at all in Brienne’s pregnancy or Jaime’s impending parenthood. He tells them that he and Tysha actually had the most ridiculous fight the other day because Tysha asked him if he was excited to meet his new niece, and Tyrion said no, he is not excited about that. He had meant that it was on account of her being a baby, and babies are inherently devoid of personality. Tysha took it to mean that he hates children and never wants to have children with her ever, which — Tyrion says — is the kind of leap a fucking insane person would take. He told her so. That was why their argument devolved into a screaming match that was a complete waste of time and prevented him from going to bed at a decent hour the night before the city’s big roll-out on the police accountability initiative.

“Oh shit,” Tyrion mutters. “I am kinda hijacking this conversation with my shit. Sorry.”

Jaime smiles. He kind of astutely says, “Is that a Lannister thing?”

“Yes,” both Grey and Drogo say at the same time.

“Ah, so about babies,” Tyrion says smoothly. “Jaime, uh, have you baby-proofed your house, yet?”

“Tysha wants to have babies now?” Jaime asks, around a mouthful of his ham sandwich. He picks up the fallen tomato pieces and shoves them into his full mouth.

Tyrion shrugs. “Of course she does.”

“What do you mean, of course she does?” Jaime asks, frowning a little. “I thought you guys weren’t having kids?”

Tyrion sighs. “I mean maybe I was deluded, and I convinced myself this wasn’t a problem. And it wasn’t — when we were younger. But guess what? It’s becoming a problem.”
“Shit,” Drogo says. “You don’t want kids?”

“Why would I want children, Drogo?”

“You gotta get on the same page as your lady,” Drogo says, maybe unaware that he is doling out some really obvious-verging-on-dumb advice. “This is the kind of stuff that will kill a relationship. And if you don’t want the same thing she does — you’re not gonna change her mind anymore than she’s gonna change your mind. You gotta break up. Or one of you has to make a huge concession.”

“And what did you do, Drogo?” Jaime asks, grinning over his sandwich.

Drogo smiles winningly. “Oh, I tried both! I broke up with her. And when that was truly terrible, I just decided to make a huge concession. It’s easy though for me. ‘Cause I’m a man. I can have children forever. I can always decide Dany’s not for me ten years from now and still go out knock up some twenty-year-old.”

“Dude, how much does Dany hate it when you say shit like that?” Jaime asks.

Drogo’s laughing grunt kind of rattles the table. “Oh my God, she hates it so much. It’s really hilarious.”

“G-money, where are you guys at right now? Is Missandei still straddling the fence?”

“Ouch,” Tyrion says.

“Beats me,” Grey mutters. “We haven’t talked about it in a long while because I can’t get my dick in her vagina to save my life, and we can’t afford to buy diapers because I’m a deadbeat. So, that’s where we’re at.”

“But at least you have a really positive outlook on it all,” Drogo retorts, already giggling at himself.

“Man, you must be really killing it in therapy,” Jaime says in appreciation, around another huge bite of sandwich. “I’m being serious here. You just told Tyrion about your penis. Just so casually and easily. Good job, man.”

Tyrion says, “What the fuck?”

He’s getting really sick of Uber. He’s getting sick of putting so many miles on his car and he’s getting sick of the monotony. He’s also getting sick of being a real estate agent. Pia will never find her dream home, and he is honestly tired of spending so much one-on-one time with her. He has concluded that Pia is probably a once-every-two-weeks friend. Her problems were once kind of novel, but after months of listening to her, he now thinks that her problems are repetitive. Also, they are easily solvable, yet she insists on not solving them.

When he tells Missandei this as they’re washing dishes after dinner, she tells him that he is ice cold. She says it fondly, without that judgemental tone of voice, though. She pointedly asks him if he can empathize at all — to the cyclical and repetitive nature of life obstacles.

He’s tempted to tell her that his penis thing is actually a much bigger deal than Pia’s inability to handle dating a guy with facial hair. But he already knows Missandei will just tell him it’s all relative.
They were approved for the loan, which he was honestly shocked by. He had wanted to talk it all out in detail with her — but her knowledge, interest, and patience for such a thing is very limited. He ended up spending two hours writing out a journal entry, about the details of the loan and how he would like to timeline out the rest of it. He is giving himself a month to get tenants in. It was a waste of a journal entry, and it’s not at all what the journal entries are supposed to be about, but he couldn’t help himself. He has no one to really talk to, about this kind of stuff.

To her, he says, “I think I want to go back to work. I think I need to go back to work.”

She says, “Okay.”

Then he says, “Okay? Just like that?”

“I wasn’t stopping you from going back to work.”

“Yeah, you were. You are the only reason I’m not working.”

“Okay?” She shrugs, obviously trying to avoid arguing about this. “So you feel that way. That’s cool. And you want to go back to work now. That’s cool, too.”

“You honestly don’t think you are the reason I’m not working?” He is veering straight into the sun, right now. He knows it, but he just can’t help himself.

“Grey. I’ve suggested to you, repeatedly, that maybe you should go back to work, if you think that’ll make you happy.”

“You actually throw it my face all the time, telling me to just go the fuck back to work so I would stop pissing you off all the time,” he corrects.

“I did that once,” she points out, smoothing the hand towel back around the oven door handle. “And I apologize for that. I was frustrated. That was a bad way for that to come out.”

She has to take off of work early to show up to his therapy session with the expressed intent of talking about their sex life. There are butterflies in her stomach as she shifts to the side in the elevator, to let a man in a business suit enter. The butterflies are because of the impending things she will say in front of him and the impending new things she will learn about him. The butterflies is not because the man joining her in the elevator is attractive — though she does get this twinge — this flash of a memory of Grey in one of his suits, either coming home or about to leave for the office.

“Which floor?”

“Four, please. Thank you.”

This was suggested to him because, apparently, sometimes it’s easier to say things to people in a space designed for this kind of communication. He has told Amari that he and Missandei talk about
sex the most when they are actually having it. He has told Amari that he and Missandei have historically had trouble talking about sex over the dinner table. It’s probably his fault. Because when they first got together, she tried — and he kept angrily and decisively shutting it down because it made him so upset and uncomfortable. She might be conditioned in a certain way, now — because of him.

He and Amari have talked a lot — about Grey’s tendency to heap a lot of blame onto his shoulders, and his tendency to absolve her of all blame. Not that she is worthy of any blame, but more because this is weight they should both carry equally. It’s only something he understands intellectually.

He stands up when the elevator doors open, when he sees her. She looks so beautiful and put-together. And he looks like a bum in his t-shirt and jeans.

“I’m very nervous,” she confesses, right away, before even saying hi to him.

He reaches up to hold her face in his hands. Her hands clamp down on his wrists right away. “Why are you nervous?” he asks quietly.

She finds herself blurting out, early on, that she’s very satisfied and pretty happy with their sex life — which actually makes her cringe. Her own peppy and forced tone of voice makes her feel like an idiot. She realizes that she basically stopped short of full-on declaring that she doesn’t miss the dick at all, that she can live without the dick. Whether or not it’s true, it’s obviously her heavy-handedness that is not helpful to Grey.

She’s blushing. She weakly says, “He’s honestly very good at sex.”

“I’m sure he is,” Amari says, kind of smiling. “Is it hard for you to say things that potentially can make him feel hurt?”

“Yes.”

“What?” Grey says, staring at her quizzically. “You don’t have any problem hurting my feelings at all.”

“I meant when it comes to sex.”

“Yeah,” Missandei echoes. “He meant when it comes to sex.”

“Oh.” Grey pauses, glancing around the room and at Amari, before he refocuses on her. Then he says, “Oh my God, do you have things that you want to say to me but have been refraining from saying them because you think I’m fucking weak?”

“Okay, hear that?” Missy says, directing her comment solely to Amari. “He says stuff like that. All the time.”
They go over their sex routine. She tells Grey’s therapist that it seems like they have a lot of sex — like, probably higher than average considering they’ve been together for a very long time. She tells him she probably has a slightly higher sex drive than Grey does, which probably is nice because it would probably be terrible if Grey had to contend with ED and also a partner that isn’t always feeling him. But she does feel him, most of the time.

It’s that “most of the time” that Grey really latches onto. He can’t hear anything else but that. And this is why she has refrained from telling him this. This is why it was a mistake to tell him she felt attraction to Drogo. He is kind of melodramatic when it comes to sex.

“You make yourself have sex with me when you don’t want to?” he asks, pretty accusingly. “We promised each other we’d never do that again.”

“No, baby,” she says automatically, already about to say she always wants to have sex with him. And then she catches Amari in the corner of her eye and she corrects herself. She says, “Grey. It’s not helpful when you get like this.”

“Like what?”

“Super black and white about things.”

“What?”

He pretty much hates this fucking session. Because he is learning so much about his shortcomings and his failings. He thought he knew where he comes up short, but he was wrong. The distance is even greater. He was unprepared for all the things she is saying. And he cannot even get that mad at her for withholding the information until now, because she is fucking trying not to cry as she sits beside him. He would be the biggest asshole if he got angry over this and made her cry for real.

She’s clutching onto a crumpled tissue, and he does not even feel like consoling her right now. Because he is just so pissed at the situation and himself. And her. He’s also a little bit pissed at her.

Amari tells them that it’s pretty normal for married couples to have sex, when one partner is on the edge or even when one partner isn’t really into it. He says it so matter-of-factly and so blandly, without stigma, that it makes the both of them kind of flinch. Grey insists on always having sex with a certain kind of intention because of these beliefs he has conditioned in himself about sex. He is obviously so pissed off about this that the session is getting all wrapped up in this. He keeps stopping short of saying what he really wants to say. He keeps talking around it, saying that he doesn’t fucking want to make anyone have sex with him who doesn’t want to fucking have sex with him.

“I want to have sex with you though,” she says softly. “I love you.”

“That’s not what you said earlier,” he shoves out. “Earlier, you said you want to have sex with me — most of the time. And what? The times you don’t you’re just grinning and bearing it.”
“No,” she says. “I just can tell that you want to have sex. And I love you, and it’s still fun for me. So we have sex. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s not a big deal!” he shouts. “Missandei! How often do you do this? What was the last time you did this.”

“Baby,” she says, frowning.

“I want to know!”

She looks over to Amari again, for guidance. And amazingly, he just casually nods and basically signals for her to go ahead. Go ahead and tell the fucking nutjob when the last time he forced her to have sex with him was.

Her heart is throbbing in her throat. She says, “Well, just last week. We came home from Drogo’s, after you guys had a good laugh at my expense and made me feel all embarrassed and self-conscious. And I was about to go to sleep when you took off your clothes and said we were gonna have sex.”

“I did not say that.”

“Okay, well not explicitly. But I guess I mean you made it clear that you wanted to have sex. And I was like, ‘Oh, okay. I can do this.’” She sighs. “And then we had sex — and it was good sex, and I really enjoyed it and I’m glad we had sex.”

“What the fuck, Missandei!”

“What the fuck to you!” she finally snaps. “How is this a fucking surprise to you! You spent an entire night making fun of me and not giving a shit about my feelings, palling around with your friend who just says whatever the fuck to me all the time. And then you covered it all with a blanket apology. Which I fucking accepted, so that’s over and done with and we’re fine there! And then you took off your fucking clothes and started going down on me! You fucking replay that back in your mind! And you tell me how it’s fair that you’re getting mad at me for this right now!”

“Okay, this is really good,” Amari cuts in. “A lot of information is exchanged here.”

“Oh my God,” Grey mutters. “Amari, seriously?”

Grey tells them that he is not down with non-consensual sex. Missandei tells him that duh, she knows that. She’s not down with rape either. She said the word, which makes him look even angrier, but she’s tired of his fucking attitude, so she doesn’t care if he’s pissed. Amari has told them that Grey tends to get angry and pissed off to manage his actual feelings of shame, of sadness and fear. Because anger is a bold emotion that seems powerful, whereas the other emotions are quieter and more painful — harder to get a handle on.

Grey asks Amari to please stop saying stuff so plainly like that. It makes him feel so fucking basic and unremarkable.

“It’s always consensual, you stupid fucking asshole,” Missandei says, completely going in the face of the stuff Amari said about calling each other names when they are angry with each other. “I fucking love you. Sometimes I am not in the mood to begin with, because you are a stupid fucking asshole to
me sometimes. But you’ll be in the mood. And I find it hot when you’re in the mood. So I start sex with you, banking on the fact that I will get in the mood about like, fucking fifteen minutes into it. Or sometimes I have sex with you when I’m not in the mood to have sex because I’m in the mood for intimacy, just so I can hold you because I fucking love holding onto you. Is that okay with you? Is that okay with you, you stupid fucking asshole?” She doesn’t even let him answer. She’s so ticked at him that she says, “Guess what? If you took off your clothes right now and said, ‘Missandei, let’s have sex,’ I would yell ‘no’ and punch you in your fucking asshole face. Does that make you feel better?”

After a point — he frustrates her so much that she completely stops caring about how her very minor, very little ity truth bombs are falling. She just starts dropping them like she’s drunk on honesty. She starts divulging all of the secrets that she can think of, all that she can get a handle on. She knows that there are probably a bunch more that are not coming to mind, but she has to be content with the here and the now. She crassly tells the both of them that Grey likes anal play, but she always has to lead with that because he will never ask for it. He actually doesn’t ask for stuff — period. He has to physically lead her places or she has to figure it out through a fucking million context clues. She is too tired to read his mind sometimes. It would just be really nice if one day, he just said, “Babe, can you put your finger in my ass?” She would throw a fucking party.

She tells them that he has some serious body image issues. He has a ridiculous diet where he vacillates between very healthy, very low calorie food — and greasy gut bombs. He cannot stand deviating from his “ideal” weight. He manages his weight like a fucking OCD sixteen-year-old girl who is trying out for cheer squad.

She tells them that Grey is beautiful. Like, objectively, he is nice to look at. Like, it’s so obvious. It’s so obvious to everyone with eyes. She actually helplessly asks Amari if he sees it — Grey is really good-looking right?

“He’s a very handsome person,” Amari affirms.

“He is. That is why I fucking tried to mount his dick the moment we met. I am superficial, and he is hot and smart and funny and responsible and just the best person. I don’t even know what he sees when he looks into a mirror, but he just says these bizarre comments about himself and his garbage body to me all the time. These comments never make any sense to me.”

“So you done?” Grey asks, as he watches her rapidly fan her sweaty face with her hand. “Are you glad you got all of that off your chest?”

“Yeah,” she says. “That was great.”

“Great,” he says in his signature deadpan. “I’m glad you were able to feel so free and open and safe to say all you wanted to say.”

“Me too.”
“In light of all your truth-telling, I have a question for you.”

She feels her heart speeding back up again. She feels the prickles of sweat beading on her face again. “What?”

“How much do you miss getting fucked by a hard cock?”

“Whoa,” she says, mindful of Amari’s patient gaze. “The potty mouth on this one.” Back to Grey, she says, “I really liked how you phrased that. That isn’t lost on me.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not as dumb and blind as you seem to think I am.”

“What do you want? Like you want me to rank this on a scale of one to ten?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Guys —” Amari interjects. “Maybe we shouldn’t apply a number to this.”

“Probably a five,” she says. “Dead center. Of course I miss it. Of course I mourn it sometimes. Of course, I miss that kind of sex — the physical feeling of it. But you know what? I also miss feeling like I did something for you. I miss the surety of knowing that I turn you on. I miss how easy it was to make you feel good during sex. I don’t have this in the same way anymore. I just have to deal with more of my own insecurities and perceived shortcomings. And also your anger at yourself. And I get to feel sad about it, too. Did you ever even consider that?”

At the end of the session, they are both exhausted. That is when Amari confirms that he agrees with them — they have a lot of sex with each other, which is generally good. And without any lead-in or explanation, he tells them that he thinks it’ll be good for them to take a vacation from intercourse. For perhaps a month.

Missandei says, “I’m sorry, but what did you just say?”

Grey immediately looks ready to fight. He shakes his head and says, “No.”
Grey becomes a citizen. His wife doesn't show up to the ceremony.

“This is dumb. I am so bored already,” she says, pressing her hands into his arm for balance as she gets on her tiptoes to peep the cashier. They are too discouraged, too lazy to cook dinner, and the girl manning the register is cute, of color, has thick-rimmed glasses, with a face half made up of a smile. Girl’s slow as hell, but upon seeing her face, Missy decides this is a forgivable offense. “Like, what are we supposed to do?” she says, dropping back down to her heels. “Talk to each to pass the time?”

“Maybe we should get another dog,” he mutters, also tracing his gaze up the long line.

“Is it even okay to touch you?” she asks, lifting up her palms like he’s hot and he’s burning her.

“What are even the rules?”

“Don’t worry,” he says, crossing his arms as he sighs, scanning ahead and watching the guy at the fry station take a break to have a conversation with a guy holding a milkshake. “I’m good at rules. I’ll write down all the rules for you.”

“Yesterday, I read an article about how abstinence-only treatment for opioid addiction is dangerous because what people are not told during treatment is that, because their tolerance for the drugs plummet, a relapse can be fatal because people take the same dosage they previously were on, thinking they’d be okay. But it’s not actually okay and they die.”

She can actually detect the absence of his breathing — he is holding in his breath as he is thinking of what to say back to her.

It takes a little bit — they hear the chattering of a family nearby, a kid wants a milkshake but his mom says he has to finish his burger first, the sound of sizzling oil on a griddle hisses underneath it all. And then he says, “You know, I really don’t like it when you talk around what you actually want to say. I’d rather you not wait until you’re about to explode from irritation, before you will say stuff to me straight.”

“Well, I really don’t like it when you start sentences telling me what you don’t like about me,” she says, only semi-sarcastically.

“Well, how else am I supposed to convey this shit to you?”

“Try starting your sentences by saying, ‘I feel.’”

“Did you read that off of a Pinterest meme called Pseudo Psychology For White People?”

“I know you think you just burned me, but all I can hear is the fact that you really don’t get how Pinterest works or what Pinterest is all about. You sound old.”
She can detect the stiffened shoulders of someone doing a bad job of hiding their eavesdropping. The people in front of them have quieted their own conversation — ever since Grey said stuff about white people. He has much less shame over displaying his derision in public. She is still stupidly self-conscious sometimes. She takes a modest step forward, to fill in the gap in the slow-moving line.

“I just worry about you,” she says. “Like, all the time. Like, all the time, Grey. I obsessively worry about you, okay?”

“Well don’t. I can take care of myself.”

Fuck therapy. That is all she can focus on right now. She is stopping herself from being petty in the face of his coldness. She’s stopping herself from bitterly apologizing for loving him so much.

He’s still really ticked at her, still a little sensitive and annoyed over her hypocrisy — at all the secret-keeping that’s been happening on her end as she simultaneously gets on his ass constantly for not telling her about every stupid detail of his fucking boring life. Superseding that is this blinding urge to make the very last time count.

He asks, “Is this okay? Do you want this?”

“Yeah,” she says breathlessly.

They’re breaking the rules already, but he grabs her by her naked butt and hauls her right to his mouth. He can do this when he’s angry with her.

Her panting, muffled groans are all he can hear, all he can think about for a while. It’s a nice break from all of the shitty, uncomfortable things he has learned. He was reminded that their relationship started with sex — with the denial of sex. In therapy, they talked about how this relationship is sustained on sex, and how people always mistake and equate sex with intimacy. He actually accidentally blurted out that he doesn’t even know who he is as a human being, if he can’t have sex with her. That statement had actually startled her.

He makes her come with his mouth and his hand. It happens quicker than he wanted it to, but he is just so fucking sad. After she finishes, her expression pulls into one of regret. She looks like she feels like he does.

She doesn’t bother straightening the rest of her clothes as she gets back on her feet, as he follows her. She reaches for him, one arm around his shoulders and the other on enclosure of his pants. She asks, “How do you want to do this? What do you want?”

It’s an entirely difficult question to answer at this point. He says, “I don’t know.” He then adds on, “I don’t care.” And right after he says it, he flashes back to her cruelly aggressive recriminations that touched on a bunch of fucking stupid stuff he is sensitive about already, when it comes to sex. It’s not like he doesn’t know that he never initiates certain things during sex. It’s not like he’s proud of it. He is obviously nervous and scared of certain shit. He is constantly scared of the most subtle forms of rejection from her. It was great that she threw it all in his face.

He suddenly doesn’t feel like doing this anymore.
She looks displeased — because he said he doesn’t care. She repeats it. She asks, “What do you want?”

He sighs. He looks down at his body, still clothed. “Honestly? I want to lie down on our bed and not talk for a while.”

In the month or so that they’re not having sex, they have to do a bunch of contrived exercises that seem really awkward and not very useful, like staring into each other’s eyes for long minutes as their souls connect to one another. That’s not exactly what Amari said to them, but Grey is being a bit bitterly fatalistic about it. It all sounds unscientific, New-Age-y, and woo-woo, which is not at all what he’s into.

But he’s trying to be a team player, and he keeps saying that he’ll try anything once — a statement that manages to get on Missandei’s nerves. She has told him that she’s been finding his too-cool-for-school attitude about everything in life to be defeatist and self-sabotaging. He has refrained from telling her that he finds her holier-than-thou attitude to be fucking irritating as hell.

His naturalization ceremony is in the middle of the work day. He told her about it weeks ago, when he first got the letter. He told her once and mentioned that she didn’t have to take the time off to haul ass down to the courthouse just to see him swear his oath of allegiance to a country he was not born in.

When he doesn’t see her there, he figures that she forgot or she took his words to heart.

The ceremony is 45 minutes. There’s a short PowerPoint presentation. They all get packets. Some words get said about who they are as people. It predictably draws out emotion from him, so he starts shutting out the noise and forcing himself to be deaf to it. They then swear their oath of allegiance. He is entirely uncomfortable with swearing devotion to an entity he does not fully believe in, but he does it half-heartedly anyway — apparently being too-cool-for-school is a chronic affliction for him. And then they all stand in line to get certificates.

He kind of hides out at Jaime’s house — because after a few hours, he kind of realizes that he’s a bit angry at her for missing his naturalization ceremony. Even though he only told her about it once. Even though he told her not to bother coming.

Apparently, a subconscious part of him feels like she should know him well enough to just know that when he says he doesn’t want her to show up for something that is stupid and pointless, he really actually means that he wants her to read through his layers of subtext and show up to something that he told her to stay away from.

“This is so dumb,” he mutters, mostly to Brienne. She’s sitting at the kitchen table with him, and Jaime is puttering around at the stove because Grey completely interrupted their dinner plans. They had assured him there were no real dinner plans, and they could put down an extra setting. He says, “I’m mad at her because she did exactly what I asked her to do.”
“Yeah, man,” Jaime calls out. “It is totally dumb. You should’ve just told her you wanted her to be there.”

Grey rolls his eyes.

“Sometimes we just can’t help how we feel, even when we know it’s a little unfair,” Brienne offers. Her investment in this conversation actually seems greater than Jaime’s. And Grey’s wondering just how much of this will end up trickling back to Missandei. A part of him almost welcomes the breach of confidence. Because it will save him the trouble of explaining shit to his wife in a way that results in them getting into another fight.

“It’s hard to unpack and start doing stuff in a different way from how you have in the past,” Brienne adds.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she affirms. “It like, took me a long while to teach myself to not mumble all the time because I thought the stuff I had to say was unimportant compared to everyone else’s voice. It’s still a work in progress, to not say self-deprecating stuff all the time and pretend they’re just jokes.”

“She’s been to all of my marathons,” Grey says. “I don’t invite her to them. With the first one, I actually didn’t even tell her, but she found out from Jaime and then strong-armed her way there. And when we were broken up, we didn’t talk for a long time — until she texted to ask about my marathon because she had the date in her calendar or something — she just remembered.” He shrugs, again, shoving his eyes off to the side of the room. “She’s always been the person that got me. She’s been the person that can read through my bullshit and understand what I really want — and what I need. It’s like she skipped my citizen ceremony to punish me or something. Because how can she not know that I actually wanted her to be there?”

He’s actually refraining from recapping the biggest example of Missandei doing shit that he verbally asked her not to do, but secretly really wanted her to do. It was how their whole sexual relationship started. It was how their actual emotional relationship started. He feels this vague shame around the situation — maybe because of his cowardly inaction — maybe something else. He doesn’t like thinking about it.

“Dude,” Jaime says. “You have got to just start saying what you want. It’s fucking hard to decode you when we’re busy and distracted with our own shit at work or whatever. What is more efficient? For you to just be like, ‘Missy, go to this thing please.’ Or for you to be like, ‘Missy, don’t bother going to this thing because I think it’s really stupid and pointless.’ And then Missy processes it through that Grey-translator in her brain and is like, ‘Oh! He actually wants me to be there! Therefore, I will be there!’ Like, do you realize how much work that is?”

“I read subtext though,” Grey says. “I read subtext all the time for other people. I’m always trying to figure out what people mean versus what they say. Do I just not get the same courtesy?”

“Dude, rationalize it and compute it however you want. But she’s your wife. You love her. You have to live with her for a very long time. You have to get along with her. So it’s probably not a good idea to keep score and track shit you’re doing for her versus shit she’s doing for you.”
She’s not at all surprised to find their house dark and quiet as she drives up to it. His car is not in the garage, which is also not a surprise. She has no idea if he texted her his whereabouts, because her phone is currently a paperweight at the bottom of her purse, having suddenly fritzed out and shut off. Dead hardware. She spent a long time on the office phone with customer service, trying to get a replacement. It was a choice between spending hundreds to buy a new phone out of pocket, or waiting for an under-warranty refurbished phone to make its way through the mail system — two business days. She opted to wait the two business days, which include a weekend, because it seems really stupid to waste money on a new phone. She knew Grey would not want her to buy a new phone.

Then her tire blew out, at some point between leaving the office at lunch time and trying to get to the courthouse for Grey’s naturalization ceremony. She had no phone, so she was stranded on the side of the highway, struggling in her heels and her skirt as she changed her tire with the emergency spare in her back trunk. She would’ve tried to make it the ceremony, but then a cop pulled over on the side of the road to have a fucking conversation with her, acting like she was dumb and didn’t know how to change a tire, like she didn’t grow up swapping out tires in her brothers’ garage. He was chivalrous and chatty. He didn’t really jack up the car that safely. She wanted to kick gravel in his face because she was so upset that she was missing Grey’s ceremony. In reality, she was unfailingly polite because sometimes that’s all she can do in the face of authority.

Later, at the tire place, she was shown a bent nail as a jovial employee told her that it was the culprit.

Her clothes are a mess. Her shoes are probably toast because they’re scratched up. There are grease smears on her skirt. She loves this skirt. And she has sweated through her blouse. She went back to work hours later — hours late — and showed up looking crazy, which garnered everyone’s sympathies. Their enthusiastic ‘poor you’ comments managed to make her feel extra rotten inside.

The longer he takes to get home, the more angry with him she becomes — and the harder it is for her to not self-victimize. The silence in the house is making her crazy. At one point during the day — much, much earlier — she was really keen on rushing home and apologizing profusely for missing his ceremony.

She thinks that he’s really petty and punishing and unfair. Her phone is deader than dead, and he is not concerned that he has not heard from her all day because he has not rushed home calling out her name. She could also be dead in a ditch somewhere. And he does not even give a shit.

On top of that she feels terrible — physically. She’s on her period so she’s cramping. She also thinks that she is getting sick. She grabs a cup of tea, a book, the dog, and drags her tired, aching body onto the bed in the spare bedroom. She’s probably contagious, and she doesn’t want him to get sick, too.

Grey initially makes all the wrong assumptions when he gets home, so prone he is to assuming the worse. He sees her car. He sees the empty house. He sees the light underneath the door of the guest bedroom. He sees red because he thinks that she’s punishing him. He tells himself that he knows this woman like he knows himself. He knows that she was probably ticked that he didn’t tell her about
where he was going for dinner. He knows that her form of torture is the dead silence in response to his text message about doing their own things tonight. He knows she left the light on as a fuck you to him. And he has to figure out whether or not he wants to ignore her or whether he wants to burst in there and have a long and intensive discussion about all of their fucking feelings and where the miscommunication happened.

He’s kind of abstractly proud of himself as he knocks on the door, before he opens it.

He’s hit in the face with the smell of menthol. And then his stomach drops when he sees her sleeping, curled up in the fetal position with lights on.

She wakes up when she feels herself being lifted, when she feels his arms hooking underneath her knees and shoulder blades.

She instinctively snuggles into him. The first thing she says to him is, “I think I’m sick.” Her voice is hoarse, and her head is hot.

“I know,” he says quietly.

He takes her into their bedroom. She mutters, “I’m contagious. Probably.” She keeps taking on these uncertain comments because it’s been so long since she’s been sick that she’s not sure what it even feels like anymore.

He says, “I don’t care.”

She says, “I’m sorry I missed your ceremony. I—I’ve had the worst day.”

“It’s okay.”

She starts to tear up a little bit — when he carefully lays her down in their bed and adjusts her legs so he can pull the blankets over them. She thinks that she’s being a little bit emotional because he’s being really, really nice. She kind of flashes back to her melodramatic girlhood, when all she wanted was for some guy to take care of her like this.

“I’ll go refill your tea,” he says, as he leans down to touch his lips to her hot cheek.

She says, “Thank you.”

Then, silently, he transfers his mouth over hers. He kisses her chastely, kind of experimentally. Her lips already feel puffy and a little bit numb — tingly — and she twists her head away, breaking the kiss. In apology, she says, “I don’t want to get you sick.”

He says, “I don’t care,” again, as his fingers press into the side of chin, turning her face back to look at his. And then his mouth descends on hers again.

They are furiously making out like they are sixteen years old again. His hand is shoved up
underneath her shirt, cupping onto a boob in a way that is painful sometimes. He’s squeezing her breast like he doesn’t know it’s not a bag of sand. His tongue is all the way in her mouth and it’s choking and sexy and messy and heady. Her nose is stuffed and the oxygen deprivation is making her really interested in getting laid.

She kind of yelps — not in pain, but in surprise — when his hand shoves its way into the waistband of her shorts, into her underwear. There — he freezes.

He’s hit her maxi pad — they hear the plasticky crinkle of it — and it takes him a beat to realizes what it is. When he does, his entire body relaxes. He spreads her with two fingers before sliding a third inside of her.

She laughs as she exhales out a moan — because that baseball metaphor popped into her head. He just got to third base.

She says, “I love you,” in a really goopy and adoring way, lifting her arms and pressing her hands into the sides of his neck.

“I love you, too,” he mumbles.

She says, “We have to stop. We can’t have sex.”

“Babe, I already told you. I don’t care that you’re sick. I won’t get sick. And I don’t care about the mess. I’ll wash the sheets later anyway.”

“No, I mean, like — therapy and stuff.”

“Oh my God,” he shoves out, a touch too loud. “We’re actually going along with that?”

After he washes his hands in their bathroom, he lifts his fingers to his nose to randomly sniff to see if he can still detect the smell of her and blood, even underneath the lemon scent of their soap.

He goes refills her tea. It takes forever for the water to boil, during which time, he’s a little out-of-his-mind antsy because all he wants to do is to crawl back into bed with her. When he gets back upstairs, there’s a random furniture catalogue tucked between his arm and chest and a hot teapot clutched in his hand. He deposits it all on her side table.

It takes a few more minutes to get settled, for her to get into a comfortable position — she says she’s so irritated that she’s running a fever because it’s so hot and nothing feels good. That makes him want to bring up sex — make this joke about how sex might make her feel good so they should try it — but he refrains from doing that because it doesn’t seem appropriate to. Instead, he patiently waits as she thrashes around a few more times, before settling into the crook of his arm.

“How was the ceremony?” she asks, touching her fingertips to his chest.

“I hated it,” he says. “I hated pledging my allegiance to a really idealized and unrealistic version of a country that I have a lot of mixed feelings about.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “That you had to do that. That I wasn’t there.”
“That’s not a thing you should be sorry for,” he says, placing his hand on top of hers, pressing it down to his sternum. “The good thing about it is now, we’re the same — you and me.”

“We were always the same, even before you swore an insane oath of allegiance to a country you have mixed feelings about.”

“I know I take it all so seriously sometimes,” he mutters. “Some people can just say things just to say things and it means nothing to them. But it always mean something to me.”

“You swore an oath to me,” she says lightly. “Twice.”

That makes him smile. Right away. It also makes him press his mouth into the top of her head to kiss her there. “I did.”

“You meant it.”

“I did.”
Missy gets a sick day.

Before sunrise, he has to tear himself out of bed and away from the clutches of Missandei’s sweaty, feverish body, which has glommed onto his overnight like she forgot she was ever concerned with being contagious — so that he can go drive Pia to work. Pia was in a minor fender-bender involving a car that didn’t stop at a red light. Her red Miata is in the shop and from the way she tells it, she currently has a new lease on life due to an unexpected brush with death. She assured him that big, positive changes are coming.

He is skeptical only because of history. But she’s his delusional friend, and Grey told Pia he’d drive her ass to and from work at least, for the days that her car is in the shop. He volunteered because she doesn’t have car rental on her insurance plan and is terrible at money management. She gleefully gushed about what Mercedes rental she was going to try out, and he freaked out about her finances because he got a peek of the state of things, being her real estate agent and all. He’s tricking her into saving money, by calling it spending quality time together.

Missandei thinks he’s too emotionally involved in Pia’s finances — “emotionally” being a word that she used strategically. He defended himself by telling her he was doing a favor for a friend — and isn’t that what emotionally healthy people? — another instance in which that word was strategically used.

When he bends down to kiss her cheek goodbye, Missandei violently coughs right into his face. It makes him freeze in shock, and it makes her eyes pop open in horror, before her hands reach up to ineptly brush her spit off of his nose and cheeks. She sniffs back a slurp of snot before she says, “Oh my God, I am so sorry. That’s disgusting. I’m disgusting.”

They’re just casually chatting during the commute, and it feels comfortable until he inadvertently opens this Pandora’s box when he jokingly refers to Missandei as the corpse that he needs to feed when he gets home. He says this after Pia asks him what his plans are for the rest of the day, after he drops her off at work.

Pia is all confused at first, not sure what corpse Grey is referring to because her sense of humor is so basic. He has to explain that Missandei is sick and stuff, to which Pia overreacts and asks if Missandei is going to be okay, to which he downplays and says that that bitch is going to be fine. She’s not dying. She just has the flu or something.
Pia is giving him a careful glance, and he already hates himself so much because he knows he is stuck in the purgatory of social awkwardness. He didn’t mean to sound so harsh by calling Missandei “that bitch.” He was trying to be funny because he was feeling defensive because he was suddenly made to feel guilt, for apparently not doting on or taking care of his wife well enough.

“I was just asking how Missy is,” Pia says plainly. “I was just worried because I just read this article about a woman who had a fever and thought she had the flu, so she slept it off. But it turns out she had a tampon stuck in her, and it was toxic shock syndrome. She ended up losing her leg! It was so sad!”

This is completely the wrong thing to say to him. Most of his friends know he is a lunatic so they don’t say these sorts of things to him. Most of his real friends know that he overreacts, and he’s going to be distracted all day, until he can get home and check her vagina for an infected tampon in a panic.

It’s all he can do, to stop himself from leaning into his anxiety and waking up Missandei with an angry phone call demanding to know all of her symptoms. Maybe she has meningitis. Maybe she has strep. It is so weird that she is sick because she is never sick. Maybe she has some sort of disease that he has never even heard of and thus, there is no cure because this disease is so new. Maybe there is poison in their house because he left out a mouse trap and they argued about the humaneness of the trap before he got fed up and told her to shut her bleeding heart up — and now that is the thing that is killing his wife because that is exactly what he deserves. This is why it’s stupid to get emotionally attached to people. They just ruin it all by dying.

He knows he is fucking psycho, and he’s in therapy, so he does not pick up his phone while he’s driving and he works to distract his mind from the panic attack it wants to indulge in. Instead, he calmly says to Pia, “Nah, man. She’s fine. She’s just lying at home all comfortable like a fat and lazy queen.”

Pia gasps. “Oh my God, Missy is totally not fat!”

“No shit she’s not fat! I was joking!” It all comes out too vicious.

And after a short pause, Pia, who is sensitive, says, “O-kay,” which tends to infuriates him in moments like these. She says okay to placate him even though she doesn’t think he’s very funny or get him, because she is so non-confrontational.

Today, he decides to push it. He’s suddenly in a mood, so he stops rather belatedly and aggressively at a stoplight — they are pretty close to her building — and he asks, “What does that mean? Okay?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Pia turns the slightest bit pink in the face. And then she says, “Nothing. It means okay.”

“Either it means nothing or it means okay. Which is it?”

“Nothing!”

“Okay?”

If she were someone else — if she were Missandei, for instance, she’d already be rolling her eyes and telling him to stop being mental. If Pia were Jaime or Drogo, well, they actually think he’s funny so they’d all probably be making jokes about how sick people are so weak and needy and therefore, the fucking worst.

And he knows that he is the most ridiculous. Time is compressing, and he only has a small window
of opportunity to make amends before Pia has to exit the car and they part ways for about nine hours.

He sighs. And then he says, “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get aggro with you.” Aggro is a term that Pia taught him. She usually frames it negatively, usually in stories about how a mean girl at work was so aggro on a conference call in front of everyone.

“It’s fine,” she says with forced casualness. “You weren’t aggro,” she adds, lying because that’s just what she does.

“Cool.”

“It’s just weird, you know?” she blurts out in a rush. “Poor Missy is sick and not looking or feeling a hundred percent — and you called her a corpse and a bitch.” She pauses. “And fat. That’s like, all kind of mean.”

“It was all a joke! And I also called her a queen!”

“I don’t understand how you were joking!” she throws back. “Like, I would feel really bad if anyone said that about me!”

“Oh my God, do you need a laugh track and people clapping in the background to know what shit is supposed to be amusing?”

Completely the wrong thing to say — for reasons he does not understand at all. He doesn’t know how he had crossed a line. He doesn’t know if it was something he said or if the conversation just reached its natural critical mass and Pia was done. All he knows is that she immediately clams up and refuses to engage with him deeply on anything. He spends the next minute trying to make casual conversation, and she only responds in tight and girly, “Uh huh!”s without any expansion.

It makes him want to ram his fist repeatedly into the dashboard because this is some really juvenile shit. He doesn’t want to throw his friendship with Pia completely down the crapper, so he doesn’t tell her that her communication skills leaves a lot to be desired, and he doesn’t tell her that maybe this is why she keeps getting mean-girled at work, maybe this is why she doesn’t have a boyfriend, maybe this is why she doesn’t yet have a house. It’s because she never fucking takes a strong stance on any fucking thing. She is such a freaking sensitive and fickle thing.

Missy’s trying to stay unconscious in her self-created haze of germs so that she can just heal from this already — but her substitute phone is blowing up, and she actually cannot figure out how to silence the notifications despite trying at least three times. The phone is one of Grey’s old ones. She hates that it’s an Android because nothing makes sense. She can only get it down to vibrate. She’s afraid to turn off this ghetto piece of shit because she has developed a bit of a codependent relationship with devices, but the vibrations that come in with each new message jars her from sleep.

It’s a slew of messages from Pia, low-key complaining about Grey. Missandei skim-reads most of it because all she needs to know is that her head is pounding and she doesn’t want to deal with their crap right now.

She lets out a sigh as her arm covers her face — and that’s as far as she gets before her phone rings for real. She assumes it’s Pia at first — but she’s also not too surprise that it’s Grey.
“Hey,” she says, pressing her cell closer to her ear. “What’s up?”

And then Grey unleashes an onslaught of overblown accusations coupled with the most annoying interrogation. She has to remind him that of course she's still on her period. He actually should know this. Because he was poking around down there just yesterday. She ignores all the hinting he is doing, about how she must've let this happen to her somehow, by not washing her hands or by not eating complete meals or by not exercising regularly enough. He sounds like he's threatening her, when he suggests that she make an appointment with the doctor.

She happens to be too tired and too sick to deal with his bullshit, so she rolls over to smash her stuffed nose into the pillow, and she tells him to just freaking shut up and stop bothering her because she just wants to sleep. She does not care about his problems. She does not care about what he talked about with Pia. She does not care about what thing someone said to the other. She does not care that she was apparently at the center of an argument.

“Grey,” she says, voice muffled. “I don’t wanna hang up on you, but bye.”

He does this morbid math while stopping over at the property to take a look, this one-story rambler in a good school district, with some street noise. Rentals are not get-rich schemes. If they really gun it and pour all extra rental income back into the rental, they can get it paid off in maybe 10 years, after which it’s either a steady rental income flowing in that is not enough to subside completely on — or they can sell it and grab the equity. Even with inflation in mind, it’s not a bad spot to be in. He just has to survive for at least another 10 years to prevent Missandei from having to bear any excessive financial hardship — though he does have life insurance and there is a death benefit that will tide her over while she is undoubtedly very, very sad over the freak loss of him.

Whenever they happen to talk about this stuff, Addam always leads him to believe he’s weird for obsessing excessively over this sort of thing. Grey actually thinks Addam is weird, for not constantly doing so. After all, Addam is a dad. Grey currently only has another autonomous adult to tend to. That’s comparatively easy. He cannot even imagine how excessive his brand of crazy would get if he was dealing with a vulnerable and helpless child.

It’s purely happenstance that Missandei takes a closer look at 2.0’s poop. She feels like death, and she sees 2.0 scooting around on the grass outside — it’s actually not the first time she’s witness this sight, but it’s the first time it manages to resonate inside of her. Missy becomes of those women that go out into her yard at noon in a bathrobe and flip flops and her hair in a real lopsided, asymmetrical mess. She has to visually hunt a little, to find it.

She looks real trashy as she sniffs and bends over to pick up a still-warm poop-log with her hand, which is encased in a plastic dog bag. She lightly smushes it.

“Oh my God,” she says to 2.0, who is wagging her tail against Missandei’s shin. “Baby! Are you okay?”
She cannot believe that she was cuddling with her dog in bed as little white worms were crawling out of 2.0’s little butt hole. It is so gross. She is so tired and feels so shitty, but she’s not the type to lie around and be doted on. She remembers all the accusations that got thrown her way, when she was a kid and too sick to go to school. Her grandma and grandpa would always accuse her of trying to skip out on her responsibilities. Her brothers were mental, always insulting her into getting better, so worried they were that she’d shirk off her education and get teenage pregnant because she had a cold. This is probably partly why she tends to push herself too hard at the altar of her physical comfort and health sometimes.

“Oh my God,” she mutters to 2.0, as she simultaneously and whoozily pulls on some pants. She teeters backwards and then fights to keep her balance. “That is why I’m attracted to your dad, isn’t it?”

Perhaps being the youngest child and never having to be wholly responsible for a sibling, perhaps because, according to her brothers, she was always a spoiled brat that got preferential treatment from their grandparents — Missandei doesn’t really feel overly paranoid the way that Grey does. She’s had dogs before. Her family dogs barely get taken to the vet because her grandparents were so immigranty so they kinda balked at the idea of constantly taking a dog to the dog doctor when they themselves barely visited their doctors. Dogs got fed table scraps, not specially made dog food. Dogs were always fairly expendable and sometimes ran away and were hit by cars. That was traumatizing to her when she was young, but she remembers her grandparents being unfazed.

As such, she just ends up doing a quick Googling session on her phone and deciding that she can probably treat 2.0’s butt worms — probably actually tapeworms — at home. It just takes a dewormer she can probably buy at a speciality pet store.

In the back of her mind, she actually worries and feels extreme guilt — that they could be heartworms and maybe years have been shaved off 2.0’s life — but that’s statistically unlikely, as they give her medication and this is not an area of the world warm enough for a lot of mosquitoes. That line of thinking is more Grey’s influence.

Her lips are dry and chapped because she has to constantly breathe through her mouth. She’s simultaneously hot and cold — and driving a car is a real fucking drag. But she and 2.0 brave the short 10-minute drive to the store. Missy would rather take care of this right away because she’d like for her baby to be dewormed as soon as possible because it’s so gross and icky. The dog’s tummy has been a tad distended because of worm bloat and she even commented on it with Grey but neither of them did a fucking thing or investigated because they are both stupid.

Also, she’d rather just take care of this business so that he doesn’t go insane in the brain dealing with it.
When he gets back home with an armful of fruits and vegetables that he plans to cook into mush and force-feed her, she’s not there, and his eyes bug out at how typical and annoying it all is. He’s been through the motions enough to guess that she’s probably not dead somewhere, and they are probably going to have another argument-slash-fight later about installing an app on her phone so he can track her whereabouts always. Her argument is always that he’s so creepy, and she doesn’t actually want him knowing everything about her — plus it makes all the infidelity hard.

He does not find her funny — except he secretly does, a lot — but he doesn’t laugh and he generally always tells her that it goes both ways. She can know where he is at always, too.

She generally tells him that this is knowledge she is not hungry for. Like, at all.

She excitedly shoves the first pill down 2.0’s throat and feels very accomplished. She talked to the pet store owner and felt all sorts of vindicated over her choice of action. She will not waste money on a vet visit. The worms will die a swift death. It’s all so easy and seamless. And — she did all of this while she looks and feels like death. She’s been getting sympathy stares everywhere even though she is so disgusting.

She’s so impressed with her productivity that she even stops at a drive-thru to buy a burger. She even buys a second burger for 2.0, even though Grey is totally anal retentive about feeding the dog human food.

She remembers that their bed is infected as she opens the garage to their house. She will have to have Grey wash all the sheets and blankets later when he gets home. She will gladly get to hang out on the couch for the rest of the day. She bought a single blue Gatorade to hydrate herself with. She is really nailing this shit.

And when she sees his car in the garage, she feels a flash of dread. She didn’t expect him home already, and she can predict all of the things he’s probably ready to bitch her out on, in light of their most recent phone call. Also in light of his general personality.

He’s sitting on a stool at their kitchen island with a tall glass of green juice. She proudly holds a bag of french fries and her Gatorade as she walks in with 2.0, as some sort of misguided statement. She’s ready to get yelled at.

“Hey, man.”

“Where did ya go?”
He feels sick and horrified — when Missandei tells him about the butt worms. He feels astonished, because he didn’t know his dog was sick because he’s a dumbass. She corrects him and tells him they are both dumbasses because 2.0 has been scooting her little butt for a couple of weeks now. She suggests to him that he should definitely bathe the dog because there’s dried crusted worms stuck to her butt hair. He has so much more shit to talk with her about — like why she couldn’t wait for him to come home so he can do all of these chores for her — but he’s so grossed out and antsy and guilt-ridden about the tapeworms, so he scoops up the dog and they both haul ass upstairs for a bath.

There, he imagines an inevitable future where this dog dies, and he is devastated. He scrubs the dog extra thoroughly as a result, and he pauses to look deep into her eyes, trying to see any cataract clouding. He does not, which kind of feels good, but it is still not satisfying enough.

She giggles-coughs spastically when 2.0, damp from her bath, runs erratic laps around the living room like a stunt dog and then accidentally sideswipes herself on a chair leg with a thump. That dog is hilarious, and she’s still in the middle of trying to control her laugh so she doesn’t vomit — when she feels him press a glass of that green juice against her shoulder.

It tastes terrible because of course it does, but she faithfully takes a few gulps before he decides it’s enough and takes it away, placing it on the coffee table next to her Gatorade.

“You’re so bossy,” she says, orienting her face up so she can look at him. He is looming. Because he is so fucking dramatic.

“Okay.”

She screws up her stuffy face. “Don’t just say okay like that. It’s so annoying.”

It’s surprising — when his face brightens, and he grins down at her. He tells her he has to go do laundry because the bugs in their bed is totally driving him insane, but afterward, he has a couple of hours free. He asks her what she wants to do.

In the past, such a statement would’ve been construed by her as a come-hither sort of statement. A couple of hours free — duh, they are going to bang. But she currently feels like garbage and the thought of getting naked makes her shiver in nausea. Plus, they’re not supposed to anyway.

She tells him, “I kinda just want to binge-watch TV today.”

It’s his worst nightmare. Sitting on a couch and only doing one thing and one thing only — and a very passive thing at that.

He says, “Okay.”

She’s trying to keep her sniffling and coughing to a minimum because she manages to be weirdly self-conscious about her sick noises — but something onscreen makes her laugh, which in turns makes her cough, which eventually makes her gag and fight not to throw up — which manages to
earn a chuckle from the other end of the couch.

She looks at him. He says, “You are such a sad little thing right now.” That makes her roll her eyes at him. But then he adds, “It’s so cute.” And that makes her face heat up in a blush.

She keeps telling him to stay the hell away from her because she doesn’t want him to get sick. He keeps telling her about his superior immune system and the fact that it’s impossible for him to get sick.

The TV is still on in the background. He tells her that he has to get up and leave soon — go pick up Pia. He smears his face into her neck as he says this, and he also adds, “Oh man, you’re freakishly warm. We don’t even need to turn on the heat in the house. You’re our little furnace.”

“What’s nuts is that I’m freezing when you guys aren’t covering my body.”

“I’ll grab another blanket for ya.”

“No!” she says, grabbing onto his shirt when he makes a move to get up. “Don’t go yet. You never watch TV with me. This is so special.”

“I’ll be back in like, an hour and fifteen,” he says reasonably. “We’ll watch some more TV then.”

“Oh my gosh, that would be awesome! Can we watch TV for the rest of the night?”

“Uh, that’s so much TV — but yes.”

It actually kind of sucks to leave her. They were in a good groove, having snacks — she is nibbling on really soft steamed veggies and calling them snacks and that is a fucking miracle — and just wasting time on the couch. She’s not obsessing about some deadline at work — she actually hasn’t mentioned work once all day — and he’s not obsessing about money or death. He’s afraid he’s ruining this by leaving, but she reads his mind and tells him to stop being stupid and to come back quick — but also to drive safe.

He wants to squeeze her face in his hand until she yelps in pain. Or he wants to compress her entire body with his until she yelps in pain because he thinks that she is so fucking beyond adorable today.

Before he shrugs back into his sweater — he pulled off his outer shirt because she is emanating some serious heat and it was making him sweat — he presses a long kiss into her squishy cheek and smells menthol coming off of her chest. She told him that she’s trying to life-hack her way into fewer coughing fits, with real middling results. He thinks that’s funny, too. And he sounds so awkward to his own ears, but he keeps murmuring these uncharacteristically sappy things to her quietly, stuff about how she so cute and smart and hilarious and it all just breaks his heart sometimes.
Both Pia and him pretend they didn’t have a fight in the morning. She plops into the car and cheerfully says hello to him, buckling her seatbelt.

The drive is quiet for ten minutes, because even though they are trying to pretend it’s not out of the ordinary, it is still weird and there is still tension.

“Um, how was your day?” he asks.

“Good! How was yours?”

“Good.”

“Cool. What did you end up doing?”

“Oh, just did some errands. Ended up at home to check in on Missandei for a bit.”

“How’s she doing?”

“She’s sick, but fine.”

“Oh, that’s good, I guess.”

Grey finds that conversations are so bland whenever he has to be on his best behavior, whenever he has to police what is coming out of his mouth.
Chapter Summary

Two men tell the truth in this chapter.

He tells Amari that he apologized to Pia in a real way, and it was the pits. He apologized to Pia by strategically but honestly copping to his sensitive defensiveness. He told Pia that he doesn’t like it when people make comments or jokes about him not being good to Missandei. Only he can make jokes about him not being good to Missandei. Yes, it is hypocritical. Yes, it is unfair. Yes, no one thinks he’s fucking funny even though he is clearly hilarious. But human interaction is rife with inconsistencies due to how they all feel in any given moment. He told Pia those kind of comments tend to make him feel insecure.

He tells Amari he refrained to telling Pia that her aversion to conflict drives him absolutely batshit, because he knows that saying so would take away from his apology and make it graceless.

“So you know how she responded to my apology?”

Amari is suppressing a smile. “How?”

“She just acted super awkward about it, acted like I was saying sorry for being five minutes late, and then changed the subject to something —” He pauses, looking up to the ceiling, fighting to find words that aren’t synonyms of ‘fucking stupid,’ “— that was irrelevant to what we were talking about.”

Amari lightly laughs. “Sometimes the acknowledgement of other people’s feelings and apologizing to them is really for you, not them.”

Grey is scowling. “I want to fix her whole life sometimes. Like, her life could be so much better if she would just change a few simple things. It’s so frustrating to watch someone be inactive. It makes me angry, and I feel like I lose respect for her.”

“Have you asked yourself why it bothers you so much? After all, it doesn’t seem like Pia’s choices really affect your life adversely.”

Grey shrugs. “I mean, I have to fucking listen to her talk about her problems. And then what? Am I supposed to just keep my mouth shut when I have all the answers to her problems? Am I supposed to just engage in this farce where we pretend that she is a victim of the world? It’s such white shit.”

“White shit — explain white shit to me.”

“Oh my God, you totally know what white shit is, man. You already know!”

Amari laughs. “It’s an exercise. Explain it to me.”
As she raps her knuckles against Drogo’s apartment door, part of her feels like she’s already betraying Grey somehow. But then she sees him — Drogo — the clutter behind him, and his somber, tired expression.

He moves out the way so she can enter. She gradually loosens the scarf from her neck and unzips her jacket. The cough that came with her cold is still lingering, wet and gurgling — something she tries to hide behind the back of her hand — but Drogo freezes for a second to glance at her. And then he asks, “Are you sick?”

“No.” She says it a touch too defensively, because the last week of boredom and Grey’s oppressive machinations when it came to anything having to do with her health was a tad much. Today was her first day back at work, and it felt great. She changes the subject right away. “What’ve you been up to?”

He takes it to mean in the immediate past, because he says, “Just trying to clean up a little.”

Today, instead of trying to tip-toe up to more shit about his childhood of nightmares, they spend the rest of the session talking about sex and intimacy. To Grey, it feels like a cringe-inducing slow-motion car crash that happens over and over. Amari, on the other hand, remains professional and unfazed. Amari keeps asking him questions that make him want to shove his fist into his mouth and bite down with his eyes closed.

When asked what kind of sexual fantasies he has, Grey refutes the existence of any fantasies and proclaims that he doesn’t use his imagination ever. It was kind of a joke, but it garners no laughter. So he shrinks in his seat, and he admits that he doesn’t like to have fantasies so he tends to shut them down. He’s been doing that so long that it’s ingrained and second nature now. He admits that maybe he used to be afraid that if he let his mind wander off unsupervised, it would come back with the most fucking horrific shit that would just make him feel bad because he is a fucking freak.

For all of the trouble of being honest, he earns homework. He gets to try and allow himself to have a fucking mundane fantasy — Amari comes up with a real cliched example involving candles and maybe soft jazz, and Grey has to refrain from scream-asking if Amari is trying to fuck with him. Grey is also supposed to try and share his fantasy with Missandei. Maybe also write it down.

Amari asks him if he ever has thoughts of extra-marital sex. Grey shuts that down really fast and manages to be super offended, until Amari makes him feel real dumb for overreacting by reminding him that these are just questions — not accusations.

The feeling of sheepishness actually helps with the next few questions — these rotating questions that often get reworded and re-asked in sessions as a kind of training — to get him used to talking about this.

No, he’s never paid for sex before. Yes, he’s had plenty of unpleasant experiences in adulthood, duh. Still no on the porn. No on weird porn, but really, what is weird porn? Like, illegal porn? No on that. Years ago when they were dating, he and Missandei went to a pornography film festival, kind of by accident. The porn there was really artsy though. No, he has not had sex with a man in adulthood.
Most likely because the option has not presented itself.

“That’s a joke,” Grey says in a deadpan.

“So you have had the option?”

“What? Well, not really. But you have to understand.” He gestures down at himself, down at his lap. “No one of any gender wanted this. Not really.”

“Now, I don’t think that’s true.”

“Well, okay, one person wanted this. And I married her.”

“I can’t tell how serious you are right now — or if you’re mostly joking to ease your anxiety.”

Grey groans. “I’m sorry.”

There’s hot tea on the table, a plate of biscuits — a recipe he said he’s been playing around with — and a pair of paper towels folded into napkins. She’s been stationary for the longest time, just assessingly watching him walk back and forth between the kitchen space and his couch. He’s clearly biding time, and he’s clearly nervous. She’s actually starting to lose her mind a little bit, because he is frankly freaking her out.

Drogo texted her in the middle of the day and asked if she was busy after work. And then he asked if she wanted to “hang.” Having never asked her that before in the entire time they’ve known one another, she naturally knew something was up and she immediately rearranged her life to make it happen. She also naturally knew that she had to lie to Grey, so she told him that she was going to be home late because of a work thing.

“What’s going on?” She finally asks, pushing out this sigh that sounds a touch too aggressive. “Is it something good or something bad? Can you at least give me a hint?”

She suddenly starts wondering if Drogo has decided he’s going to ask Dany to marry him. That’s probably why she’s here, so he can pick her brain. She starts wondering how she’s going to respond to this.

“It’s bad,” he mutters. And then — before she can respond to that — he adds, “Dany and I broke up. Again. Because I drank. Again. I mean, I’ve been drinking.”

When she asks him why he’s telling her this — and she means why he’s telling her by herself and why she’s not hearing this much later from Grey — Drogo generally acts really blase on purpose and tells her that they are friends, just leaving it at that very bland and innocuous statement.

It forces her to clarify. She asks, “How come you’re not talking to Grey or Jaime first?”

And that’s when his facade cracks. It comes out bitter and full of self-loathing, when he says, “Because I don’t feel like dealing with condemnation from some guy who walks through his adult life without a care in the fucking world and some other guy who’s so mentally strong that he just
fucking willed his addiction away!”

“Whoa,” she says, pausing with her cup of tea hovering right in front of her mouth. “Are you talking about my husband? Being so strong he willed his addiction away? That’s funny.” Her hands are shaking — she holds on tighter to the handle — and then she pulls in a hot sip, feeling it worm its way down her throat.

She is trying really hard to respond appropriately — because there has to be a reason why Drogo called her — and she doesn’t want to fail him in this respect. She has a lot of questions — and she opts not to prioritize them. She kind of just blurts out a random one:

“How much have you been drinking? Are we talking like, a glass of wine at dinner? Or are these like, benders?”

He looks like he’s weighing it all in his head. He says, “It got progressively worse. The truck is just stressing me out. And — I know that’s no excuse — but I fucking hate AA. It’s fucking stupid. And, my fault, you know? And God. I don’t know — sometimes it just doesn’t seem like a big deal. And then Dany caught me and freaked out. And then it ended — we ended. Again, I guess. And then I got totally trashed. Which I think makes a lot of fucking sense. Like, this is fucking normal behavior.” He shakes his head, like he’s saying no and disputing himself. “Fuck me.”

“When did this happen? The fight with Dany, I mean.”

“Yesterday.”

“Oh. Maybe it’s not over then. Maybe she’s just really mad right now.”

He throws her a look of disgust. “Man, it’s over. Okay, Missy?”

She softens her tone. She says, “Okay.”

He tells Amari that Missandei is his one and only relationship in life, and sometimes he feels bad for her because of this, because he’s so remedial and dumb with emotions and just even the procedure of it all. He tells Amari that no one else has really ever wanted to engage with him on this kind of meaningful level, and he understands why. It wasn’t like he made it easy for people to get close to him. So this is what he means when he says he did not really have many options. Yes, he slept around a lot because he was a slut, lost out in the world. But the sex was generally lackluster and anger-inducing, and it never made anyone stay. He never inspired anyone to stay. Except for her. Which is still sometimes just real fucking weird.

“Why do you say it’s weird?”

“You’ve met her. She’s like, a normal, beautiful, funny, smart person. She’s like — kind of out of my league. I mean, I know I’m blazing hot. But I’m like, really odd and awkward.”

“Grey, secret? You’re not that odd or awkward.”

Due to the additional amount of grotesque honesty that spilled from his mouth, he is rewarded with even more homework, to do some real white shit — which is to write down a list of maybe 10 things about himself that he really loves — stuff about himself that he thinks is awesome. The items cannot be performance-based, so running, math, cleanliness, and cooking ability are out. Amari gives him an
example, just so that it’s very clear, what is expected of him.

“For instance, courageousness. You might write down that you love that you are so brave and so willing to do things that are so scary because you think these are the right things to do or because doing these things will make someone you love happy.”

Grey releases this tortured scoff. “What the fuck, man? That is like, nails on a chalkboard in my ears.”

Drogo tells her he’s so imperfect — that he’s so flawed. He says it really dramatically, like he’s equating it all to some deep kind of evil. It actually sounds deeply familiar to her, because she’s been listening to this sort of thing for many years now. She still doesn’t know how to respond to it sometimes. Sometimes when she feels irritated by this kind of constant, overblown statement, she lashes out and mocks him — Grey.

It’s still steeped in a lot of newness with Drogo, though. So she plays the part of a supportive pillar in his life and she tells him that he’s just a person — just a human — and that they are all flawed. She does not think he is excessively flawed. She tells him that people relapse sometimes — or all the time. When she says that, she actually thinks about her brother, but it’s a private thought she keeps to herself because she doesn’t want to make this conversation all about her.

She asks Drogo why Dany is so pissed. He smartly snipes at that and tells her that Dany is pissed because Dany isn’t into alcoholism. Missy doesn’t have much to say in response to that — she doesn’t like it when people yell at her — and in the space of her hesitance, Drogo takes the opportunity to apologize, for snapping at her.

His voice is gentler and kinder, when he says, “I think sometimes it’s hard for her to wade in between areas. She’s pretty black and white and severe about things — and morals. I think part of her probably sees this in me as a weakness. I think part of her is disgusted that I am so weak. I think she tries hard, but she probably will never understand why I can’t just get over it because she is so perfect and so mentally strong and the righteous path just comes easy to her. I don’t know. I’m just a fuck-up forever, and I’m just not like the rest of you guys.”

Grey was so busy murdering it in therapy today that he actually forgot to brag about his modest gains. He forgot to tell Amari that he and Missandei cuddled on the couch together for fun — for fucking hours. He did not reach over to grab her tits once, and she did not shove her hand down his pants. He can now sort of say the word ‘cuddle’ out loud without making a face and comparing it to stuff that babies do. He’s on a sort of high when he arrives home, ready to announce to her that he’s down for another cuddle session if she’s down. There’s probably at least two hours of TV in her queue they can watch together.

So it’s a little bit of a letdown, when he gets home and the other side of the garage is empty.

He thinks it’s kind of funny, when he unlocks his phone to write:

Bitch, where u at?
She and Drogo end up talking for a few hours. She ends up slouching on his couch so much that she’s basically lying down on it. She only leaves because Grey’s previously kinda-sweet messages have become a bit volatile. He’s been saying that he knows that she’s not actually at work anymore. She’s wondering how he knows — if that bitch actually installed some GPS tracking thing on her new phone without letting her know — or if he’s just bluffing. She’s also wondering if he’s trying to be funny again, and she just doesn’t get it and is interpreting his attempts at humor as sinister controlling-husband stuff.

In the course of talking with Drogo, nothing really gets resolved. She has admitted to him that his relapse is completely out of left field for her, because she thought he was doing well. In response, he muttered that addicts sometimes look like they’re doing great. That’s the point in it all, isn’t it?

The statement was very disconcerting. She’s been obsessively thinking about Grey and Melaku all night.

She told Drogo that he’s not excessively flawed and also that she doesn’t think Dany or Grey or Jaime are particularly virtuous, either, to be frank. She asked Drogo why he called her to begin with, observing that it’s not really part of his MO to discuss these things. He quietly told her he’s been trying to change.

That kind of stung her heart. She knows what it feels like and what it looks like, to try and change.

“Sorry, D. I have to go home. He’s starting to torture me ‘cause he knows I lied about working late.” She pushes herself into sitting position, patting her hair to fluff it up a little.

“You can tell him what’s going on when you get home.”

“Don’t you want to talk to him yourself?”

He gives her an unimpressed look, as he helps her to her feet with both hands clasping hers.

Before she leaves, Drogo says, “You know — he and I have talked about this — this kind of thing.” He has a tendency to keep his statements vague when he gets personal in a way that must feel very uncomfortable, though he does say things with enough intention that she understands what he’s talking about. “I asked him how he made it stick. He basically said it’s because he loves you that much.” Drogo shrugs. “I guess I don’t love Dany enough.”

“That’s not it,” she says, frowning. “That’s not the reason why.”

He shrugs again. “Let me walk you to your car.”

“Do you want to come over? We can keep talking there?”

“Ah, thanks for the invite — again — but really. I’m cool. I’d rather not right now.”
Drogo relapses

After Missandei tells him about Drogo’s relapse, Grey defies expectations and just feels sad about it, not mad. He feels sad because he thought he and Drogo have been getting along really, really well lately. They’ve been hanging out so much. They’ve been having conversations of substance and not just dicking around when they are together. Beyond that, Grey has expended enormous amounts of effort toward being honest with Drogo and articulating how he feels and what he thinks about things in the moment that they happen.

His efforts apparently don’t fucking matter.

He’s in a funk for the rest of the night. He’s quiet at dinner — and Missandei understands, but she also slightly misinterprets. She gives him the benefit of a doubt and assumes that he’s worried about Drogo. She kindly tells him that he’s a good friend and suggests that he give Drogo a call later.

Their hands are colliding together in her damp curls before he just swats her fingers away and mutters for her to just concentrate on her toes. She balances her her chin on a knee and twists open the cap to a bottle of electric green nail polish as he moves product through her freshly washed hair from behind. They’re sitting on their bed.

This is probably part of his homework. His therapist probably told him to do this — or told him to do something non-sexually intimate and relationship-building, and Grey has interpreted it as grooming her. He usually gives zero shits about her hair. He usually complains that it takes her forever to get ready for bed. He typically never notices new haircuts or hairstyles.

When she feels him use a comb to section out her hair, a thread of superficiality-driven panic hits her temples, and she says, “Ah, so you have to section out the hair a little more tighter and smaller up top because —”

“I know. I’ve watched you do this a million times,” he cuts in. “Hey, use that magazine under your toes — so you don’t accidentally get nail polish on the bed.”

“I never spill.”

“Yeah, actually, you have.”

“No way,” she says skeptically.

“Missandei, just use it,” he says with finality. “It costs you nothing to use it, and it spares me hours of stain removal.”
Her toes are already on their third and final coat, and he’s barely made a dent on her head. He’s surprisingly gentle with her hair — too gentle. He’s cautious and slow-moving and overly methodical like he’s never really done anyone’s hair before. He’s muttering indecipherably behind her. She can’t hear every individual word, but she knows that it amounts to his belief that this is kind of a pointless and inefficient endeavor. She agrees. Beauty is kind of pointless and inefficient sometimes. But she still wants to look a certain way anyway.

He tells her that he doesn’t really care what her hair looks like — and she obviously already knows this, but she still hums along with the admission. And then he tells her it’s fine if she wants to adopt a lower maintenance routine because he doesn’t care.

She reaches up to grab onto his wrist, trying to pause him. “I care, though. I don’t do my hair for you. I do it for me.” She means that she wears her hair natural on purpose, with purpose.

He stills. “Oh, of course. I know. Sorry. I was just . . . babbling. I don’t know why I said that. Of course you don’t give a shit what I think about your hair.”

She’s remembering the numerous conversations she had with her friend — mostly when they were still in college, when they were younger — about the discordant ebb and flow of female expectations sometimes. Jhiqui used to simultaneously love it and hate it, whenever Nick complimented her on her looks or made a point of noticing something — an outfit or a hairstyle change. Missandei remembers the hours of friendly, meandering dissection and analyzation over a few glasses of cheap red wine at a local bar that mostly served beer on tap.

“No, I do care.” She smiles into the bed sheets. “A little bit. It’s kind of nice sometimes — how you don’t have an investment in what my hair looks like. Like, I could shave my head, and you’d probably be okay with it.” He’s probably the only person she’s been with that hasn’t casually mentioned to her that it’d be interesting to see what she looks like with straightened, long hair. Regarding Grey’s general disinterest, she’s asked herself, many many times in moments of frustration, if this isn’t exactly what she wants — someone who actually loves her because of who she is as a person inside.

“That would be so cool. You’d get ready so much faster.”

He’s done a bit of a shit job on her head — the twists are too loose and not uniform — but he’s also clearly proud of himself, and she doesn’t want to burst his bubble. He’s trying not to grin as he struggles not to stare at his handiwork. She gently pushes him down on the bed and rolls over half on top of him. Her hand sweeps over his cheek and she looks him over for a beat before carefully closing the distance between their mouths.

The kiss is comforting and mostly chaste — but she lingers a little bit before transferring her lips to corner of his mouth, holding them there for a moment, breathing in the soap smell from his skin. She can feel his heartbeat underneath her palm, can feel his warm, slightly damp hand brush over her bare shoulder blades. She gets the littlest bit warmer, and she shimmies down to lay her head over his sternum so she can listen to his heart and the gurgling of his insides. She shuts her eyes and lightly
coughs into his shirt.

“Do you know — do you — um —” He clears his throat, which makes her wince because the sound is very loud in her ear. “Sorry,” he says, cupping the back of her head and pressing it back down to his chest. “It helps if you don’t look at me — ha ha, that’s what she said.”

That’s a Jaime joke. Grey is typically very anti-sexual innuendo because he thinks they are gross. He is nervous about something. “Babe?” she asks questioningly.

“Oh my God, this is humiliating.”

She frowns. “Grey, are you alright?” The mood has shifted from comfortable quiet to subtext-addled tension.

“Missandei, just chill and quiet down for a second. I’m amping myself up to tell you something.”

“Why do you have to amp yourself up to tell me some news? Unless it’s bad news?”

“It’s not news,” he corrects. “It’s not good or bad.”

“So what happened that made you so nervous to talk to me?”

“I told you,” he reiterates. “This is not news.”

“Well, shit, what is it then?” she bites out. “What mundane, ordinary thing would you like to share with me?”

He groans in frustration. The sound of it vibrates and rumbles. “Missandei, for the love of God, shut your face for a second.”

She lifts her head to look straight at him. “You know what? I know you think your act is hilarious, but sometimes it’s actually super rude when you text me, ‘Bitch, where you at,’ and also when you tell me to shut my face.”

“You don’t even give me a second to collect my thoughts before jumping down my throat sometimes.”

“That’s not true!”

He scrambles into sitting position, knocking her fully off him. “You were just fucking talking over me when I was trying to tell you something! You wanna talk rude — well, I think that’s pretty rude.”

“Just spit it out, then!” she says, daring him. “Spit out whatever normal-ass thing you wanna tell me that you have inexplicably blown up in your mind and made a big deal out of. Is it about Drogo?”

“No, forget it,” he says petulantly, getting up from the bed. “I’m not going to tell you now because you don’t deserve to hear it. I’m going to write it my journal instead.”

She stares at him in disbelief. She cannot believe the kind of arguments they have sometimes. “Yeah, man,” she says, twirling her hand. “Go tell all your secrets to your diary. I don’t give a fuck.”
She lied. She actually gives many fucks about what he’s writing in his secret diary.

He makes a big show of bringing his laptop to bed so that he can loudly and aggressively type on it as she continues to look at him in disbelief — disbelief because he is currently so committed to his spite. He makes a big show of hiding his screen from her even though she is not even trying to look at it. He is such an obnoxious jerk.

The ruse — his obsessive need to prove a point — wears out its welcome very quickly. He can’t really organize his thoughts under pressure like this. He’s been typing stupid stuff about how girl hair is so hard to decorate instead of actually typing out his feelings.

He’s actually been thinking about the past a lot — that’s kind of what he wanted to tell her — sort of. Specifically, he’s been revisiting moments in the past that could have gone another way if he had the fucking guts to take a leap based on how he felt in the moment. This is kind of the closest he can get to fantasizing — even his fantasies have to be rooted in reality.

He’s been thinking back to the first time she called him and the first time he inexplicably came running to her even though it was inconvenient to. In the moment, he had convinced himself it was because he’s a good guy, and he didn’t want the endangerment of her on his conscience, which was a crock of shit because he typically did not and does not care about the safety of strange women he does not know that well.

Back then, they were only nineteen, and he remembers the way she drunkenly looked at him and the way she wet her red lips — and also the way she drunkenly touched him under his shirt when he struggled to open the door of his apartment. In the moment, he remembers telling himself he was fucking annoyed, instead of exhilarated by her proximity. Back then, he made himself believe that he thought she was a fucking asshole, so he didn’t have to focus on how pretty he thought she was and how she made his heart pound. Back then, he was honestly just really, really scared of the unsurmountable sting of rejection and the humiliation — of what would happened if he reached out to her and then she soon quickly was exposed to all of his deficiencies. Probably subconsciously back then, he was sure that she would mock him and deride his dick and tell him that he misread all of her signals and that she actually was revolted by him and he was just so fucking stupid that he interpreted everything incorrectly and trapped her in his apartment like a fucking predator. He remembers how hard he worked to repress all of his thoughts because it was just easier to.

But knowing now, what he knows about her, he wonders what it would’ve been like if he had the guts to actually follow through — if he had the guts to kiss her and to climb into bed with her when she asked him to.

He wonders what it would’ve been like if he had the guts to admit to her that he thought she looked so fucking nice on her twenty-first nameday and he kind of moved heaven and earth to be at her party and that he checked out her ass multiple times that night as he simultaneously told himself he was a disgusting monster and no one wants to be stared at in that predatory way.

She always tells him she likes that they happened — that they got together — when they did because she believes that things happen the way they are meant to happen. He partly believes she says this to
appease him and to make him feel better about all of the missed opportunities and his general chicken-shittery.

Even his fantasies are tinged with regret and self-hatred sometimes. Even in his fantasies, he is obsessed with course-correction. He’s not even sure that any of it qualifies as a legitimate fantasy.

Out of nowhere — in the dark, lying in bed next to her — he asks, “How would you feel if you learned we could never have sex again?”

Her response is immediate and withering. “You need to expand your definition of sex and stop being so fucking obsessed with your penis.”

“Yes, thanks for that,” he responds dryly. “I actually was talking broadly. All the sex — hand sex, face sex, mouth sex, butt sex, nose sex, cyber sex, donkey sex, whatever sex — every kind of sexual expression — gone. How would you feel about that?”

“I feel like I’m heading straight for a trap that you set up,” she says sarcastically. And then more somberly, she adds, “Obviously, I would hate that.”

“Why?”

She finds this conversation bewildering. She’s trying to figure out where it’s going before he leads her to the destination because she doesn’t want to be surprised by outcomes. She hedges for time and she keeps her response inoffensive, dull, and obvious. “Because sex is a healthy and normal part of any relationship?”

“Then would you go out and find another relationship with somebody else, to fulfill the need?”

“Is this what you’re afraid of?” she asks. “Babe, I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“I’m asking you a question,” he says flatly. “I’m not fishing for reassurance.”

That kind of ticks her off — all over again. “No,” she says succinctly. “To answer your question, no. I wouldn’t be some bitch who cheats on you. I would probably leave you first, because our relationship has become so dysfunctional and toxic that we cannot even have any sort of sexual expression with each other. Then I’d probably eventually end up with someone else because I don’t think I want to live out the rest of my life alone. Is that the right answer? Grey, what in the world are you trying to get at? Are you asking if I value sex over you? Obviously I love you more than sex. I tell you this all the time.”

“I want to talk to you about things. Some things are inordinately hard for me. You sometimes make me feel self-conscious for being bad at shit that comes naturally to other people. It’s hard sometimes to tell you things when you’re always sarcastic or being clever or trying to say shit that you think I need to hear from you instead of just being honest. It’s like, somewhere along the way, a bunch of people just decided that they don’t trust me to handle their honesty.”
The following week, he has to tell Amari that he failed his homework assignments. He failed at coming up with a proper fantasy because it’s like he’s a fish that was asked to fly. His fantasies are kind of a depressing visit to his past failures, visits in which he fixes himself earlier so he doesn’t end up wasting so much fucking time in the future — aka right now.

He tells Amari that he and Missandei have been having the most frustrating arguments because he can never fully communicate what he actually means, and she’s always cutting him off to guess what he means. She keeps guessing wrong. And then so much time gets wasted as he spills words to drill into her fucking brain that she actually guessed wrong and apparently does not know him as well as she thinks she does and she should shut up for a second so he can actually say what he wants to say to her. By the time they work through that nonsense, he is exhausted and also confused — enough that he has kind of forgotten what dumb minor thing he wanted to talk with her about.

“In the past, we used to have these fights and then have sex to smooth over these kinds of fights,” Grey admits baldly. “So I get it — I get why we’re not having sex right now. It’s the right thing to do.”

Grey tells Amari he’s still trying to compile a list of shit he loves about himself, because coming up with a list of ten is hard and he truly does not want to half-ass this one. He is giving it an earnest go and it feels so boastful and arrogant to list out personality traits that he thinks are strengths. Also, he tends to couple his strengths with weakness. Like, using Amari’s example from last week: He is brave — except for all of the fucking times he is a real fucking pansy. He still hasn’t interact with Drogo with any sort of depth yet. He did send out a text that amounted to, “Hey. How are you?” Drogo answered him with something like, “Oh, fine.” And Grey wanted to call Drogo a fucking liar because obviously Drogo is not fucking fine. That was fucking annoying, and it’s on his list of shit to deal with — in addition to starting a job hunt and getting fucking tenants into the rental house. Grey pontificates that in life, there is just so much shit to deal with and a byproduct of aging is that the shit that he has to deal with only compounds. It does not lessen. This is why he fucking regrets not fixing himself earlier. He should have fixed himself earlier when he had a lot of leisure time to fuck around with, time to analyze his stupid feelings in between classes and rowing. Back then, he used to think his schedule was packed. But he was such a fucking idiot.

Amari tells Grey that it’s okay that he didn’t complete his homework. Homework is actually the term that Grey uses and prefers. Amari actually keeps reiterating that nothing they do in therapy has to be mandatory because he always has agency and choice. Grey kind of uses the word homework on purpose to make a mockery of the process. Because he is a real dick sometimes.

When she arrives home after work, she sees that he’s on his way out. He’s wearing his gym clothes and, after he kisses her on the cheek and gives her a hug hello, he tells her that he’s about to meet up with Drogo. He also tells her that dinner is in the fridge. He needlessly adds that she should nuke it or heat it up in the oven before eating it — like she is stupid.

Today is actually the monthiversary of their celibacy. She’s been counting down the days in anticipation — she’s been waiting for the outcome, not necessarily the reinstatement of sex. She’s
been excited to hear what he has learned and what conclusions he has made about this period of time.

“Hey, what time are you going to be home?” she asks.

“Not sure,” he says, staring at her plainly and cracking his thumb joints. “We might go grab a few drinks after the gym.”

She blinks. “Is that a joke?”

He makes this exaggerated I-don’t-know face and then lightly shrugs. “I’m just taking his lead and trying to stay non-judgmental, man.”

He finds that Drogo already expects the heavy conversation and doesn’t joke excessively or blow him off and tell him things are no big deal, which he appreciates. He also finds that it’s far easier to talk to each other when they have some sort of structured activity to break up the awkwardness.

He has told Drogo that it sucked for him to be told personal news secondhand because it’s like Drogo doesn’t trust him enough to tell him the truth. Drogo has corrected him and told him that it’s not about trust or truth. It’s about disappointment and how looking at Grey’s face just reminds Drogo of failure and how Drogo couldn’t stand it when it was so fresh. He couldn’t stand to look into the face of another person who was so important and see disappointment mirrored back and see the disappearance of confidence and belief.

There’s a metal bar with one-fifty pounds of weight on it, hovering over his face, propped up and balanced by the strength of his slightly shaky arms. Drogo’s hands are hovering underneath, ready to catch the bar in the event of his failure. Every time they switch off, they either have to put on a bunch of extra weight or take off a bunch of weight, such is the disparity in their strengths. He is a bit of a weak bitch compared to Drogo.

And Drogo is graciously encouraging when they are training. “Come on, bud,” Drogo says. “You’ve got this. Just two more.” Grey remembers this from college.

With a grunt, he pushes up in a burst and his wrists bend back too much — he winces and tries to shakily correct — the whole unit wobbles and Drogo is waiting it out, which frustrates Grey a bit as he fights to not collapse — and sweat leaks from his face as it steadies out.

“Nice!” Drogo says appreciatively. “Okay, one more!”

“Fuck you, one more!” And even as he grinds it out, he lowers the bar down to his chest in a controlled depression. Going down is the easy part.

Grey watches wordlessly as Drogo swipes down some of the condensation on his beer glass. Drogo
notices the staring — the scrutinizing — and he says, “What are you thinking right now?”

Grey cuts his eyes away, shrugging. “Lots of jumbled things.”

“Want to share some of it?”

“It might not make sense to you,” Grey mutters, picking up his own glass to take a sip. “I’ve been doing a lot of reading — to try and understand. I think that’s what I just try to do with people, try to prepare and research sometimes. But I’ve been reading that AA is a crock of shit — so I’m sorry you were pushed into that so hard —”

“No, it’s fine,” Drogo interrupts. “I pushed myself into it.”

“Yeah, but I think I suspected it was a crock of shit — and I never said anything about it to you. I should have. But I was wrapped up in telling myself that my experience isn’t going to be your experience.” He pauses. “It’s hard to know what to say to people that will not mess them up more, you know? It’s hard to know what is useful to people.”

“Yeah.”

“I also remember all these moments in the past, when you told me you didn’t think you were an alcoholic, because your dad was an alcoholic who lost it and became violent whenever he drank — and that person isn’t you. And I think — I think me and Jaime always made you feel like you were wrong, and you were in denial. But maybe you were right. Maybe it’s not either-or. Maybe there’s a gray area in all. I’ve been reading about that, too.”

“I’m seeing a doctor,” Drogo blurts, gesturing to Grey. “Like, the kind of doctor you’re seeing. And, um, I’m on a medication called naltrexone. And I’m supposed to actually drink while on this medication. It kind of seems counterintuitive, but that’s how it works. That is why we’re at a bar and why everything is so fucking weird.” Drogo sighs. “I don’t know, man. It may have worked for you, but I’ve just been thinking that abstinence is just this fucking impossible road of constant pass or fail, constant threat of failure. All or nothing has been my speed for my entire life. And it’s been crazy fun and mostly destructive. But it’s unsustainable. And I’m just not . . . contained and controlled like you are. I don’t have my shit together like you do, and I never will. And I just keep thinking — for weak people like me — that there has to be a fucking middle ground in it all.”

He has so many misconceptions to clear up with Drogo, it’s crazy. They devote an entire hour to this and stay out way too late on a weekday. He has to repeat himself, over and over, that he’s actually a fucking failure in so many ways, not at all a rousing success of a human being. He mostly stumbles into situations and benefits from other people’s goodwill. Also, he also has started to think that addiction is not binary. It is a spectrum, and he used to call himself a high-functioning addict, but maybe what he really was was just borderline. Maybe it was relatively easy for him to give it up because substances didn’t have the same kind of hold on him as it does Drogo. And he’s not altogether sure he has actually kicked it as much as he substituted in other things to manage his dysfunction, other things that are more socially acceptable. He was a workaholic. He is obsessed with running long distances all at once, which is a hobby that is terrible on the body and very isolating, which is one of his fucking favorite things in life — isolating himself. He lost his marbles when he couldn’t have sex with Missandei anymore, partly because that’s a normal thing to worry
about — but also because he is addicted to how he had conquered sex. He misses that feeling of power over something that used to be the shittiest, most terrifying thing. It was emblematic of how far he had come and how much he had gotten over shit. It is why she fell in love him, whether or not she will ever admit it to him. It is something that proved to him that he had some semblance of normalcy. Its absence from his life is fucking worrying, because of all of the things that it has come to represent to him. There is just so much shit to unpack now — now that it’s not there to blunt out how he feels or what he remembers.

“How can anyone fucking even do that to someone they are supposed to love, you know?” he says angrily.

“Do what?” Drogo asks gently.

“When she got me back, she pretended that nothing fucking happened.”

“Are you talking about Missandei?”

“My mother,” Grey corrects. “She picked me up at the train station. She had candy, and she gave it to me. And she told me I liked candy. I was crying, and she acted like I wasn’t. Then she took me home and gave me dinner and told me to go play with my brothers and sisters. What the fuck was what? Who the fuck behaves that way?”
He arrives home late. He actually wakes her and the dog up with the whirring of the garage door opening. Momo is going nuts and screaming out these shrieks of excitement. Missandei does a groggy double-take when she looks at the clock — it’s one in the morning.

He quietly apologizes for waking her up after he appears in their doorway, bending over to pat their dog. She asks him why he’s so late coming home, and he tells her it’s because he and Drogo talked for a long time. It’s hard to express annoyance with him when he is trying so hard to articulate himself and his feelings, so she just rolls over onto her back and murmurs that his night sounded nice.

He walks over and bends down to kiss her — and he absolutely reeks of stale beer. She braces herself for the kiss, and he doesn’t notice — so she figures that he does not realize that he smells. She’s tempted to ask him to take a shower before bed, but before she can get a word in, he tells her he’s exhausted and that he’s excited to crash.

His body is cool to the touch — he hisses softly when he lays a hand on her hip. He tells her that she’s still so warm and probably still a little bit sick. She doesn’t agree. She feels fine, but it’s fine. It’s not a point worth arguing over.

She doesn’t resist when he pulls her into him, with his hand pressing into the small of her back, tilting her toward him. She’s expecting the kiss — she plugs her nose and breathes through her mouth — and she kisses him back, trying to inject some authenticity into it. She reminds herself that this is who she loves because he is sweet and kind and considerate most of the time. She touches the column of his neck and holds him carefully, like he’s precious, trying to remember specifics of his amazingness.

She pushes back against the open-mouth kissing and sits up. He takes her lead and scoots back a little bit. There’s just this blue glow from their alarm clock, but it’s enough to see his face. She reaches for the hem of her shirt, and it’s a little nerve-wracking because it’s been a while. She pulls her shirt off and she feels her nipples pucker from the exposure and also probably self-consciousness. His hesitation is rather overt and blaring right back at her. The apples of her cheeks feel hot, as she resists the urge to cover her breasts. Instead, she asks, “Um, is it the dog. I should kick her out of the room, huh?”

His hand on her hip pressing down is the thing that halts her from getting off the bed. “Hey,” he says softly. “I know it’s been a month — and you’ve been great. But do you think we can — is it okay if —”

“Oh,” she says softly, now definitely reaching for her shirt. “You don’t want to. Oh. Okay.” Her own voice sounds far away and weirdly pitched. She forces out a smile at him, and then goes back to looking for her discarded shirt as the cool air bites goosebumps from her skin.
“It’s not that I don’t want to,” he says, maintaining contact with her, pushing his hand up her bare side, up her ribs. “It’s just that it’s been so good for me, not feeling the pressures of sex.”

“Oh,” she says, temporarily knocking his hand off her skin as she shoves her arms through the armholes of her cotton tee. “Yeah, of course.”

“Missandei,” he says. He grabs her hand. “I’m not trying to hurt you right now.”

“I know,” she says blearily, blinking hard a few times. “And it’s totally okay. I understand. It’s just always a little disorienting and um, you know, embarrassing — when you take your clothes off and the other person is like, ‘Oh, no thanks.’” She sniffs in a deep breath. “I’ll take your lead on this. You let me know when you want to, again.”

He’s unreasonably chipper in the morning. He’s talkative and alert as she stumbles her way through her morning routine, running in and out of their bathroom, struggling with undoing the scarf from her head without ripping out strands of hair. He watches her struggle for a beat before he murmurs that they can double-team this — she can focus on putting on her makeup and he can carefully untangle some of the knots in her curls.

She feels self-conscious and overly polite as she sneaks glances at him through the mirror. She’s wearing a sheer cream blouse that he picked out for her. He doesn’t think she should wear black bras with these kinds of tops. He thinks she should wear nude bras. He has told her that the silhouette of black peeking from underneath the shirt isn’t how the shirt is supposed to be worn. Additionally, it’s a bit too young of a look for her these days. These are designer clothes, and there is something a little trashy in black bras.

It’s actually precisely because he said that to her — that she wears a black bra with this shirt. She is not trashy, and she is not too old — and sometimes people wear things not because it’s the right way to wear things, but because of how the things make them feel.

He’s smiling with his eyes when she finishes applying her lipstick and turns around. He reaches out to correct a tendril of hair. He says, “You look really nice.”

“Thank you.”

“I like the dark lipstick with the blouse.”

She kind of doesn’t know how to respond to this. All she knows is that they awkwardly went to sleep after spooning for a bit. He fell asleep before she did because she could hear him snoring. And then he woke up without a care in the world, while she just feels this pervasive weight on her shoulders. She doesn’t know why she can’t match his apparent happiness.

“Can I get a kiss?”

Her face automatically transform into a frown. “Huh? Like right now?”

“Yeah.”

“Why did you ask?”

“Because I don’t want to accidentally mess up your makeup,” he says reasonably.

“Oh,” she says dumbly. “Okay.”
In her heels, her line of sight into his face is more direct. She actually finds no malice or amusement in his eyes. He just looks patiently expectant. She’s reserved and a little slow-moving, as she puckers her lips and softly presses them against his. He keeps his eyes open — and she can see him because she keeps her eyes open, too. He smells and tastes a little minty because he brushed his teeth. He still reeks of stale beer.

The lipstick proves to be a big hit at the office when Alicia in Accounting notices Missandei cramming a turkey avocado sandwich down her throat and the deep burgundy color does not even budge. They spend a casual few minutes trading notes on lip primer, lip liner, lip stains, and matte glosses. Missandei engages in the conversation because she’s overly polite — but her eyes track the room and she hopes her noncommittal responses will result in the gentle erosion of this interaction. She’d like for her vanity to be a nice piece of hardware in the entire arsenal of what she is professionally all about. She doesn’t want it to be an entire conversation topic that calls attention to how female she is.

She is caught unaware when her boss asks her why the launch date on the new LVC site is been pushed to next month. She did not know it’s been pushed, but she can speculate why. That UAT team was audited and got dinged for being sloppy and rushing through testing. They have overcorrected in an extreme way and now are testing rigorously and changing the scope of testing every few weeks. They have pushed the deadline three times already.

“I think we’ve reached the point of diminishing returns,” Cynthia says. “This project needs to close out.”

“Okay, I will ensure it closes out next month.”

“Next time, projects should be scoped out with a better understanding of how long testing should take.”

The criticism is actually rather faint and gentle — more a suggestion than anything. But Missandei is still so pissed at Greg’s team for not looping her in. She’s also so pissed at herself for not knowing better and for not being more hands-on. She says, “Yeah, that’s a good point. You’re right.”

She’s not sure what the exact purpose of Moss’ midday call is — maybe he called her just to vent about Mars and the claustrophobia that is sometimes oppressive when working with family members. How these conversations invariably go is that one brother will bitch really vaguely about the other brother’s wrongdoing, punctuated with derisive statements like, “You know how he is,” or, “You know how he can get.” Mars is the more financially conservative one of the two. Moss likes to complain about how Mars is a whiny deadweight that will kill their business with his caution.

Being the youngest child, she’s aware that no one really calls her for advice — not truly. They don’t call her for her wisdom. They call her when they want an audience, when they want someone to bear witness to their lives. On the flip side, when she calls them, it’s typically to for them to solve all of her problems, whether it’s her grandma telling her to let Grey put a baby inside of her or whether it’s Mars telling her to have Grey put a baby in her or whether it’s Moss telling her to ensure that the prenup is ironclad, before she has Grey put a baby in her. They assure her that life is frighteningly short and random sometimes. They tell her stories of happenings in their lives that lead them to the conclusion that she needs to get her reproductive shit together. They don’t want to hear what her thoughts are on any of it — not really.
After complaining at length about Mars and then updating her on his kids, Moss starts griping about Grandma and how he thinks that that woman is not taking her Fosamax because she is so ancient and so distrustful of Western medicine and progressive shit like science.

“I keep telling her to take her meds because her bones are brittle and one wrong move — boom — she falls down and then she’s dead. But does she listen? She’s telling me that her mother never took any pills and her mother was fine. And I was like, yeah, well I don’t remember our great grandma because that woman died before I was even born — probably she tripped on a rock, fell, broke her brittle bones, and died.”

“Well,” Missy says reluctantly. “Maybe you should try another tactic. Maybe she resists all the more when you are making fun of her for her brittle bones. Have you tried just explaining to her why you think preventative medicine or maintenance medicine is important at her age?”

Missy must’ve caught him in a particularly bad mood — or she must have really said what she said in the wrong way — that is, too confidently and too knowing. Because Moss’s voice hardens in her ear and he lashes out. He says, “Yeah, I’m actually not a fucking idiot, so yes, I have tried having what you described as a conversation with her. But thanks for the helpful tip, rich person who doesn’t even live here and who knows nothing about the day-to-day shit that we all actually have to deal with.”

Her side of the conversation completely shuts down at that. He doesn’t apologize explicitly because he typically has a hard time doing so. He expresses some sort of contrition and makes this excuse — stating that he’s been sleep-deprived and extra cranky as a result. She does the verbal equivalent of a shrug. It’s another few minutes before he tells her that he has to get off the phone. He tells her he loves her before hangs up.

Over the next week, she makes the rounds and does her duty with her friends — checking in on them. Brienne is still pretty pregnant and that is still something Missy has a hard time talking about. There are only so many questions she can ask and so many obvious observations she can make, like, “Whoa, your belly button turned inside-out,” before Brienne insists that they can talk about other things besides pregnancy.

Jhiqui is still claiming that her marriage is on the verge of collapse. The urgency and emotion of this has drained a bit since the very first time Jhiqui packed up her suitcase and Arqo and camped out at Missy’s house. Jhiqui being really unhappy with her situation but unwilling to change it is now the new normal.

Doreah is ensconced in the honeymoon period of her engagement still and her ostentatious love really pisses Jhiqui off. For this reason, they have not been seeing each other socially very much. Also, Doreah has really adopted Tank’s friends enthusiastically and sometimes Missandei’s invites to dinner get RSVP’d no, because Doreah already has plans with Tank’s friends. This is another thing that pisses Jhiqui off. She says Doreah’s priorities and Doreah’s loyalties are fucked. Missandei has tepidly pointed out that Doreah is about to get married. Things change in marriage.

Jhiqui got annoyed that Missandei told her about what marriage is all about because Jhiqui knows what marriage is all about. She actually knows more than anyone.

Everything in the world pisses Jhiqui off.

Clea actually has done something pretty cool. She randomly took a month of vacation off of work to travel around aimlessly. They’ve been getting postcards and photos from all over the Essos coast.
They’ve also gotten the occasional inspirational quote that probably obliquely comes from whatever wisdom Clea has acquired from her Eat, Pray, Love journey.

Missy hears entirely way too much about Pia because Grey is obsessed with Pia’s life and often spends their entire dinner together dissecting all the ways Pia is inefficient, emotional, non-confrontational to a fault, and illogical. Unfortunately, Grey’s constant bitching has affected how she feels about Pia, a little bit. For instance, Missandei doesn’t take it too seriously, when she asks Pia how everything is going and Pia responds with, “Terrible!”

Missy leaves Dany for last because Dany’s schedule is packed and Dany is also hard to read and complicated.

Missy shows up at Dany’s apartment and is kind of surprised to see Dany going hard on her elliptical in dead silence. Of all the things she could say to Dany, she ends up asking Dany why Dany doesn’t work out to music. That elicits a non-committal grunt and shrug as Dany promises that she’s got two minutes left before her cool-down.

Missy ends up spending an awkward ten minutes just watching Dany work out. Dany does not seem to think it is weird at all.

They end up ordering in takeout because Dany doesn’t feel like getting dressed and presentable. Missy, on the other hand, did dress up so that she is presentable because she thought they were going out to dinner. But no big. She can adjust. It’s just that she took work off early and stressed herself out rushing home to change and wash up before running back into her car to fight traffic because she was afraid she was going to make them late for their reservation.

The penthouse is dark and the city lights are simultaneously beautiful and isolating, illuminated the way they are at night.

Missandei decides to broach the subject like a freight train because she is kinda exhausted over being everyone’s sounding board. She cracks open a can of seltzer water and says, “So, are you really okay with how things ended with Drogo? Honestly?”

Dany’s tone is regulated and even as she says, “Honestly? I am really sad about it.”

The response is so honest and so forthright and so foreign coming from Dany. It forces Missy to sit up straight and to really listen. And all she ends up doing is listening because Dany is the kind of person that is so smart and always so put together that she already has the answers before they are asked. She already knows that she tried her best. She already knows that she shouldn’t feel responsible or guilt for not helping him enough. She already knows that sometimes, when people are too different, they fight a lot. There is really like, nothing that Missandei can say that Dany doesn’t already know.

For about two weeks, all Grey wants to talk about is the rental property. He’s being a really classic version of himself — which is a person who has a paralyzing fear of failure and of forgivable, normal human mistakes. His anxiety is stuff she’s been listening to for years, and she’s exhausted from her job and her family and her life — but she forces herself to listen to him as he talks about how he’s been choosing tenants based off of his biased gut reaction and also desperation. He tells her he’s desperate to get this shit off his plate as soon as possible that he talks himself into accepting stupid applications, like that of a three-person family with an adult son who inexplicably still lives at home. He thinks there is something about them that is a little creepy but he still runs a credit check and hopes really hard that they have good credit.
They do not.

He tells her that he’s a real fucking dumb asshole and that he wasted money and time because he’s a fucking dumb asshole.

She tells him he’s not a dumb asshole — and he somehow finds a way to refute her on this. She’s tired today, so she just gives up and lets him talk himself into a frenzy.

When she doesn’t say enough in response to his ranting — he gets kind of ticked at her for being inattentive and for supposedly not caring enough about about their future. He’s looking at her expectantly and she assures him that she definitely cares about their future. Of course she does. This seems like a really off-base thing to accuse her of, and it kind of makes her feel bad. But she understands that he is stressed out, and he is sometimes irrational when he gets like this.

So she adjusts herself and starts asking these questions to demonstrate her engagement, but her questions only reveal to him that she hasn’t done a good job of listening to him in the past because he keeps saying to her, “Uh, you should already know this.”

When he bites her head off — it surprises her because she didn’t see it coming, but it also doesn’t surprise her because a number of people have just been unhappy with her a lot lately.

All she say to him is, “Just trust your gut, hon. Sometimes your gut is trying to tell you something your brain hasn’t fully processed yet.”

It results in him getting vicious and saying, “What is even the point in having this conversation with you?”

She feels utterly confused, and she says, “Huh?”

Which just sets him off. He says, “Are you even listening to me when I fucking talk? Just a second ago, you were telling me to approach this shit like I approach work shit — with cold hard logic because if the numbers add up, then it must mean the probability for success is good. And now you’re muttering contrary shit about how I should go with my fucking gut — after I freaking told you that I think my gut is probably super anti-white people like I’m a reverse-racist at the very beginning of this conversation! Come on, Missandei!”

For a moment, she stares back at him — just stunned.

And then, in the face of both of their expectations — she doesn’t fight back. She feels ill-equipped and worthless. There’s no fight left in her. She starts bawling.

In his point of view, the crying comes out of nowhere, and it is totally bewildering and random. He doesn’t think he was overly harsh with her. He thought he was doing their normal bantering where he tells her to get with it and she tells him to shove it up his ass. But instead of doing that, she is literally standing in front of him and just crying like someone died.

“Missandei?” he asks questioningly. “What the fuck just happened?”

She can’t stop her crying enough to answer him. She sort of tries — she sputters out a few incoherent words about how she can’t do anything right — and then she descends into a new wave of anguished wailing, pressing her fist into her eye socket as she sinks to the floor, with her heels still on.
He walks over and grabs onto her wrist, struggling with her and trying to pry her knuckles away from her eye. “Baby, the fuck! Have you lost your mind? You’re going to blind yourself!”

Missandei kind of shoves him and screams at him to go away when he tries to comfort her, when he tries to hold her. She slams her hands right into his chest and cries loudly with snot and tears just smeared all over her shiny face. It makes his jaw drop as he stares back her and starts to wonder if she’s experiencing a fucking mental breakdown. He keeps urgently asking her all of the wrong questions — he knows they are wrong questions because her stuttered shrieking only gets more pained and agitated when he repeatedly asks her if she’s hurt — like, if she’s physically hurt. She has to be physically hurt because fucking nothing emotional led up to this blow-up. Like, is she hemorrhaging blood inside her body right now?

“Shut up!” she wails, becoming more and more unhappy with each passing second. “Baby!” he screams back at her. “I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s fucking wrong with you!”

She won’t let him touch her, and she’s really scaring the shit out of him. He’s actually contemplating calling the fucking police, convincing them he didn’t hit her and that’s not the reason why she is crying, and embarrassing the shit out of himself because he doesn’t even know what else to do — when the crying calms down somewhat.

And then — schizophrrenically — she reaches out her arms for him. He grabs onto her right away — in relief and in pain and also in fear — pulling her into his lap and squeezing her so tightly he doesn’t even care if he’s choking the life from this crazy bitch.

The entire summary is so convoluted — pointlessly so — she knows this — but she tells him every excruciating detail anyway. She tells him about how her dumb brother made her feel like shit over the phone because she just caught the guy in a mood. It’s so typical and annoying and unfair, how she gets to be a punching bag for people because she’s lower status and female. She tells Grey about how everyone just wants a piece — everyone at work is just breathing down her neck about things that are completely out of her control, but she knows that is the fucking nature of work so she doesn’t actually know why she’s so bad at handling such ordinary shit. She tells him that all of her friends find her unsatisfying — Jhiqui is aggressively unhappy and Missandei wants to be the one person in Jhiqui’s life that doesn’t fail to live up to expectations, but Jhiqui has been a real hag lately and Jhiqui is hypercritical. She tells Grey that Brienne and her have been awkward because there’s a baby in the fucking way of their friendship. She tells Grey that she and Dany will never be like him and Drogo or him and Jaime. She tells Grey she’s been freakishly worried that her grandma is going to fall down and die — because her stupid brother keeps talking about that. She tells Grey about her parents and her other siblings and how much it hurts sometimes, to feel used and to feel like a chump that allowed herself to be used because she was so starved for their love. They will not return her calls. All she wants is to ask them how things are going for them. But ever since she stopped giving them money, they have been stingy with life updates. She knows that he predicted this from the very start. She knows that she gave them the benefit of a doubt because she is stupid. She knew she was going to get hurt, and she still did it anyway. And now she and him are fucking poor because they have not been saving money. She and her terrible decision-making are probably the reason why he is always so stressed out about their money. It is all her fucking fault.

He grabs onto her head and urgently forces her to look at him. He says, “What the fuck has been going on in your life, and why haven’t you told me about any of this?”
Her face crumples up a little bit — because she can’t stand the way he is looking at her — and she tells him that it’s all so petty and small — her problems. Her problems are minor and stupid compared to what everyone else is going through. That’s why she hasn’t told anyone about any of this. She’s dumb.

“Yeah!” he pushes out in a stress-induced panic of honesty. “You are stupid. You need to fucking talk to me, baby. That’s what I’m here for. Holy shit, you are crazy. Look at how you let this shit build!”

“I know!” she says, crying. “I know! I’m dumb!”

For good measure — she also tells him that she feels terrible about missing his naturalization ceremony. She kind of hates herself for it. She had it in her calendar and everything — but that day was just rotten. She tells him she also feels bad about their joint therapy session and all of the mean things she said about him and about sex. She said it all in the wrong way — trying to embarrass him on purpose — and it wasn’t right to do that. She tells him she’s sorry that she sometimes doesn’t respond in the right way, when he’s trying to get real with her, and that she sometimes makes him feel small — she feels terrible about that, too. She tells him she’s really sorry for trying to force something sexual the other night — in bed — before he was ready. She is always fucking doing that to him, and she is such fucking selfish jerk.

As he crams his tongue down her throat to stop up the flow of her really sad, misguided guilt, as his hands frantically yank at the closures of her clothes, he identifies to himself that he is about to relapse, and it’s just something he’s going to have to forgive himself for later because he’s not going to stop.

She’s this mess of snot and tears, and she keeps breaking away from his mouth to breathe because her nose is stuffed. She keeps asking him against his mouth if this is okay to do — as he gropes the shit out of her body. She keeps asking him if this is actually something he really wants or if he’s just trying to make her feel better about the other night. He answers her by yanking her hips down and grinding her against the front of his pants, against his erection.

“Oh,” she says, reaching up to clutch his head.

“Come on, really fast. Before it goes away.”

The romance in his statement makes her snort out this wet laugh into his cheek. He reaches in between them to unzip his pants and extract himself — wincing because he’s catching himself on his raspy zipper. He says, “Oh, God,” in pain and then does some awkward maneuvering on the floor, trying to get enough of his fucking pants down. Simultaneously, he’s doing just incredible mental work not to overthink this shit — not to wonder what it must fucking mean or what it signals or what it’s a fucking metaphor for.

“Come on, come on, are you ready?” he asks her frantically, as she shimmies out of her underwear. “Whatever, come on.”

There is friction because she’s not really that ready — but it is still fucking glorious.

His jaw about cracks open and his head falls back when she sits on him, warm, wet, tight — it’s amazing because he never thought he would get this shit ever fucking again. She gasps and then groans and her body is shaking — and she’s crying again.
“Jesus Christ, Missandei. You’re a basketcase today. Why are you crying again? How can you cry when I love you so fucking much.”

“I thought we were gonna go an entire year without this,” she confesses, tightening her arms around him, also clenching herself around him.

“Baby? Me too.” He shakes his head, still reeling from the incredible feel of her. Everything is going to be okay. “Shit. I thought we were going to go the rest of our lives without this.”

The sex doesn’t last long. It’s not a surprise. He’s been holding in years and years worth of pent-up sexual repression — and it is bizarre, how something that is so bad can feel so fucking good. It feels so good, and he can’t handle it and that is why it is so short.

A lot of familiarity comes flooding back to him. He feels overwhelmed by how he feels about this person. He feels like he can do anything with her. He feels like he has purpose again. He feels like he is in control. He believes in himself.

He finishes with a grunt and a few erratic pumps. It feels so immense — his fingers are trying to break into her skin and she looks dazed and shell-shocked, with her mouth ajar and evidence of her meltdown still written all over her puffy face. He palms her cheek gently and makes her look at him. He tells her he has totally fucked up — they weren’t supposed to have sex, and especially not like all volatile like that. And it’s so adorable to him, how worried and scared she looks in response to his admission. She’s worried that she has caused a setback in his healing. Her investment in him is so bewilderingly immense — often at cost to herself. She is so dumb and so crazy for how much she loves him.

He pulls out of her and tucks himself — uncomfortable, raw, and sticky — back into his pants and zips up. She starts to gather her shoes, which fell off in the commotion. He stops her and then pushes his hand in between her bare legs. That sex was more for him than it was for her — if he is truthful with himself. He tells her this — tells her that he capitalized on a moment.

Her expression is pained and torn and a little bit confused — and turned on. He tells her he has already fucked up, and he’s going to cop to it later in therapy. And later, perhaps things will shift and change. But right now, he is just going to ride out his fuck-up. He tells her he fucking misses having sex with her — like he doesn’t know that she’s been wanting to hear this from him. But he’s been thinking that if he voices it — he’s going to crack and it’s just going to be harder to move forward.

He kisses his way down her body. She knows where he’s going, so she says, “Oh, God.”
The baby shower

Chapter Summary

Grey and Missandei go to a baby shower

Grey tells her he doesn’t know why he has to be subjected to this. She’s not sure how to answer him — because she’s not sure why this guy constantly sounds like he thinks he’s special and should be exempt from attending mundane social obligations.

They get to spend the afternoon with all of Jaime and Brienne’s family and friends at Jaime’s dad’s house — because Jaime’s sister hijacked Brienne’s baby shower and, in Jaime’s words, made it pointlessly really ostentatious and overblown.

“Awesome,” Grey says, driving slowly and popping his gaze out the window to look at the ginormous houses they are driving past in the gated community that Jaime used to live in, that Jaime’s dad still lives in. “Missandei, if we’re about to get caught in some sort of ‘Get Out’ situation, just know that I want you to do your best to get the fuck on outta here before the auction, even if you have to leave me behind to be brainwashed.”

“Hon, I think there’s a Black family who actually lives here —” she says, peering at a man in glasses who is actually staring right back at her, waving kindly before he ducks into his own car.

“What?” Grey cracks. “No, there’s not.”

When they roll up to the house, there are tons of cars parked off to the side and also a valet who patiently waits as Grey starts lowering the window on his side. He mutters, “Holy shit, for the record, I’m really glad we got them a scrap of fabric.” Grey is referring to the yellow box sitting at her feet that he wrapped before they left their house — a fleece baby blanket.

The baby shower is distinctly adult. There are themed cocktails and a wait staff passing around hor d’oeuvres, for instance. “You know what this kind of reminds me of?” Grey asks, shoving a endive goat cheese boat into his mouth without really tasting it. He’s gesturing to the gender neutral decor that Cersei’s event planner put together. He’s gesturing to the mini vases of fresh white carnations decorating the area around the fruit and cheese plate that he snatched the endive from. “This reminds me of your twenty-first nameday party. Because it’s also a pretentious-looking, fancy-pants party.

She completely ignores the baiting insult. He has a sly look in his eye so she doesn’t want to give him the satisfaction of rising to the occasion. She’s not sure if they’re going to be fed a full meal or if it’s just going to be appetizers, so she’s been debating whether or not to go ham on the food like Grey is. Instead, she says, “Aw, that was a fun night.” She says that because she remembers how happy and excited she felt — when he showed up.
He looks at her quizzically. “Was it? I remember it being stressful and awkward.”

“We had a sleepover and bonded,” she points out. “And then I got a free breakfast from Jhiqui the morning after.”

“Oh yeah. The steak.”

“Yeah, it was not yummy. What was I thinking? Diner steak!”

“You looked real good eating it, though,” he says, smearing a soft cheese on a large crouton, before topping it with salami. He crams that into his mouth, too. “The gagging,” he says with his mouth full. “The hacking, the heavy breathing.” And then — horrifically — he actually mockingly imitates the heavy breathing and gagging, as he remembers it.

“I was so hungover!” she says, trying not to laugh, swatting at him. She currently finds him kind of hilarious right now. His commentary has been constant, and it has been biting.

A number of people around them have kind of furtively been watching Grey, evidently impressed that he can eat without self-consciousness at this kind of party. The cheese platter was really nicely arranged when they got there. Someone worked really hard on it. He is destroying it.

“Oh, cool, they invited both Drogo and Dany, and there is a lot booze around,” Grey mutters under his breath, looking across the room. “Smart. You know what that reminds me of? Our wedding. Babe, do you want me to make you a cracker? The last combo I made was fucking delicious.”

She really does laugh at that — as Drogo walks up to them, perhaps hustling extra so that he could claim them before Dany does.

“What’s the joke?” Drogo asks when he’s within earshot, grinning. He’s wearing a shirt with buttons. He’s already holding a glass of sangria. He holds it up to them, as if they say cheers or bottoms ups. And then he takes the smallest of sips. She completely doesn’t understand his treatment due to lack of information, but Grey is on board with it, so she has forced herself not to question it.

“Oh my gosh, you look so good, Drogo!” she blurts out in a rush. And he does. The last time she saw him, he looked ragged and tired and depressed — and unshowered. Today, he looks clean and bright and tan and relaxed and groomed. She reaches out to touch the ends of his hair. “So handsome today.”

“That’s the joke?” Drogo asks, chuckling. “That I look nice?”

“Um, I look real good, too,” Grey says dryly. “Hello, have you checked this shit out yet?” He holds open the flaps of his blazer to show her the fit.

She suppresses another smile, reaching out to wipe away a crumb from his face, smoothing her hand down his warm chest, patting him there. She says, “Yeah, but you know that you always look super wonderful to me.”

“Oh, yeah man. How did you get so lucky?”

“Man,” Drogo says, scanning the busy room, trying to pick out people he recognizes. “I really don’t wanna be playing baby games and hobnobbing with Jaime’s people. Man,” he adds, addressing Grey specifically, “There’s Jaime’s uncle. Do you think he remembers us as the two assholes that caused him to get woken up in the middle of the night to call the police chief because we got into a bar fight? Well, you got into a bar fight, and Jaime and I saved your ass.”
“Do I know this story?” Missandei asks, pursing her lips as she tries to remember.

“Yeah,” Drogo says, suddenly laughing like a mack truck. “It was Daven’s nameday. Dovoeddi was real messed up and dry-fucking some frat guy’s smokeshow of a girlfriend — right in front of the guy! The guy got pissed and tried to beat Grey’s face with a glass bottle. Bieber’s hand jumped in front of that bullet.”

“Thanks for that, D,” Grey says, rolling his eyes. “Thanks for telling that story in that way, to my fucking wife.” He then shrugs and then, directly to her, he says, “Don’t forget — you ended up getting the ultimate prize.” After a pause, he says, “The prize is me.”

She thinks that these kinds of stories — when they do pop up — which is usually when Drogo feels like being a tool and messing with her for his own amusement — don’t really make her jealous as much as they make her feel kind of uncomfortable and awkward.

She ends up reaching out to shove Drogo back as best as she can with one hand because the other is holding her drink. She says, “Drogo, you are so annoying!”

He’s cracking up. He’s giggling like a ridiculous man.

The baby shower has the social awkwardness of a networking event, in the sense that a bunch of people trapped together in a finite space must make small-talk to pass the time in order to accomplish a singular goal. In this case: watching Brienne and Jaime get cute banal baby junk they probably do not need.

She tries not to rely on Grey’s company at these sorts of things. She tries not to be one of those couples who are attached at the hip and cannot stand to be apart. She leaves him at the fridge to continuing chatting with — believe it or not — Jaime’s dad and Jaime’s uncle. Grey likes to act like Jaime’s dad hates him because Jaime’s homophobic dad thinks Jaime and him were in a gay relationship that pivoted around Grey’s poverty lifestyle, but she has observed that Jaime’s dad is super polite to Grey, makes reasonable inquiries, and when Grey admitted that he is no longer handing Tywin’s accounts due to the fact that he was laid off from his company, Tywin and Kevan actually expressed empathy and actually gave him an abstract pep-talk. They told him things in life generally happen for a reason.

It’s impossible to get to Brienne because there is like, basically a line forming of people who want an audience with her. Jaime is similarly hard to nail down — he’s been sweating buckets, trying to navigate between his family, Brienne’s family, the people he works with, and also the people Brienne works with. In a very brief and breathless hello near the kitchen island, Jaime mumbles to her that his dad is very one-percent and likes to say a bunch of one-percent-y stuff, like racist unsympathetic stuff. So watch out! She cuts in and tells Jaime that his dad has been fairly nice to her, actually. But Jaime insists that his dad really, really sucks. Jaime says that he is losing street cred with his coworkers by the minute — he regrets letting them be invited. He also tells her that he he fucking loves that Connie is fucking introducing herself to people as his housekeeper.

After the brief bit of constrained bitching, Jaime apologizes and says he has to run off to fulfill more hosting duties. Before leaving though, he casts a suspicious glance at Drogo’s back and asks her, “What the fuck is going on there?” Then he shakes off his own question and mutters, “I have to catch up with that guy.”
She meets new people — Jaime’s coworkers mostly — they are really nice and seem like really cool people. But what is typical of these sorts of interactions is that things stay pretty superficial and surface-lying. She tries and smiles and laughs at her own really bland jokes — the go-to is how this is the fanciest baby shower she’s *ever* been to.

She and Grey reunite again when they cross paths with Brienne’s dad, who immediately asks them when *they* are going to have a baby like he gives no shits about decorum. Missy is blindsided by the question and also by how pointed it is, so she starts saying, “Ummm . . .” drawing out that syllable *forever* as she tries to think of what to say.

Grey helps out by shrugging and saying, “Dunno.”

“I know you kids these days have different priorities, but I’m telling you, you need to start thinking about it. Brienne’s mom and I had her later in life, and I’m telling you, it was hard for her to be an only child. You guys really need to plan for at least two children. And also, by the time Brienne came along, I was old and tired. It’s better when you are young and have the energy.”

“Sir, I hear you — I do,” Grey says casually. “But I think getting pregnant would really ravage Missandei’s body and make her get really fat. She already carries it in her hips and butt when she gains weight.”

Her jaw drops, because she doesn’t realize he is joking around at first.

“Son,” Selwyn says. “You need to learn that it’s what on the inside that counts about a woman — and I *know* you are fucking around with me, you little shit.” Selwyn roughly claps Grey on the back, chuckling. “Do you and Jaime practice this act together or what? Just fucking awful.”

They are then held hostage as Brienne and Jaime painfully make their way through the deluge of presents. Everything takes forever because everything warrants a comment, and everything needs to be passed around.

Jaime and Brienne get just a bunch of impractical stuff — heated changing mats, nanny cams, animatronic teddy bears, stainless steel bars for when the kid starts teething —

Missy knows that it’s completely game over, when Jaime opens a gift from his dad’s housekeeper and finds that it’s a quilt — a handmade quilt with a bunch of panels that have special meaning that Jaime recognizes away. The guy gets *emotional* and becomes speechless and just about starts crying right in front of all of them as he fights through the sea of his guests to hug Connie.

She feels Grey squeezing her knee to get her attention. He leans over and into her ear, he whispers, “Now I really can’t wait for them to open the very affordable scrap of store-bought fabric that we got for them.”
They leave with a bag of party favors — a bunch of chocolate, a lavender scented candle because lavender promotes restful sleep, and a silver-plated keychain in the shape of a baby rattle — it actually rattles and Grey shoots her a look when they are safely in their car and says, “What are we actually supposed to do with this shit?”

She states the obvious, which is that she will eat the chocolate and also use the candle as her new bathtime candle. It’s actually a really nice candle. It’s one of those expensive designer soy candles. She never would buy this kind of candle for herself because it would seem too frivolous, so it’s kind of neat that one kind of fell into their laps. She tells him she actually cannot wait to get home and run the tub so she can use her new candle.

“You are such a girl sometimes,” he mumbles, shaking his head.

They drive in companionable silence for a little bit. She keeps opening and closing the candle tin to take big whiffs of the scent, trying to analyze it before capping it again. The straps of her shoes have been bothering a little bit, so she bends over to unbuckle and slip off the heels.

“Babe, can I talk to you about something?” Something’s actually been niggling in the back of her mind for a while now.

“Yeah, man,” he says, almost right away. “Of course. You can tell me anything.”

She realizes she’s been resorting to her old habits of suppressing feelings and worries in times of stress. She realizes that she has been working a little bit hard to be the cool, chill girl again — even though it goes against her very nature. With her recent meltdown, she realizes she went on auto-pilot, just always trying not to burden him.

“I don’t think I like it when I hear stories about the other women you’ve been with?” She doesn’t know why she framed it like a question. Probably because she is lame.

“Oh shit!” he says, tilting his head back and laughing. “I seriously thought you were gonna bring up us having babies, baby. And I got all nervous!” He snickers, lifting a hand off the steering wheel to give her a pat on the thigh before shoving his hand in between her legs — for the sake of comfort, not sex. “Yeah, I’m sorry about Drogo,” he says. “He is sometimes a jerk. And I don’t particularly like hearing the stories, either. I can ask him to stop.”

“Oh, don’t. I don’t want Drogo to know he’s gotten to me.” She winces right as she says it. Because it sounds so juvenile and stupid.

“Oh, no big deal. If he misbehaves, I can just bring up his own atrocious dating history in front of Dany — see how he likes it.”

She haltingly tells him that the stories probably make her feel insecure. It’s like, while he was out having fun with these other girls, where was she? — already in his life, pining for him like a dork, dressing up deliberating before each tutoring session like she was desperate, trying not to feel hurt when he wasn’t giving her the time of day. She might be feeling a little bit possessive and maybe actually a little bit jealous — maybe — she also hasn’t thought it all out. But Drogo watched all of this. She was texting back and forth with Drogo all the time, awkwardly asking after Grey all the time. It was pathetic and embarrassing. And now Drogo keeps bringing it up whenever she gets too big for her britches — like, whenever she gets too confident and self-assured, he brings up old history to make her squirm in her seat. She feels like she’s the butt of the joke in these stories — and that is why Drogo keeps telling them — “Because he thinks it’s funny that I acted like such a fool.”

“Drogo makes fun of everyone, though. I wouldn’t take it personally. That’s like, his sense of
humor. It’s like, you’re one of the crew — if Drogo likes you enough to mess with you. You’re in his good graces.”

“I know. I get that. But I still feel embarrassed, all the same.”

“I don’t think that’s something you should feel embarrassed about. Like, we’re a couple now, so there’s nothing for you to really be jealous about or insecure about.”

He’s basically telling her that she is being irrational — in a nice way.

She still feels this weight in the bottom of her gut. She feels stupid for bringing up ancient history. She suspects that what she really wants from him is really unfeminist and shameful. She probably wants him to stop the car, pull over to the side of the road, and declare to her that he was deeply in love with her and pining for her in those moments, too. It was just a bunch of external factors that conspired against them. She probably wants him to grab her and kiss her passionately to assuage her insecurities. She thinks that what she should actually be content with is honesty. Because she is an adult. She should be okay with the fact that she was a little weirdo and that she constantly freaked him out and scared him with her intensity and her feelings for him. That is sometimes the reality of love stories.

She decides to drop it because she is probably making a big deal out of nothing. She says, “Yeah, you’re right. And I know it’s kind of a silly, illogical response — to feel bad. I know it’s in the past, and that what we have in the present is really special.”

The next time Grey sees Amari, he’s riding high on victory. He has now fully drunk the therapy Kool-Aid. He buys into it now. He will go through the entire process and the entire plan without complaint and petty bitching now. He will talk and talk and talk and talk about his sad shit until he is all better and his dick will be so hard and so consistent that they could fucking use it as a sundial and tell time with it.

He’s pretty fucking excited to tell Amari that he totally fucked up and messed up and lost self-control and had sexual relations with his wife in order to avoid resolving an emotional conflict with her. And it felt fucking fantastic. He remembers why he used to do this shit all the time. It’s because having sex with her is fucking awesome.

“You had penetrative sex? You maintained an erection?” Amari asks.

“Um, yeah man.”

“Wow,” Amari says, looking at Grey appraisingly. “You know what this means, right?”

Grey narrows his eyes. He’s expecting another homework assignment. Probably one that doesn’t involve more sex. “What does it mean?”

“That I am the best therapist. In the world. And you need to apologize to me for all of the times you aggressively doubted and questioned my credentials and called what I do pseudoscience.”

Grey is shocked into laughing — his eyes widening in appreciation. “Man,” he says around his chuckles. “I only said that pseudoscience stuff at the beginning. And don’t rest on your laurels quite yet, man. Missandei and I haven’t been able to replicate those results since. I apparently only get the best hard-ons when I’m in an extremely heightened emotional state of distress.” Grey points to his
own head, to his brain. “So please figure out how to fix that unpleasantness. And I’m sorry for calling what you do pseudoscience.”

“Grey — this is great. I’m really happy for you — for a number of things, not just that you had sex with your wife.”

“Man! I’m happy for me, too!”

For the rest of the session, Grey is very amenable and forthcoming with the details of his sexual history. He tells Amari that the first time he had sex by choice, he was thirteen years old and the girl was also very young. His aunt had already died. He couldn’t get it in the girl for the longest time because he didn’t understand anything about foreplay so his frustration and panic and her confusion morphed together into this fraught fever pitch. When it happened, it was blessedly short and like nothing he expected. She made the unfortunate mistake of asking him if that was it. He went psycho and yelled at her and maybe called her a whore, which made her cry and scream-ask him what the fuck was wrong with him. That really freaked him out, and he was positive that if she could detect that something was really fucked up about him just through very brief sex — then every person he’d ever have try and have sex with would also be able to easily detect this about him. Like, there is something so vulnerable in sex. In sex, there are just some things he never got good at hiding about himself.

It only got progressively worse, because fear probably builds on itself. There were these hopeful moments in his teens when he thought he could be normal, that maybe one day someone out there could love him — he was really fucking melodramatic and his emotions were out of control when he was a kid — so he’d made these bumbling attempts to court girls. They were all terrible and disastrous and he was sometimes a real dick, and all the people in his life who got frustrated with him just kept asking him what the fuck was wrong with him — which in turn really frustrated him because he had lived through the most atrocious shit and he got no grace for it. Just more grief.

Morphine really blunted and smoothed over his emotional volatility. It really put this cloud in between the trauma and his new, mundane, ordinary life. With it, it didn’t hurt so badly all the time and he was able to think about other things, instead of just being hyperfocused on how unfair everything was and how sad and angry that made him. With morphine, he kind of became a good student and he was kind of able to socialize. He like, joined a dance crew on morphine. In hindsight, he can see that it served to calm his anxiety, and he was self-medicating. In hindsight, he can see that he used it as a tool to teach himself not to feel when it’s inconvenient to.

He was also able to have penetrative sex on it — because it blocked out the noise in his mind. It’s kind of crazy to look back on it all right now — because he distinctly remembers moments in his youth where he felt really great and really victorious, because he had conquered the shitty hand he had been dealt — all by himself. Like, back then, it never really occurred him that it was really unsustainable and unhealthy, to shove a drug up his butt in order just to cope and get by just enough.

In hindsight, meeting Missandei when he was nineteen was one of the best things to ever happen to him because that bitch got him all hopeful about life again. But at the time, that shit was just terrible because he thought he knew how the story ended. Of course it would end like how everything else ended — it would end with her scream-asking him what the fuck was wrong with him and then leaving.

Missandei had an attraction to him that kind of defied human logic. He obviously immediately
thought she was just fucking scorching hot because young Missandei was a really insecure Missandei and insecure Missandei wore the most ridiculous, skin-baring clothes — and so he immediately shut that horny shit down because he had to deal with her for nine entire fucking months. It wasn’t like he could hit it and quit it, because he had to fucking ace his Summer Tongue class, and she was a really good tutor. Like, priorities — he had them.

She was just fucking amazing. She made him laugh, and no one ever made him laugh except Drogo and Jaime and Daven and Addam. But she was a girl, and he thought she was funny and really nice. She also kept low-key hitting on him, and he kept low-key rejecting her advances. That’s what he means when he says she had an attraction to him that defied human logic. What kind of ridiculous person would just keep coming back to the well of rejection, time and time again?

“Have you asked her this?” Amari cuts in. “Asked her why?”

“Oh yeah,” Grey says. “She said she had really low self-esteem, and her brother died in front of her in a rather traumatizing way and her family lost its head of household soon after. She said she was partially so attracted to me because I was so emotionally closed off and challenging, and she thought she could save me and heal me — in a way that she could not do with her own family.”

“Wow.”

Grey grins, orienting his gaze off the far wall. He’s remembering something else. “She also liked the way I looked in t-shirts. She told me that. She was a bit of a superficial bitch. Oh, I guess I mean she is a bit of a superficial bitch. Oh my God, I love her.”

He tells Amari that the first time he had penetrative sex with Missandei, she was pissed, and he was also super pissed. She was really jealous because she caught him with another girl, and he wanted to be like, ‘Bitch, you don’t own me. I ain’t your boyfriend.’ And then he got really jealous because he remembered that she went on a date — with one of his best friends! So he was raging about what kind of messed up shit that was and what a hypocritical bitch she was. There he was, just doing his very fucking best to be a good guy and to do the right thing — like, not ruin a really nice friendship by banging her — and then these assholes in his life go throw it in his face by probably falling in love with each other and being happy and normal and healthy together forever while he’s just always on the outside.

He was so angry at her because he was about to lose her in spite of his best efforts at not self-sabotaging — and it felt completely out of his control — that he fucked her. In a car. It was so scary — sex back then was so scary. It was so scary because it always felt like he was on the cusp of being devastated, all the time. So he vowed never to relapse and do it with her again. He figured the itch was finally scratched. They could move forward all normal and not tense with each other.

The second time he had penetrative sex with Missandei, she was drunk and so the consent was a little dubious. He typically likes to also be drunk, if he’s going to have sex with a drunk girl because then they’re on the same uneven ground. But there was no booze at her place and everything was moving so fast and before he knew it, they were both naked and he was scared shitless she was going to end up hating him at the end of it all because his body is broken and disgusting. His erection fizzled out soon after the sex started, but he supposes it was that initial surge of fear that really pushed his boner into existence.

The third time he had penetrative sex with her was months later — and it was when she found his stash of drugs. He was like, oh no! And he was also scared shitless that she was about to hate him pretty soon — and so they ended up screaming at each other until their voices were hoarse and then they fucked like animals on his bed. She left him after that because she wasn’t into drugs, and it was fucking devastating and he kind of wanted to drown in a hole of his own self-loathing.
The fourth time they had penetrative sex was many, many months after that — and Missandei was super pissed because —

“Grey,” Amari interjects, half-smiling wryly. “I’m sorry to cut you off, but time is winding down.”

“I have a pattern!” Grey declares.

“You do.”

“What do you think drives it?” he asks.

“You tell me.”

“Fear of people leaving me because I’m a shit human being,” he says simply.

“Yes. And what do you think that stems from?”

“Is it too on the nose to say that it was my mom intentionally leaving me with people who hurt me — twice?” He pauses. “Do you think my erections went away because after we got married — me and Missandei, I mean — I stopped being subconsciously scared that she’d leave at any moment? Do you think that the security and health of my relationship was the thing that doomed me?”

“I have no idea, Grey. Maybe it’s that. Maybe it’s something else. Maybe it’s a mixture of many things.”

“What! You’re the expert!” he says, gesturing to Amari. “Don’t you know?”

“Hey, this is an inexact science,” Amari throws back. “Now, how do you feel — now that you’ve shared all of that?”

“I feel fine.”

“Can you use more specific words? Like, do you feel calm? Do you feel energetic?”

“I feel kind of excited, kind of invigorated. I get why we did that. I could hear myself talk and I could tell when I was saying things that were a bit illogical — like, why did I think I was such a terrible, weak, unworthy person just because I’ve experienced pain? Like, I don’t view other people like that, so why was I so hard on myself? Or, why am I currently still so hard on myself?”

Missy learns about Pia’s new condo from Facebook — via a really ecstatic Facebook post Pia wrote about finally becoming a first-time homeowner. There are over a hundred likes on this post and dozens of comments congratulating Pia.

Grey does not have Facebook anymore because a bunch of “asses” tried to “friend” him on it, and it really irritated him. So Missy has to tell him about the post.

And after Missandei trepidatiously tells him that Pia bought a place — at first, he straight up denies it. He says, “No way, it’s not possible. You probably read it wrong.”

She insists that her comprehension is good. It really does look like Pia bought a place. Missy says, “There are photos.”
It takes him a few minutes to work through his denial. He grabs the laptop from her and reads over the post.
Chapter Summary

A lot of sorries get traded around in this chap.

He intensely holds the thin screen of her laptop in his veiny hands like he wants to choke its neck. He’s deathly quiet, and he stands there like that for a length of time that many people would qualify as: Run away, girl. Run far, far away.

Unfortunately, she has shared vows promising to love this person for an entire lifetime, so she just waits him out and tries not to incredulously ask him if he’s really being serious right now.

“Okay, cool,” he finally says, jarringly doing a one-eighty in mood. He casually slides her back her laptop across their kitchen island, cracking his neck. “I’m over it.”

She scrunches up her nose. “Huh?”

“What do you want to do for dinner?” he asks, swinging open the fridge. “You wanna cook together, or do you wanna order in?” Then he shoves his entire head into the freezer, inhaling audibly. “Missandei, do you think there’s a smell in here?”

She tosses together a quick green salad and sears some chicken cutlets in a pan while he obsesses over the smell that is supposedly emanating from the freezer and-or fridge. He’s in between marathons right now, which means he has to work a little bit harder to maintain his preferred weight, which means on any given day that he isn’t carbo- and fat-loading, he is a health nut. His diet is still insane, and she cannot swing alongside him on the calorie pendulum because her body balloons up on a dime.

She asks him to take a break from his OCD for a little bit and eat with her.

They sit side by side on the couch, and she grabs his hand to squeeze it comfortingy, before she asks him if he’s really okay — like, really really okay about the Pia thing.

“Oh, I’m fine. Pia is just totally fucking dead to me,” he says, shrugging. “New rule: No more fucking new white friends. No more new female friends, either.”

“So you only want new friends who are men of color?” she asks, genuinely confused and genuinely inquiring.

“I guess,” he says, scooping salad onto his plate. “If that’s what’s left.” He then releases a dreamy sigh as he stares back at little Momo 2.0, who is sitting on the other side of the coffee table, politely staring at them as they eat with her big brown eyes. “Oh my God, you are so cute, monkey!” he sweetly says to the dog. “Do you want some munchie-munchies? Can I get you some munchie-
The dog immediately loses her shit, wagging her tail and spinning around in circles.

“I’ve already fed her,” Missy tells him, even as he puts his dinner plate on the table and gets up from the couch.

“Just a little snack.”

“Oh, okay. Just disregard what I said then.”

Grey laughs. Because he evidently thinks she was joking around.

After dinner, he tells her that the smell in the freezer is pretty much driving him bonkers, so he’s going to spend some time cleaning it out. She cannot really smell what he is talking about, but she knows that cleaning soothes his anxiety, so she leaves him to it. He tells her that if he goes super late with the cleaning, he’ll try not to wake her up when he crawls into bed later.

In their bathroom, she runs the tap. She ties up her hair, takes off her clothes, stands naked in front of a mirror, and assesses herself. She hasn’t been going to the gym very often — she has gotten a little soft in the belly area. She also has dark circles under her eyes that she tries to cover up with makeup. The older she gets, the harder it is to be physically beautiful. It’s an obvious truism, but being constantly confronted with it is still annoying.

She soaks in the tub for half an hour, hanging out with her lavender candle. She has already written a thank you note to Cersei, letting Jaime’s sister know that she loves the party favor and has gotten a lot of use out of it.

She kind of hopes that Grey would finish cleaning the kitchen early and come upstairs to hang out with her. She already knows that in lieu of an explicit request for him to do just that, he will be cleaning for hours.

The tub is still very warm, but her skin is pruny when she drains the water. The dog is downstairs with Grey because the dog loves him more. Missy changes into her sleep clothes and crawls into between the cool bed sheets by herself. All in all, not a terrible day.

She grabs her vibrator from the nightstand drawer and turns it on. The buzzing is quiet, but also kind of loud. He has not caught her masturbating yet — he probably has a general awareness that it happens, especially in light of the ongoing abstinence, but they have not really talked directly about it. The sparse discussions of masturbation usually revolve around whatever he’s clinically doing midday while she’s at work.

She lifts up the waistband of her drawstring pants and nudges the tip of the vibrator past the edge of her underwear.

It is nice, and it is easy to fall asleep after that.

Missy never really identifies herself as the kind of woman who would throw down for her man out of blind loyalty to him. Missandei has never been literally known as a fighter. An arguer, sure. A
person who has a bunch of long conversations weighing the pros and cons of a situation, sure. A person who climbs on a soapbox and starts preaching somewhat idealistically in a way that is annoying to other people — yes.

But she is not really a brass-knuckle kind of person. Even when Okha left Moss, Missy was full of idle threats. She threatened to kick Okha’s ass. She ended up drinking coffee and having a really lengthy conversation about feelings with Okha. She ended up using her words to make Okha feel bad. That is Missy’s speed, and she’s worked really hard at becoming more self-aware — so she knows who she is.

Armed with this knowledge about herself, she goes to dinner with her friends because Grey’s beef with Pia doesn’t have to be her beef with Pia. After all, Pia has really done nothing to her. Plus, Grey generally seems fine about the state of things. He calls Pia a spineless twit in casual conversation, but there’s a lack of heat and a lack of anger in his words. He says it like it’s just a fact.

She walks into the restaurant kind of expecting Pia to act contrite and a little weird because she feels bad. But actually, Pia is actually completely normal and just passing around her cellphone and showing everyone photos of the new place and also photos of furniture she wants to buy to fill up the new place. She tells them about the housewarming that they are all invited to — but she’d like to get some painting done first.

When their entrees get delivered, Jhiqui casually asks, “How’s life, Missy?”

And that sets her off. “Were you gonna ever tell Grey you *fucked him*, Pia? Or was he always meant to find out via Facebook? You know he doesn’t have Facebook, Pia!” Missy accuses.

The various conversations die down at the table. Jhiqui mutters, “Oh, shit,” under her breath, and then grins as she waits for Pia’s answer.

Pia is squirming — avoiding eye contact. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Why didn’t you tell Grey you were planning on buying a home *without him*?” Missy asks, basically repeating herself and feeling ticked that she has to repeat herself. “He basically got a real estate license *for you*, to help you.”

“Oh really? I was unaware.” Pia still won’t look at her. “I thought what we were doing was a casual thing. He wasn’t — you know — he wasn’t *my* real estate agent exactly. We were just hanging out and looking at houses and stuff.”

“Oh my *God,*” Missandei says — pretty loudly. “You have got to be kidding me! He freaking showed you like, forty houses. He freaking put in multiple offers for you! I constantly ate dinner alone at home because he was out late constantly trying to help you!”

Pia is quiet for a bit — just deeply uncomfortable by the turn this has taken.

“Did you really think that you were gonna buy a place with someone else and that he wasn’t going to comment on it?”

“Well, *technically,* you’re the one commenting on it, Missy,” Jhiqui interjects, crossing her arms and grinning.

Missy gives Jhiqui the hand. She says, “Okay, thanks for that. Thanks for keeping it accurate.”

The rest of the conversation is shitty. Missandei continues to try and make Pia understand why what she did was a rotten thing to do to a friend. Pia is either an idiot or just hopelessly ass-deep in her
river of denial. Missandei doesn’t even know which is worse. Doreah and Clea kind of watch the exchange awkwardly. Jhiqui relishes in it — like it’s entertainment. That also rankles Missandei, but she can only focus on being annoyed with one friend at the moment. Missy even tries to guilt Pia, but it seems to make no difference. She tells Pia that Grey wasn’t going to even take commission on the sale because he is always so stupidly concerned with Pia’s finances, and he was only showing her houses to help her out. Pia won’t even say something reasonable and fair, like say stuff about how she never asked him for his oppressive brand of help — she won’t even say that. Instead, Pia vaguely says that her agent, Denise, has a lot of experience and has been an agent for years. Missy kind of flips her shit at that. She slams her hand on the table, and she tells Pia that Grey happens to be smart as fuck, so screw Denise’s so-called experience. Missy ends up parroting Grey’s awful party line because she is so mad, and the line is: “Any freaking idiot can get a real estate license. Like, any idiot can open the doors to houses and point out granite countertops.”

“I don’t even know what you want me to say,” Pia says quietly, her eyes becoming shiny with unshed tears. She’s acting like she is being attacked here, like she is the victim here.

And the ridiculousness of such a thing is driving Missandei nuts.

“Why don’t you say something that’s actually real. Say that you felt beaten down because he’s so opinionated and always tried to bully you into doing what he thinks is best and that he’s bad at listening. Say that you were a freaking coward and instead of talking to him about it and being like, ‘Grey, would you fucking get the fuck off my balls for one second?’ you just decided to quietly get another agent behind his back, knowing full well that you’d hurt his feelings doing so. And you did this after he spent hours listening to you cry about Peck and your relationship. Do you even know how much he loves listening to people cry about their feelings!” Missandei is shouting right now. “He hates it! Oh, he really hates it! But he did it. Because he cared. And this is the thanks he gets! It’s bullshit, Pia! And I defended you to him! I was wrong! No more new white female friends!”

Jhiqui is laughing now. She is grasping onto the edge of the table, and she is cracking up to the point of crying. Pia starts crying, too. But in a different way than Jhiqui.

It only makes Missy feel angrier. She does not feel bad at all.

Doreah calls her to basically tell her that she was a real asshole to Pia. Missandei is kind of shocked — not over being told she was an asshole because obviously she was a real asshole to Pia — but more over the fact that Doreah, of all people, is calling her out on it.

“You were really, really mean to her,” Doreah says patiently. “She felt really attacked, and it was really uncomfortable for the rest of us to be there.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Missandei says. “Jhiqui seemed to find it pretty hilarious, and she seemed comfortable at dinner.”

“See, this is what I mean,” Doreah says, sighing. “You used to be a person that didn’t say that kind of thing. You used to care if you hurt someone else’s feelings.”

It stings to hear that. Probably because it’s all true, though she does disagree with the interpretation here.

She has a lot of things she could say to this — stuff about how it’s unfair when some weaker woman cries and then the conversation becomes about consoling that fragile person instead of focusing on
the person who was actually victimized.

In the long pause, Doreah sighs and then says, “Look, I get where you were coming from. If it were Tank, I would stand up for him, too. But I’d do it in a calm and fair manner. You came in really aggressive and hot.”

“Oh, well I’m sorry my anger made you all uncomfortable. Now I know for next time, and I’ll just suppress all of my feelings so that you aren’t uncomfortable. And for the record, I’m not even defending Grey because he’s my husband. It’s because I watched him try hard and then I watched him get stepped on. But I get it. You guys think he’s fucking weird and stoic and doesn’t display his feelings on his face — so fuck him, right? Pia feels bad that I yelled at her and called her out for it that she cried. That is really fucking traumatic, and I’m the asshole. I get it.”

She continues to call her monthly or sometimes bi-monthly — every two months — sessions with Terri ‘brain tune-ups.’ Missandei finds herself more or less running down a laundry list of what is going on because the sessions are spaced out far enough that she can pack a session with just life updates.

She tells Terri that work is stressful, but name a worthwhile job that isn’t at least a little bit stressful? She tells Terri she’s grateful for the opportunity to work, because she’s seen how terrible of a time Grey has had not working. She’s also seen what not having an education and pick of the crop in jobs can do to people — it can saddle them with a lifetime of depression.

She tells Terri that her family is same ol’, same ol’. They’re great, and she loves them. Sometimes they are judgemental and bossy, but the nice thing about being an adult is that she is a lot better at absorbing and processing the things they say to her. She knows that they say the things they do because they love her. Of course, she also feels a lot of guilt for living so far away — but it is realistic for her to pack up her life and move to Myr where there are a lot fewer job opportunities? No, it is not. Does she envision a future where she might have to do that because of her grandma’s health? Perhaps. But that time is not right now. Does she feel weighed down by guilt sometimes — the guilt of living better? Kind of every day. But that is also nothing new. It’s something she can manage, and she knows she feels guilt because she is empathetic, and empathy is a good trait to have.

She tells Terri she recently saw a photo of a bunch of her friends together on social media, and it was kind of jarring, to realize she totally was not invited to whatever get-together they were at. They are probably sick of her because she is fucking terrible to be around. She’s not really sure how to feel about it — whether to feel relief, self-righteousness, or nothing at all. Maybe it’s not even a big deal. After all, people are allowed to hang out with without her. It’s a free country and all.

Her parents are not currently in her life — and it’s their choice — much like how it was for her between the ages of eight through twenty-six. It kind of hurts more this time around because she can’t delude herself and convince herself there are a bunch of extenuating circumstances that prevents them from reaching out to her. She’s been slow at accepting what Moss and Mars already felt and believed — that their mom is really selfish and self-centered, and their dad is just weak and cowardly. She doesn’t want to think this about other people — but maybe she has to start, in order to move on.

She tells Terri that Grey is great. She and Grey are pretty great. They’ve been communicating a lot better. He’s been doing really well in therapy and on medication, which has evened out his moods somewhat. She’s also been a lot better at standing up for herself and advocating for what she wants
— loads better than when they were kids. They fight and argue sometimes, but she thinks that it’s healthy to argue, versus sweeping things under the rug and being complacent. They haven’t been having sex — not really — but there’s a reason behind it and his therapist is really great.

Missandei sighs — pausing in her long speech. To Terri, she says, “You don’t have to point it out. I hear it. I can hear it in what I’m saying.” She rolls her eyes at herself. “Everything is just great,” she says — mocking herself. “Just great.”

He hasn’t worn a suit in what feels like eons. He hasn’t had his neck constricted with a tie in a very long time. He hasn’t sweated in wool in a minute, so he has kind of forgotten how amazing wool is at wicking away moisture from his skin.

He stands up when he sees Jaime’s dad enter the reception area — he actually did not expect to see Jaime’s dad at all today. His heart is beating in his throat as he leans forward to shake Tywin’s hand. He says, “Oh! Hey, Mr. Lannister. I didn’t expect to run into you today, sir.” Grey’s first meeting is supposed to be with a man named Tom, who is VP of operations.

Tywin shakes his hand firmly, says, “Janette messaged me to let me know you were in the building. I just wanted to come down, say hello, and wish you luck.”


The interview goes well — or at least he thinks it did. It’s just the first round of multiple rounds. The next interview — with various department heads — is probably harder. He has kind of realized that there are significant holes in his experience. He’s only known own industry or one vertical, for instance. He doesn’t have a lot of management experience, to be frank.

He goes out for some celebratory drinks with Drogo. Drogo needs opportunities to drink in moderation and to let his medication rework and rewire that emotional, Pavlovian response that he has to alcohol — and Grey needs opportunities to practice gratitude. It seems really stupid and white to celebrate a non-accomplishment — simply having a job interview and showing up to it — but he has found that a lot of what being healthy is involves a lot of white shit. After all, whatever he’s all about — where he comes from — has been limiting in so many ways.

“Man, it’s so trippy to see you in a suit again,” Drogo says, chuckling, swiveling his body to check out sports highlights. “Has Missy seen you in this get-up yet?”

“Nah, man,” Grey says, peering at the same highlights. “I haven’t seen her today.”

“Man, you look so good.” Drogo gushes, laughing at how enthusiastic he sounds. “Like, I’m kinda physically attracted to you, right now. You look so upwardly mobile, man. So 401k, baby. You look like you’ve gone through Toastmasters and now you’re good at public speaking.”

Grey rolls his eyes real quickly, suppressing a laugh by taking a sip from his beer. “You’re feelin’ this only because you have been forced into a bout of celibacy. You’ll get over how beautiful I am soon enough.”

“Nah, man. I’m not celibate.”
Grey does a double-take at that. “You’re dating again? Already?”


“Man — that’s crazy to me,” Grey says, shaking his head. “I don’t even know how you do that. Like, emotionally disconnect from sex like that.”

“You used to do that.”

“Not very well, man.”

Drogo raises up his glass to Grey. “Well, we all have our strengths, man.”

She’s running around in the dark. She’s doing the activity that she probably hates the most in the world — not only because it feels terrible and is boring, but also because it’s an activity that sometimes takes her husband away from her and replaces him with some cranky asshole who goes to bed way early and never drinks or has fun.

Her lungs are working hard — expanding and compressing in her chest, causing her to occasionally cough out this taste of copper as her heart hammers in her chest and as sweat makes her face itchy.

She’s gained weight again because of course she has. She is so fucking sick of her dumb, fat ass.

She’s in the shower when he gets home. Momo 2.0 is bouncing off his shins and she follows up him the stairs. The bedroom is humid because she left the bathroom door open.

As he strips down and carefully lays his clothes out on the bed so they don’t get wrinkled, he thinks that it’s kind of a shame that she won’t get to catch a glance of him all suited up. She used to like his suits — they used to stir something in her sometimes, when she saw him in them.

She screams and then yells, “Oh! God!” at him just like he expected her to, when he suddenly opens the shower door.

A draft of hot air hits the front of his body and his face, and he laughs.

She shoves at him with one hand. She screeches, “You scared the shit out of me, you freak! I could’ve slipped and died! Why is this fucking funny to you!”

He’s still snickering as he enters the stall, as he crowds her naked body against a tile wall, as scorching water hits his back. He resists the urge to press into her nakedness tighter — he has decided to take a moderated approach. He says, “Hi. You look hot and slippery.”

“Hey,” she says warily, as he cups her face, tilting it up. “How did your interview go?”

“Good,” he says simply, running his hand up the curve her of thigh, grabbing a thick hold of her ass. He still hasn’t decided whether or not he’s going to try and have actual sex with her again or if this is just another exercise in training himself to accept that sexual expression does not have to always culminate in someone’s orgasm. He is allowed to touch her without real intent. He can touch her just for fun.
“Are you here to just shower or are you here to start something?”

His brows go up at that — at her tone. It distinctly sounds like her don’t-fuck-with-me tone. He drops his hands from her face and from her ass. He says, “Is everything okay?”

There’s a long pause as she shifts on her feet, cocking her hip. She’s like, trying to figure out how to respond to him. And then she sighs, her face drops into a frown, and she says, “I’ve had a bit of shitty day.”

“Oh,” he says softly.

“It’s fine. I didn’t know you were gonna be late coming home, though.”

“Oh,” he repeats, now feeling real stupid. “I was with Drogo.”

“Yeah, cool. I hope you guys had fun,” she says. And then she adds, “I’m not like, your keeper. But if you could give me a heads up, whenever you’re gonna be late — that would be cool.”

“Missandei, I’m sorry.”

In Brienne’s hospital room, there is a super wrinkly, super pink little baby that is the center of attention. Missandei, Tyrion, Tysha, and Grey are there first, having camped out a little bit after Jaime called them. They are watching Brienne be bullied into trying to breastfeed with an audience. She keeps telling Jaime and the nurse that it’s not that she’s gonna be shy about breastfeeding — maybe, maybe not — but she’d rather not try it for the first time in front of their friends and a guy who is basically her brother-in-law. Like, that is awkward and what if she’s not good at it?

“Oh my God, newborns look so weird,” Grey mutters when he gets a chance to hold the baby.

“Support the head,” Jaime calls out.

“Jaime? No shit,” Grey says, carefully picking up the child from Brienne’s arms. “Oh man, little man, you’re so weird-looking!”

“Grey, you are giving me complex by constantly saying that my kid looks weird,” Brienne says.

“He’s cute!” he insists, bouncing up and down a little bit on his feet. “Weird-looking and really cute!”

They all swivel their heads when they hear a soft knock at the door. A small crowd has gathered — Pia, Clea, Doreah, Cersei, and Drogo. There is a mess of balloons and flowers in between the five of them.

It’s the first time Grey has seen Pia in a while. He continues rocking the baby, tilts his head to the side as he stares straight at her — she is not happy and her face is flushed — and he says, “Oh, hello, traitor and former friend. Fancy meeting you here.”

He actually doesn’t know that Missandei threw down with Pia on his behalf — because he’s been a little self-involved. So it’s completely a surprise to him when Pia is really bad at rolling with the joke and her sigh shudders into a sob. He kind of freezes in horror. His mind is telling him, oh no, not again. He instinctively holds onto the baby tighter, more protectively, as Pia starts crying in front of all of them without any shame.
“I’m sorry, Grey!” she wails. “I’m so sorry I’m a traitor!”
The pregnancy scare

Chapter Summary

Grey and Pia work out their little tiff. Missandei and Grey have some real talk about the future.

Jaime hasn’t really been looped into the whole condo thing because he’s been rightly and completely preoccupied with the birth of his child.

Even though he doesn’t know what’s going on, he looks like he is already bored with their petty bullshit, so he wearily asks Pia and Grey to take it outside. He says he doesn’t want all of the unmetered crying to disturb the baby.

Grey hands the baby back to Brienne — casts Missandei a look — this mix of confusion and irritation — and then he follows Pia out the door of the hospital room.

Right outside the door, Pia’s roughly wiping her eyes with her hands as she blubbers that she feels really bad for how everything went down — it just happened so fast and it got away from her. She tells him that she didn’t mean to hurt his feelings — to which he tries to speak over her to tell her that she did not hurt his feelings because he has no feelings — but she either doesn’t buy it or she doesn’t hear him because she just keeps on rambling. She tells him that it’s just that she knows he’s all down on condos with high dues and pointless amenities and doesn’t think she should buy one — and she was embarrassed because she kind of thought she wanted one. She also didn’t want to disappoint him so she went out looking with another agent — just to see what’s out there. And then she kind of put in an offer in on a whim — figuring that the offer wouldn’t get accepted because none of her other offers have been accepted. But this condo offer just happened to be accepted. And then the whole thing snowballed, and she just didn’t know when to tell him. That’s what happened. It was kind of accidental, and she is so sorry.

“What did you offer?” he asks, crossing his arms, leaning against the wall. “Did you come in at asking?”

She sniffs. “I offered ten over asking. Denise said it was competitive.”

He shuts his eyes at that — because he cannot believe it. He says, “What the fuck, Pia? Of course that offer was accepted. Well, you better love it. This better be the perfect place for you.”

Her lower lip quivers as she stares back up at him. She whispers, “The counters are quartz.” She makes a tortured noise. “And they are a beige-y white. The entry way is Carrara — no — travertine. The living room is a triangle.”

He shakes his head. He says, “I don’t even know what to say in response to that. I mean — I told you —”

“I know, I know,” she says urgently. “Wall paint is cheap. Kitchen remodel is expensive. I’m sorry.”
“Pia,” he says, placing his hand on her shoulder. “It’s your money. You can do whatever you want with it. I’m sorry, too. I’m sorry I made you feel like you couldn’t talk to me.”

“I’m so sorry for — for the betrayal.”

“Yeah!” he says, his mouth twitching now, from holding back a smile. “No shit you’re sorry for that! That was not cool!”

“I know!” she says, whining. “I know! I’m weak, and I have no loyalty!”

When they come back into the room, Missandei expects a lot more emotion from Pia and a lot more dissatisfaction from Grey because she remembers the numbers of hours he has spent complaining about everything that makes Pia special.

But actually, Pia’s just wiping at her tear-streaked face in embarrassment, and Grey has both of his hands on her shoulders, maneuvering her like she’s a car. He’s grinning and shaking his head at Pia. Pia looks sheepish and quietly asks Brienne how the birth was.

Missandei’s curled up on Jhiqui’s couch with a glass of burgundy. They have both repeatedly made the same joke about how they’re both insufferable and how all of their friends hate them now — so they might as well just hang out with each other.

Missandei is wearing a red satin mini-dress with a deep V that ends below her sternum. Jhiqui had smartly remarked that it’s a really sexy dress just for a night in. Missy had shrugged and told her friend that she’s worth it.

Earlier that evening, Missy walked over to her side of the closet and noticed right away that he had rearranged and reorganized her clothes. It used to be arranged by article type: tops and blazers up top, slacks and skirts on the bottom. Dresses used to be arranged by season and then by color.

Now, her clothes have been demarcated and delineated. Some of the logic of it was lost to her, because he arranged it for his own sake, but she could see that all of the expensive, classic, designer pieces in shades of white, black, and gray have been pulled to the front where there’s easy access. All of the trendy, cheap, colorful pieces of questionable fit have been moved to the back of the closet.

Nick took Arqo out of the house so that Jhiqui could have a quiet relaxing night in. Nick is — as Jhiqui warily puts it — “trying.” Jhiqui believes that he’s also still not quite getting it — not quite understanding the depth or character of Jhiqui’s unhappiness. They are fundamentally too different, and he still thinks that things can be fixed with behavioral changes. She has acknowledged that she has not always done a great job of articulating how she feels to him.

“How’s the sex? Are you guys having sex?” Missy is asking because their marriage therapist actually told them that in order for Jhiqui to get in the mood for more sex, Jhiqui just needs to have more sex. Sex builds on sex apparently.
Jhiqui gives her a half smile and nods approvingly. “We had sex in a car last weekend because we had a babysitter.”

“Oh, that sounds fun and exciting.”

“It was uncomfortable. He asked a lot of questions, and I did not finish,” Jhiqui says without emotion, twirling her wine in her glass. “The space was tight.”

Missandei sucks in a gulp of tannins and acid. “What kind of questions was he asking?”

“Ha! He was asking if I was close.”

Missandei shoots Jhiqui a look of admonishment. “Babe — come on. He’s trying.”

Jhiqui shrugs, smiling into her glass. “Girl, I gotta be honest with you, I can barely pay attention to this conversation because your tits look fantastic. Did you get a surgical enhancement or is it just ‘cause I haven’t seen them on display like this in forever? You look fine as hell.” Jhiqui actually reaches out to gently press on one.

“Ow,” Missandei says, wincing.

“That hurt?” Jhiqui asks, eyes narrowing.

“Yeah, man. You popped me in the boob.”

“I touched you in the boob,” Jhiqui corrects. “Dude, are you pregnant?”

Missandei interprets the question as an accusation and responds to it in a bizarrely juvenile way. It’s as if they are in sixth grade and Jhiqui accused Missy of harboring a crush on some acne-speckled dingus who has asthma and speaks in a lisp. Missy immediately denies, and she denies hard.

She tells Jhiqui that it’s completely impossible for her be pregnant because she and Grey have not been having the kind of sex that results in pregnancy — though even as she says that, she remembers that they did have exactly that kind of sex a few weeks ago. That sex was unprotected. She hasn’t been on birth control in nearly a year. Because it seems pointless to be on birth control.

“There’s no way,” Missandei says.

Jhiqui says, “Babe, are you sure you’re not? Like, there’s really no way? When was your last period? And you know, you’ve been like — incredibly moody lately. And your tits — oh my God. Like wannabe milk bags.” Jhiqui tries to poke her in the boobs again.

Missy uses her hands to cover both of her breasts. “Yes! I am sure!”

Other topics of conversation to convince Jhiqui that there’s no way she can be pregnant consist of Grey’s very average, very non-exceptional sperm count, the fact that Missandei has never even ever had a pregnancy scare before in her entire life because she must not be that fertile, and the eggs that are locked up in some freezer somewhere — waiting for her to shit or get off the pot. The reasons don’t quite add up or amount to much, which Jhiqui quickly points out, but Missandei is too frazzled to make a really salient argument.

If she happens to be pregnant — which is impossible — she tells Jhiqui with her heart pounding and
her pulse racing that she’s been drinking so much — she’s had a lot of alcohol in the last month — and she might be having a panic attack right now.

Jhiqui is bowled over, laughing with her hands covering her own stomach as Missandei self-consciously lowers her wine glass to the coffee table and abandons it there. Jhiqui says, “Oh my God! I bet you that you are pregnant! Oh my God, you are totally knocked up! You are having Fifty Shades’ baby!”

“No, I’m not!” Missandei shouts — pleadingly.

“Finally! I’ve been waiting for you guys to get pregnant so your marriage can go down the shitter like mine.”

“Ugh, stop. That’s terrible.”

“I’m joking,” Jhiqui assures her.

Missandei places her hands on her stomach, feeling it through the material of her tight dress. “I have gained a little bit of weight,” she concedes. Upon seeing the look of triumph on Jhiqui’s face, Missy says, “Shut up! Maybe I’m just getting fat, okay?”

“What’s even the big deal?” Jhiqui asks, snickering. “You guys are married, and you’ve got money — and Grey is like, a fucking savant when it comes to children. You’ll be fine.”

When she pulls into her driveway, she sees a dark figure on her neighbor’s doorstep. When she exits out of her car and feels the cold air bite her bare arms, she crosses them and gingerly walks across the way to see what is going on. She smells the acrid scent of stale cigarette smoke.

He’s young, and he is pounding on the door urgently, with anger. When he spots her out of the corner of his eye, he doesn’t stop as much as he merely pauses before he resumes pounding on the door.

She says, “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

And he says, “Lady! Fucking mind your own business!”

Her neighbors are a guy named Hal, his wife named Amanda, and their teenage daughter named Stephanie. Hal is a corporate attorney, and he’s really friendly. He grabs their mail for them when they are away for prolonged periods of time — usually in Myr. He sometimes weeds their garden for them, an offense that he apologizes to Grey for because he is astoundingly polite.

And right now, he is embarrassed. They are standing on his front lawn and their cul de sac is illuminated with blue cop car light. Hal tells her that he really didn’t want to call the police, but here they are. Amanda tells her that young love is sometimes really volatile and dramatic — kind of explaining that their daughter is in the midst of breaking up with the young man who is now talking to the police.
Grey comes out a few minutes later with a jacket that he places on her shoulders. He asks if she is alright — she confirms that she is. And then he grabs her hand as he gets a summary from Hal.

In their kitchen, Grey’s remarking about how young kids have no shame because when he was that age, he never would have terrorized a family and pounded on a door to try to get to a girl. Like, people have to get up to go to work the next day.

“I might be pregnant,” she blurs.

“Yeah right,” he mutters, shutting their fridge after grabbing a bottle of water. He cracks it open, staring at her. “You’re hilarious.”

“No, really. When we — when we had sex — we didn’t use a condom or anything.”

“Oh shit,” he whispers, just stunned. “Shit. Shit. Wow. Shit. But I only stuck it in you like, once in the last year?”

“Oh my God,” she says quietly. “Oh my God. I might be having a baby with a guy who describes sex as him sticking it in me.”

She feels ridiculous wearing his windbreaker and also wearing the red dress and a pair of heels — but he has no patience, and he doesn’t want to wait for her to change her clothes or her shoes. He kind of just shoves her in his car and tells her it’ll be quick.

She tries to force a joke out of that. She says, “Ha ha, that’s what you said to me when we conceived little Beulah here.”

“Missandei, I do not have the wherewithal to banter all sexy with you right now.”

At the pharmacy, he’s super rude and knocking off a bunch of boxes from the shelves as he digs around for what he wants — and she’s stooping down to pick up his mess as he reads the backs of boxes. She tells him that he’s being really inconsiderate, and he distractedly reminds her that he used to sell women’s shoes — as if that is even relevant to anything at all. He holds up a pregnancy test and says, “This is digital. And it tells you right away.”

“Okay,” she says.

He seems — honestly — terrified. If they weren’t married and if they were like, sixteen years old, she would be scared that he’d tell her he was going out for a pack of cigarettes only to abscond, abandoning her with a kid that she’d have to raise on her own for good.

On her end, she feels too stressed out to even begin thoroughly processing her thoughts or her feelings. Of the many random things she is thinking about — she is thinking about how happy her grandma would be and that gives her heart pangs because she just wants her grandma to be truly,
truly happy because that woman has had a really rough go at life — for decades. Just a bunch of
decades of challenges.

She thinks about her parents, too — her mom specifically. And just how much anger she feels inside
because of just one person.

She thinks about her own superficiality and how she doesn’t want her body to change and how the
thought of being pregnant and growing a person inside of her is an uncomfortable burden.

She thinks about how she didn’t really want to hold Jaime and Brienne’s baby — but she did it
because it seemed like the thing to do. She thinks about how it felt empty to hold him and how
relieved she was when the baby was taken out of her hands. She thinks about how she’s been
dreading Brienne’s baby and being petty — ascribing fault to the baby for being the thing that
changes her friendship with Brienne. He isn’t her baby. He’s someone else’s baby, and she was
already resenting him. There is a thread of selfishness in her.

Grey is probably trying to help her into the car, but she’s uneasy on her feet because of the heels and
it kind of feels like he’s pushing her, so she kind of twists her ankle on a bump in the ground and
goes down. She hits the wet asphalt hard, and her legs sting from the impact.

She feels his hands come down to grab her by the elbows. He says, “Missandei — would you watch
where you’re walking? I don’t want you to sprain your ankle again.” Once he gets her into standing
position again, he’s stooping back down to wipe the wet gravel from her knees. “These fucking
impractical shoes,” he growls.

She nudges his shoulder. “Grey. How about instead of bitching out my shoes, you have some self-
awareness and remember that you didn’t let me change out of them before leaving the house?”

He freezes at that, before slowly standing up. “You’re right. My bad.”

At a point during the drive home, he realizes that the way he is acting might be communicating the
wrong thing to her — so his tone shifts and he starts to explain and to communicate.

He tells her that he is losing his shit — that he is really freaked out because this wasn’t even
something on his radar — his list of possibilities. He reminds her that they haven’t been having
penetrative sex for most of the past year so he just shut off all of the baby stuff to the very back of his
mind. He tells her that he doesn’t even have a job yet — bringing up whether or not they can afford
such a change. He tells her that one of his goals in life is to get healthy — like mentally healthy and
normal — before he would even consider having a kid with her because it would be so supremely
unfair to reproduce and bring someone innocent into all of the shit that people’s parents saddle them
with. He tells her that he’s not sure sometimes — if he will ever even get there. He says that his
mom was a really fucking shitty mother — and it is hard to get past all of that and to have faith that
he could be better because that shit is like, genetic.

She listens to all of it — all of his fears and apprehensions. And she is currently ill-equipped to
handle it all. Her hands are cold as she clenches them around the pregnancy test. She says, “Grey —
I so appreciate everything you just said and what you just communicated to me, but man, I am also
losing my shit. I cannot handle your shit on top of my own shit, right now. Baby — I’m so sorry, but can you backburner your breakthrough for later?”

“Yes,” he says, immediately grabbing her hand tightly and holding it in his lap.

At home, in the first bathroom they find downstairs, she asks for privacy because she doesn’t like peeing on command as he looms over her. He surprises her by not immediately acquiescing. He stays in the bathroom and crosses his arm. She’s sitting on the toilet with her knees pressed tightly together. This might be the first time he’s noticing what she’s actually wearing because he says, “Whoa, were you wearing that all night?”

“It’s a dress,” she says defensively.

“Missandei — the bust needs to be adjusted.” He points to two mirroring seams. “There’s a little wrinkle here and here.” He picks up her straps at the shoulders, and he lifts them just a little bit. “That’s better.”

She touches his hand on her shoulder. She says, “Grey, you are managing me again. Why don’t you just tell me I look nice?”

“You do look nice,” he says, brushing some of her hair away from her face, bending down to kiss the top of her head. “The dress is just a little bit off.”

“Okay?” she says, sighing.

“What?” he asks, straightening up. “Why are you acting like that?”

“Like what?”

He gestures to her, to the toilet, to the pregnancy box on her lap. “Like I’m just annoying the shit out of you with everything I do.”

“You’re not annoying the shit out of me,” she says calmly.

“Oh, okay,” he says sarcastically.

“Grey, can you give me some privacy? I can’t pee on command like a dog.”

“Missandei, it’s cool. I’ll just hang with you until you get in the mood.”

She repeatedly tells him that he’s not listening to her. She actually tells him that he’s actually been really bad at listening to her lately, and he’s been denying her her feelings.

“I listen to you,” he says, keeping his voice so low and so quiet that it’s almost like he is whispering. “We talk — all the time. What do we spend hours doing over dinner and in bed and in the car — if it’s not talking to each other? I know everything about you. I didn’t obtain this knowledge through osmosis. I didn’t dream this up.”
“You are not hearing me. You are constantly telling me what I should think and how I should interpret things.”

“What does that even mean? I hear you. I am constantly changing my behavior because all I do is listen to you.”

She stares at him for a targeted beat. “Like, after Brienne’s baby shower, I was trying to open up and tell you about this insecurity I had, and you kind of just minimized it and bowled over it.”

“I’m sorry you felt minimized. I responded the way I did because that was really a non-problem to me. What was the ideal way to respond to stuff that happened in the past, that we cannot change?”

She shakes her head like he doesn’t get it at all. “Man, I don’t want to have a screaming match with you right now. Sometimes it feels like me screaming at you is the only way you’ll hear me.”

“I hear you,” he whispers, dropping to his knees in front of her. He holds her face gently in both of his hands. “I hear you, Missandei. I love you. I work so hard to listen to you, so to hear you say to me that I’m doing a poor job of it is just — it’s so sad.”

He loses sense of time and space, as they have this protracted, cyclical conversation. He thinks that he’s been telling her that he wants to be with her when she finds out if she’s pregnant or not, that he wants to support her no matter what, but her responses to all of his statements make it sound like he’s not communicating any of it correctly at all.

“I don’t want to have a baby right now, Grey,” she finally says, sinking down into tiredness. “I really can’t have a baby right now.”

He points to his head — to his ear. “See, this is how I know I listen to you. Because you’ve been saying this to me for years now. You don’t feel ready for a kid — well, if not now, then when? Never? Is it never, and you’re just too scared to just be definitive about it?”

“Man, I just don’t know,” she says. “I don’t know if I’m going to wake up tomorrow and feel like I want a kid. I don’t know if I’m never going to feel like I want a kid.”

“This could be like, our one chance to have a kid,” he says, kind of sounding like he’s negotiating now. “Our sex life has been — limiting — for an entire year. What if I never get any better? Maybe this pregnancy is happening for a reason.”

“Yeah, the reason is that you had an emotion that you couldn’t handle so you fucked me on the floor of our house. That’s destiny, for sure.” She shuts her eyes tightly as his expression hardens. “Sorry,” she says. “That was a terrible thing to say to you.” When she opens her eyes again, she says, “Look, I get that you want me to make up my mind already, because you’ve made up your mind and it was relatively easy for you to — but you know, it was easy for you because the burden that we bear with this is wildly disproportionate. You keep talking about ‘we’ and ‘us’ and how this will affect you — but that is honestly minimal. I’m the woman. This affects me, not you.”

“You’re not alone in this. We’re in this together.”

“Have you noticed that when we talk about the shitty hand we’ve been dealt in life, we blame our mothers and not our fathers?” she whispers. “Maybe we hold our mothers responsible because we expect more from them. And the dog loves you more than she loves me.”
“That doesn’t mean anything, Missandei,” he whispers back.

“I cannot let myself be a bad mother.”

“But what are we — what are you going to do if you’re pregnant right now? We’re married, baby. Are you going to — terminate it if you’re pregnant?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“We’re married, Missandei.”

“Is this why we got married?”

She’s asking him to get out so she can pee — and to him, it sounds like she’s telling him to leave her alone so that she can shut him out of this huge life event and continue treating him like he’s some monster that only knows how to take from her. Every time she asks him for privacy and for him to leave the bathroom, he only digs his heels into the floor all the more because she’s being unreasonable and unfair. He refuses to budge. He tells her he won’t go — he won’t leave.

She mutters that she will be the one to go then.

She looks shocked when his arm comes down in front of her and barricades her exit. And then that shock transitions to anger and disbelief — mostly anger — as she slaps his wrist and tells him to move. She tries to wrench his arm out of her way, and he thinks that she just makes him so crazy sometimes.

They struggle against each other for a while — him trying to grab onto her arms and hold her still — her trying to pull her way from his hold — and then there’s just that look on her face — she’s crying. Crying always manipulates how he feels about her.

She says, “I can’t believe you’re not letting me leave. I can’t believe you’re trapping me like this.”

He finally lets her go — when he snaps back to reality and sees that things have gotten out of control and he’s physically blockading his wife in their bathroom, trying to make her pee on a stick in front of him. That’s the reality of his situation.

He steps out of the way in a daze, and she rushes past him. She runs up the stairs to their bedroom. He hears the door slam shut.

Maybe about two minutes pass before the door opens again — he has a throbbing headache. He sees her shadow moving around on the top floor. She says, “I’m not pregnant.”

He says, “Great. I’m glad for you.”
The day after

Chapter Summary

Grey is on the verge of getting a J-O-B.

When he wakes up, his neck and back are sore — probably because the guest bed has a million decorative pillows on it 'cause he let Missandei decorate the room. He didn’t bother to shove any of the pillows to the ground. His sleep was sporadic and restless. His running watch tells the exact same story. There is like, so much data on his wrist that reflects how preoccupied he was by his failings.

He finds her already dressed and drinking coffee in the kitchen when he silently walks in wearing the wrinkled clothes he slept in. He was too asshurt and scared of how pissed she was last night to go into the bedroom to grab a change of clothes.

He tries not to look directly at her, but he does look at her through his peripheral vision. She looks beautiful like she always does — and today, it just makes him sad.

“Want some coffee?” she asks, holding out their French press, mostly full still.

“Sure,” he says.

And then he feels real dumb, when he sees her lower the coffee to the countertop and push it vaguely in his direction. He kind of made the assumption she’d just pour him a cup — but clearly — she is not.

He awkwardly walks around the island to their cabinets, where they keep the mugs.

When she makes the coffee, it is acidic and light-bodied. He likes coffee to be dark like motor oil, bitter, and devoid of delicate notes.

He spent a large portion of the night just torturing himself because why not? What else is he gonna do with his spare time? It’s much like all the times he holds onto Momo 2.0, and imagines her dying from old age, imagines that morning when he says, “Wake up, monkey,” and she like, doesn’t move at all. She’s just a cold, dead brick. He often imagines her death in a perverse kind of preparation. It’s inevitable. It will hurt like hell. Maybe he can test how much it will hurt. Maybe he doesn’t have to be so destroyed by how much it will hurt.

Last night, he imagined what a life without Missandei would look like. He did the inverse of fantasizing. He imagined what his life would look like if they had never met. He imagined what it would look like if they had met, but she just never fell for him. He also imagined a future state without her, and he found it to be especially fucking terrible because it’s always worse when there’s a precedence and there are expectations. It’s always harder when there’s knowledge of what there is to lose.
“I hope you have a nice day, Grey,” she says, rinsing her cup out at the sink before. “Good luck with your interviews today.”

“Thanks.”

It is supremely difficult to carry on with his day normally when he feels so bad inside. He can’t even remember the mind tricks he used to utilize when he was younger, to shut off his emotions. He can’t remember how he even passed any of his classes back when their relationship was turbulent and undefined. If he could remember how to shut out the distractions, he’d be leaning hard on that shit right now.

Today, he just sluggishly walks through the motions. It takes him so long to shower and to get dressed because he keeps wondering what the fucking point is in getting dressed and going out to find a job. What does he even need a job for? What is the point in accumulating wealth? What is the point in buying a bunch of shit all the time?

Their bed is made — kind of. She haphazardly threw the bedding together before she got ready for work. He found a couple of her shoes knocked askew in the closet.

He has two interviews today. One is the second interview with Jaime’s dad’s company. The other is with Dany’s company. He’s been joking with Jaime and Drogo about how this could be the very first time in life that he will benefit from favoritism and a kind of privilege. Jaime has been urging him not to go work for the devil, but he keeps telling Jaime that a job is just a job. He reminds Jaime that he has no professional passion in life. He can disconnect and do whatever drudgery, day in, day out. He also tells Jaime that he actually won’t be working directly with Jaime’s dad ever — isn’t his dad semi-retired and a board member at this point anyway?

Grey actually kind of blows the interview with Dany. Beyond being embarrassing because he comes off so fucking inept, it’s also bad for optics because he actually asked Dany directly for this opportunity. He went to her because he remembered her bringing up contract work, way back when he was first laid off. He remembers joking about how he’ll work in the mailroom, no big deal. He also remembers how serious she looked when she messed with him by answering straight and told him there’s no mailroom for him to work in. Most everything is digital nowadays.

He also went to Dany after her relationship with Drogo ended. And he is Drogo’s best friend. Dany is really, really classy.

In the interview that he is completely wetting the bed in, he sometimes gives these awkward one word answers. Other times he talks way too fucking much. He keeps saying, “I’m sorry, but what was the question again?” because sometimes in his aimless rambling, he actually forgets what the original ask was. And then his heart generally stops in pain as he realizes that maybe Missandei is right, and he is actually a fucking terrible listener. And then that thought completely distracts him, and he just cannot focus on talking about measuring sales incentive strategies.
“Hey,” Dany says, kind of putting a pause on the job interview, asking for water, knowing full well her head of finance would go offer to run and get the water.

He does, kindly asking Grey if he’d like anything else. Grey has a bottle in front of him already, so he says he is fine.

When he and Dany are alone in the conference room, she says to him, “Are you okay? You seem distracted.”

It feels horrifically unprofessional — but she knows him and she knows Missandei. So he says, “I’m sorry. I’m just — Missandei and I had an argument last night, and it didn’t end well. I barely got any sleep. I’m sorry I’m garbage today. I’m sorry I’m making you look dumb for vouching for me to your people.”


That actually jolts a short smile from him.

He sits in Amari’s office and immediately feels like a real simple bitch for the emergency meeting that he requested. Emergency therapy meetings are probably for people who are on the verge of killing themselves. They are probably not for some dipshit who had a rough night and then wants to talk it out with a professional the day after.

He feels especially stupid because he’s really mute. He called an emergency meeting, made it sound dire, and now he suddenly has nothing to say to the guy.

“How are you doing today?” Amari asks.

Grey resorts to the logistics of his life and he tells Amari about how the job interviews went and the pros and cons of each situation. He tells Amari he’s probably jumping the gun in assuming that he’d have to pick one job over another because he might not get any offer from anybody. At which point, he will just maybe reach out to Tanja and see if she knows of anything. People keep telling him he has to network because at his level, no one finds a job just through applying. It’s all about who he knows. He tells Amari he’s just terrible at networking, and he just doesn’t feel like doing it because it feels so fake, and he’s very bad at small talk — and at talking about himself to strangers in general. It’s all a stupid game designed for professional advancement. He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say to people. Is he just supposed to tell people that he’s smart and he’s detailed and he’s a strategic thinker within five minutes of meeting them? He then tells Amari, “Sometimes, like today, I feel like my marriage is dying in front of my face. And there’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

After that, he’s just a fucking hot mess for the rest of the session. He tells Amari about the entire fight he had with Missandei, taking care to linger on the disastrous part where he physically trapped her in a room with a toilet — much like how monsters used to trap him in a room with a bucket. Life is fucking cyclical, and he is just fucking screwed because he keeps acting out his history. Maybe the responsible thing is to let her go so he doesn’t keep dragging her down into this shit. He just needs for her to be happy.

He more or less just dies inside at the thought of letting her go — like, he doesn’t know what he — he doesn’t know he’d do —
“Oh my God,” he says, reaching up to swipe at the wetness coming out of his eyes with his fingers. “This is so fucking dumb. Oh my God.” He leans over to pluck out a tissue from the container sitting on the side table. “I’m a cliche now,” he mutters. “Great.”

“You’re going to be okay, I promise you,” Amari says, getting emotional about it, too. “I really believe that.”

“God, you’re so empathetic,” he says, sniffing back a lot of wetness “Stop it.”

He feels really, really vulnerable and just completely idiotic because he cannot hold his shit together. Every effort that he applies toward keeping his shit together is thwarted by Amari, who keeps listing off this litany of things that he is proud of and glad for in Grey.

Pride is typically a feeling that Grey feels a lot of conflicting things over, a lot of emotion over. He doesn’t like to hear that people feel pride in him — it creates this immense sense of expectation and it applies this heavy pressure on him to perform. It also makes him feel very inadequate because he never thinks he has properly earned all of this unwarranted grace and belief from people. He is never as good as what the people around him say — and that is something that just sucks.

“These things upset you and you fixate on them because you care about people a lot, you know?” Amari says. “You care a lot about your friend Pia and you wanted her to be in the best spot that she can be because you felt bad that she was having a hard time.”

“Nah, man,” Grey says tightly. “I was just frustrated that she couldn’t do shit right.” He’s joking. Right now, it is damn near impossible to separate his jokes from his truths.

“I know you feel like things are currently in upheaval and you can’t get a handle on anything — and I know that is really scary — but you are handling it so well and so admirably. I’m so impressed with you.”

“What? No,” Grey says, denying right away.

“You told Missandei the truth of how you felt. You did it calmly and fairly for the most part. You did your very best to communicate with her and to listen to her. You didn’t act out, lash out, check out, or follow your other old patterns because you were cognizant of not repeating them. What you guys talked about is heavy and complicated. I’ve seen other couples handle it far worse. You are doing a lot of honest self-evaluation right now. And you called me today to process it, instead of doing what you usually do, which is shut down.”

It was eleven in the morning when he finished his terrible interview with Dany’s company. He gets an offer letter in his inbox at two in the afternoon.

He’s still with Amari when it comes through. He holds up the screen of his phone to his therapist — who is actually sitting too far away to see — and he says, “What the fuck? I was so sure I shit the
bed on this one. Oh my God. Cronyism, am I right?”

He is spent — from the lack of sleep and also from the labor of letting his emotions just hemorrhage out of him. He tells Amari he’s kind of scared to go home because that’s the scene of the crime — but he must nut-up and just go home.

He has this plan. He’s going to go home and then take a nap somewhere in his house at three in the afternoon, like a little child. He’s anxiously trying to figure out whether he can handle sleeping in their bed and smelling her scent in the sheets — he might just end up preoccupying himself with a bunch of unbidden, irrational thoughts about how it could be the very last time, just depressing the shit out of himself.

He finds her car already parked in the garage when he gets home. He then finds her sitting on the couch in her work clothes with their dog.

He tiredly says, “Oh, hey. What are you doing home early?”

“I took a half day.”

“Oh. ‘kay.”

When he quietly asks her for her permission to sit on the other end of the couch — and it makes her think that he’s completely ridiculous and heartbreaking. She gets kind of teary as she tells him that he can totally sit on their couch.

He doesn’t notice or he opts not to notice the way she watches him or the way she can’t seem to get a handle on her own facial expressions. He just collapses down on the other end and hangs his head back against the cushions. His face is tilted to the ceiling. He shuts his eyes, and he tells her that he’s exhausted because being an idle trophy spouse is really exhausting sometimes.

He’s wearing a suit — one of the lighter ones. His socks are navy, and he lightly smells like mint — from the gum he was probably nervously chewing on — and herbaceous — from his aftershave. He has this entire thing about defying expectations and launching really minute, really small scale fashion rebellions in the form of single-button suit tweed jackets — and sometimes she cannot believe this is the same guy that used to procure his shirts from garbage his housemates were throwing out.

She’s about to say something to him — something really bland like how sorry she is for how they left things last night and also how much she fucking loves him and just needs him — but his phone buzzes in his pocket. He groans with his eyes still closed as he fishes it out. He peeks one eye open to read the screen. He softly scoffs. He says, “What the mother?”

“What?”

“I just got an offer letter from Lannister-Ostrom. What the fuck? Are they crazy? I thought I had to
“go through another round of interviews.”

“Whoa,” she says. “This is good news though, right?”

“Hell yeah, this is good news. Is this a mistake though? Oh my God. We’re gonna be rich again, babe.”

Upon hearing the same tired old term of endearment from him — she decides she can’t take it anymore. She pushes the dog out of the way, and she crawls the short distance of the couch to him. He pops open both of his eyes in surprise — as she nudges his arm — and then he raises himself a little bit in his seat to accommodate her.

“I went on an entire journey today,” he whispers out, eyes still closed, breathing deep, running his hand down her back. “I was on an odyssey.”

“Me too,” she says, leaning in to smell him, pushing her hand in between two of his shirt buttons in the center of his chest.

“I had a real shit job interview with Dany. When she asked me to name an instance in which I faced a challenge and then overcame it, I answered, ‘Yeah, definitely.’” He kind of rocks a bit, kind of nudging her. “Man, I think I might be bad at listening to people.”

“Only when you think people are being dumb.” She smiles a little bit at that. Then she sighs. “I could be doing a vastly better job of letting you know when stuff is serious or important to me. I can stop acting like things are fine and then secretly becoming resentful over it like a real fucking asshole. I am sorry, Grey.”

“It’s okay.”

She shakes her head. “No, it’s not okay,” she says firmly.

“No, I mean I forgive you,” he says, chuckling a little bit. “But it felt weird to say it that way. To bestow the gift of forgiveness upon you.”

A lot of their issues cannot be solved in one single conversation, but at the very least, they have reminded one another that they are not adversaries — they are actually partners. He remarks that it’s such a stupidly obvious thing, but he’s really stupid so he needs the reminder from time to time.

She tells him that she knows that her some of her hang-ups about kids are irrational. She knows she’s letting fear drive a lot. She tells him that she remembers that she didn’t really push for the dog. He was the one who wanted the dog. He was the one who went after the dog. He was the one who convinced her that the dog was a good idea. And right now, she fucking loves the dog to death. It’s their puppy. She supposes that she could go through the same experience with a kid.

“Missandei, dogs and kids are kind of not the same thing.”
“Grey,” she says, giving him a withering look. “Clearly.”

“Sorry,” he says, giving her a strained, peacemaking smile.

Then she kind of just twists the knife in both of them, as she tells him that all day, she’s been trying to imagine what a life with a child would look like for them. She thinks that she will probably love him even more than she currently does, when she sees him take care of their child because women are kind of genetically programmed to get their rocks off on stuff like that. She tells him she has to articulate it that way to distance herself from it all because it’s actually really, really something really, really huge. She tells him for this reason — it’s not at all a hardship to think about embarking on that challenge with him.

He tells her he has no reason for wanting what he does. That’s why it’s dumb and why it’s kind of a cosmic joke for someone like him. He compares it to how he feels about her — there’s really no fucking reason for it, for why he wants what he wants and why he feels what he feels. He just does. He says that he can invent a lot of reasons to stir up fear and apprehension, but in the end, he would just really love having a baby with her. He really just has no reason for this.

When he tells her that he's been imagining a future without her — she assumes he’s up to his old tricks and he’s manufacturing these reasons to feel fear. But he says, “Obviously in my fantasies, it’s because you died or lost your mind to dementia or I beat you to death because you piss me off so much sometimes. But I’m no longer realistically worried about you walking out. I’m no longer realistically worried about me walking out to save you from myself.”

“Good,” she says.

“Yeah.”

“I love the battered wife jokes,” she adds. “I love it when you tell them at dinner parties.”

“Baby, how crazy was it when you were like, ‘Grey, I want to pee in private,’ and I was like, ‘Oh no you don’t.’ And then I blockaded myself in the doorway so you couldn’t leave. That was hilarious.”

She grabs both of his hands. She squeezes them hard. She says, “Hey, don’t torture yourself over that.”

As some point, she kisses him. She kisses him because she can’t stand not kissing him. She gets to her knees so she can better reach him — it’s awkward positioning and she is up a little too high — but her hand comes down on his warm cheek, and he raises his face to her as her mouth comes down on his.

She kisses him slow and thoroughly, the tip of her tongue immediately dipping into his mouth — and she feel his amused smiling through the kissing before he reciprocates. Her arms and hands are going everywhere, trying to find the right place to rest — landing on his shoulders, lightly holding his neck, encircled around his entire body, then feeling too restricted that way, so she goes back to lightly touching his face. She whimpers as she deepens the kiss, angling his head back, opening her mouth indecently, stroking his tongue with hers.

Both of his hands come down on her wrists when she starts pulling at his tie. She basically knows
what it means, so she breaks apart from his mouth, ignores the dazed expression on his face, blows past the obvious, and she says, “So when?” They haven’t been able to sync up on this lately. She always wants it when he doesn’t. He always wants it when she is distraught about something.

He runs his front teeth over his bottom lip, thinking. She takes the liberty of dipping back in for another smooch — the clean and affectionate kind.

After pulling apart again, he says, “Maybe when I’m less emotional.”

“So, specifically — when?”

He laughs off to the side at that — it’s adorably sheepish. “After dinner maybe? After a nap, maybe?”

“Oh!” she says, smiling widely. “That’s actually sooner than I thought.”

Unlike him, she is wired and ready to bounce off the walls. She is bored, and she thought that she could content herself with watching him sleep and convincing herself it’s romantic. But it’s actually really creepy.

He told her that there’s still so much he needs and wants to say to her, but all he’s been doing all day is talking. He’s been talking about himself an excessive amount, whether it’s under the guise of proving his worth as an employee or whether it’s as the disgusting emotional mess in his therapist’s office — he told her he is really tuckered out from all of the work that went into all of that output.

She changes out of her work clothes and into workout clothes. She touches him before leaving the room.

Downstairs, she swipes up her keys from the counter, and she leaves the house for a few hours.

He’s still sleeping when she gets back from the gym with a couple of boxed steak salads. The fact that he is still sleeping astounds her. She prods him and then grabs his arm and tries pulling him out of bed. She tells him he’s going to mess up his sleep schedule if he gets too much REM.

When he’s finally awake he has like, so much to say about the salads. They are mostly complaints on calorie density, nutritional value, value for money — and she tells him that he is the fucking worst sometimes. She laughingly says, “I bought you dinner! You’re being ungrateful!”

He says, “Man, Missandei. I have barely eaten in the last day. Of all things — a salad? Really?”

It feels so nice and she loves hearing his bitching so much sometimes — because it’s so him and it’s so them.

He tells her that his body is craving fat and sugar and simple carbohydrates. He wants cheese, meat, and bread. She then is full of sexual innuendo — talking about what his body craves and what it
needs and what it’s going to get — and he admirably ignores all of her come-ons and takes a long time eating his salad. He is messing with her because these are the kinds of things that he finds funny.

After dinner, he follows her back up to their bedroom. There, he tries to kiss her right away, but she ducks away from him — to be coy. She collapses back onto the mattress, her legs bare, her shirt riding up, her stomach exposed, her feet already kicking off blankets and wrinkling their sheets. She’s giggling.

He’s pulled off shirt, and he’s in the midst of untying the drawstring of his pants when she says, “No. Don’t take it off just yet.” That makes him look at her. She says, “Slower. Draw it out.”

“Like, you want me to strip for you?” he asks quizzically. “Oh, no. I don’t think so. You know I don’t perform in that way.”

“No, idiot,” she says. “Don’t take off your pants yet because I want to be the one to take your pants off. Great. Now it’s not sexy because you made me say it.”

He’s trying to act like he’s exasperated, like he’s not kind of pleased and happy and amused as all hell by her. And she is lying. It is still sexy.

“Come here.”
There’s one thing that would’ve been comforting if she was pregnant, in a horrific and terrifying kind of way. Then, at the very least, her unstoppable weight gain would have a cause and a reason that is out of her control. But it turns out she is just becoming a fatass. She knows why. It’s all the snacks. It’s also all the carbs she crams into her face mindlessly when she’s at work. It’s fucking Bingo and his delicious cookies. It’s the cream and sugar she puts into her multiple cups of coffee a day. It’s the glass of wine at dinner. And after dinner. And right before bedtime. It’s all the hours she’s parked at a desk. It’s the hours of Netflix she’s been watching. It’s the nibbles of dessert that she steals from Grey plate. She fears she has to make a lifestyle change soon, increasing the amount of her self-control and willpower. She already doesn’t get as much sex as she’d like. Now she has to stop eating sugar and fat.

She’s unfortunately privy to the number of steps Grey takes in a day because he is competitive and likes data. He is not content with absorbing his own data. He has to track her exercise, too. She relented on this, if only to get him to shut up about the GPS tracking app.

When he comes home from his run, the sweat on his body has already dried, and she randomly reaches out to grab his butt as he walks by, actually shoving her hand underneath his shorts so she get accurate skin-to-skin contact. It is still a little damp in there. His butt also feels rock hard, and he looks excessively athletic. He pauses in surprise, and then she pats him kindly to assure him that nothing nefarious is going on. She sometimes wishes he would just get a little fat so that they can be sorta-fatties together. “Your booty looks and feels amazing,” she says glumly, pulling her hand out of his shorts.

“Thank you?” he says, giving her half of a smile.

“Would you still be attracted to me if I was chubby?”

He relaxes, as if suddenly understanding what this conversation is really about. He shrugs. “Hard to say. How chubby are we talking?”

“Baby!” Her jaw drops. “I’m inordinately sensitive about this! Because I am superficial!”

He laughs. “Oh, I know. That’s why it’s funny.”

She’s rubbing her cheeks roughly with both of her hands, tiredly groaning through her palms. “Pregnancy would not look good on me. I’d get so fat.”
The baby stuff in their household is still touch and go — a type of conversation that he has to have a lot of mental energy stocked up in order to have with her — but he finds that he notices it a lot more these days, when tangential baby stuff inserts itself into their mundane lives. He has noticed the outward manifestation of her inner struggles.

For instance, he really notices how cranky Missandei gets when Jaime pretty reasonably requests they are up to date on their vaccinations, on whooping cough in particular, before they come visit. Grey is apathetic to the request and just confirms with Jaime that he is pretty vaccinated, at which point Jaime gives him a virtual thumbs up and sends over some dates and times that they can visit. He has gotten the sense that Jaime and Brienne have been inundated with well-wishers and visitors lately because the date Jaime gives him is more than two weeks out.

Two things manage to annoy Missandei: the fact that she has to be up to date on her vaccines to hang out with an ordinary baby and also the fact that she has to wait more than two weeks to hang out with said unimpressive baby.

“In Naath, babies play with rocks in the freaking dirt, and we grow up fine,” she says — trying to force herself to sound casual but it actually sounds pretty defensive. She’s holding her glowing phone in her hand as she talks animatedly, a sure sign that she’s about Google something. “Babies need to be exposed to germs. I don’t like this Western helicopter parenting. It’s going to result in a wussy kid who grows up into a hypochondriac.”

“You’ve gotten the shot anyway though,” he says, trying to quickly figure out just exactly why she is so cranky and what tactic he should use to diffuse the tension. “Like, you’re vaccinated already.” He is kinda assuming that it’s the inconvenience of it that is bothering her. He is probably guessing wrong.

“That’s not the point,” she grumbles, staring down at her phone. “I just don’t like being told what to do.”

“Technically, he just asked us about it. There was no decree.”

“Man! Whose side are you on? Me or your friend’s!” she snaps, which is not altogether surprising to him. She’s staring at him, her eyes bugging out expectantly. He thought she was just snapping at him in frustration and that was it. He is belatedly realizing she actually wants him to answer this question.

“I didn’t know there were sides? I didn’t know this was a fight.”

“Oh my God, you just don’t get it.”

He reaches out to touch her knee. “Then explain it to me.”

She orients her face back down at her phone. “How do you think you’d be, with our hypothetical kid and this vaccination thing?”

“I would probably ask people to either get their shots or wait to see our baby,” he says honestly.

“Well, okay! See!” She holds up her phone to him. It makes him realize the question was a total trap. “This academic article says that if the mother gets her booster while pregnant, her baby gets her antibodies, and it’s fine! These doctors are saying the whole ‘No Vax, No Visit’ movement is overkill!”

After weighing his options for a moment, he asks, “Is this really the molehill you wanna die on?”
Because Jaime is always so busy these days, he asks Drogo for advice because Drogo is good at this sort of thing. Grey’s approach to advancement when it comes to his professional life has always been a narrow, straight line. He typically doesn’t have to weigh his options because in the past, he had no options. He’s been rather complacent and just let stuff happen to him — whether it was a promotion or getting laid off.

He’s never had to pick between two jobs before. “Or option C?” he asks, leaning back against Drogo’s couch, holding a game controller in his hand, starting the level over. “Maybe I pick neither and go for something else, something better and bigger?”

“Ah,” Drogo says, also leaning back and grinning at the TV screen. “The food truck option.”

“I don’t have a ‘food truck option’ to be passionate about, though,” Grey says, using air quotes real quickly with one hand.

First, they have to get through the very basic logistics of this. Drogo has to teach him that it’s actually perfectly fine and expected for Grey to request time to think over the two job offers. It’s perfectly fine to solicit more information about salary and benefits. A more advanced move would be to use a competing offer to leverage a better deal from the job he actually wants.

He tells Drogo he doesn’t know what he wants. He sounds melodramatic to himself when he asks Drogo what will happen if he’s never figures it out. Drogo is blase when he assures Grey that he will figure it out.

“Is it weird that I could end up working for your ex?” Grey asks.

“A little,” Drogo admits. “But I know her. I know she’s not offering you a job to get at me. She’s not like that. I know that she’s offering you a job because she just wants to hire you.” He shrugs. “Just in case you’re worried about that.”

“Okay, I wasn’t,” Grey says, banging his thumb on his remote violently in succession. “Fuck!Fuck! Fuck!” He clears his throat, transitioning back into his normal speaking volume. “But now I am worried about it.”

All the things that Grey doesn’t know about advocating for himself or about self-promotion that requires a smidge of politicking kind of shocks Drogo, which he articulates. He asks Grey how he got so far in his career without picking up these things or at the very least, being exposed to things.

Grey speculates that he was sheltered a little bit under the kindness of his former boss — Selmy. He suspects that his boss used to fight for him behind close doors, and he was just really stupid and self-involved that he never paid attention and never thanked the guy. Grey admits that perhaps he was naive and fucking lame, for adhering to the strict truth all the time and to the assumption that good work speaks for itself. “Because sometimes it doesn’t.”

“No, sometimes it doesn’t,” Drogo echoes.

“I’ve been kind of disgusted at myself lately,” Grey says, as he takes off a zombie’s head with a lead pipe in the game. Blood is spewing everywhere. “Looking back at myself and just looking how I just let life happen to me because I was too chickenshit to take really minor risks.”

“You got very far with that MO.”
“Because I had Selmy and I had Missandei. And you and Jaime. I owe everything to you guys.”

Drogo shrugs again. His general low investment in Grey’s agonizingly warped self-perception is simultaneously frustrating and just the very thing that Grey craves sometimes. Sometimes he and Missandei take his problems so seriously.

His mind is very preoccupied with all the shit that is on his plate. He has to prepare for these meetings he has with his job prospects. He has to figure out what to say and how to present himself as confident and competent and possibly worth more than he actually thinks he is. The role at Jaime’s dad’s company is fully in his wheelhouse — a lateral move that pays a fair bit more — and it’s a huge company with room to grow. However, there were a few red flags in his interview that spoke to some mismanagement or dysfunction in process and typically in the past, he wouldn’t even give a shit since he would be getting paid for the trouble, but right now, he’s been trying to put a premium on work satisfaction. It seems like a thing to care about.

Dany’s company pays significantly less and while the job description fits him to a T, he’s fairly sure it was designed that way and that the job is actually undefined. He has so many questions for her.

On top of work stuff, there is also baby stuff, Missandei stuff, sex stuff — they’ve been trying to have it, his erections are still either absent or pretty lackluster — personal finance stuff, their tenants needing to set up utilities with the city so that he and Missandei aren’t on the hook, Drogo’s apparent progress with his new alcohol program, but Grey knows from the past that sometimes Drogo looks like he’s doing really well when he is actually doing really badly. He thinks about Jaime’s general absence from his life and not letting himself wonder if this is normal and temporary — or if this is the very fucking end of them.

They take the train because she wants to get more steps in. She wore sensible sneakers with her laces double-knotted, and she generally stays close to him — until he completely loses sight of her and then his heart drops like a dead weight in his chest.

One second, they are idling on the crowded train platform, shuffling closer to the edge as the train arrives — and then before he knows it, as they are siphoning into the car, he has lost Missandei somewhere behind him. The fear and disorientation lasts for only a few seconds — he ends up finding her fast as he fights the crowd and backtracks back onto the platform. She’s standing by herself, with her back to him.

He reaches out to place his hand on her shoulder, and immediately — she rips her body away. She recoils and he feels the burn of friction against his palm. Her head swivels around and he sees her anger and her aggression for a hot second before she recognizes him and her expression relaxes only incrementally. Her body is still very tense.

“What happened?” he asks.

She’s blinking rapidly and crossing her arms defensively over her chest as she simultaneously waves a hand abstractly. She doesn’t answer him right away. He doesn’t even know what he has done wrong this time. She’s acting like she’s irritated with his question, which does not even make sense to him. He already feels terrible.

And then she sighs and mutters, “Some asshole grabbed my breast and squeezed it when we were trying to get on the train. I tried to — I don’t know — I don’t know who did it.” She grunts when
she sees the doors to the trains shut behind him. She shuts her eyes in irritation. “Great,” she says. “We have to catch the next one now.”

When they arrive to Jhiqui’s and Nick’s house, well, they are both in really shitty moods. She’s pissed probably because she was violated. He’s pissed in this crazed way that he cannot even make sense of. He’s angry in all of these ugly and unproductive ways.

He’s pissed at the guy because, deep down inside, he feels possessive and that she belongs to him and is his property. No one gets to touch his wife like that except for him. He’s especially pissed at himself, for his general cluelessness and inaction — that he let that happen to her, that he didn’t protect her. He’s pissed that he feels embarrassed and ineffectual and impotent over this shit. He is pissed that he has managed to get super wrapped up in how he feels about this, instead of being able to focus on making her feel better. He’s also a little bit pissed at her in a really unfair way — because it’s kind of cold outside and her t-shirt is kind of low-cut and provocative, and he’s been battling with the way she dresses herself since the beginning of their relationship. He is generally pissed at himself for his entire line of excessively masculine thinking — for his general jealousy over it all, too. So he just double-downs on the indulgent self-loathing and internalizes.

They’ve barely said anything to each other since the incident. When he tries to talk to her, she generally looks like she has to expend massive effort toward not biting his head off. She hasn’t yelled at him yet. He asked her if she was okay — that managed to piss her off. He told her that a really shitty thing happened to her — that managed to piss her off. He told her he’s sorry and he wishes he had been closer to her and watching out for her — that also pissed her off. He does not even understand why she is so pissed at him because he had the awareness of mind to not say out loud, some of the more sexist shit that is swirling around in his brain.

When Jhiqui opens the door, he watches as Missandei’s posture immediately relaxes. She suddenly becomes animated and chatty. She sighs loudly at Jhiqui, and she says, “Oh my God! I got groped on the train!”

Jhiqui immediately says, “What the fuck! Where did you get groped! Who groped you!” Inexplicably, Jhiqui shoots him this look of pure darkness before she apparently remembers who he is.

“She’s really pissed at the guy because, deep down inside, he feels possessive and that she belongs to him and is his property. No one gets to touch his wife like that except for him. He’s especially pissed at himself, for his general cluelessness and inaction — that he let that happen to her, that he didn’t protect her. He’s pissed that he feels embarrassed and ineffectual and impotent over this shit. He is pissed that he has managed to get super wrapped up in how he feels about this, instead of being able to focus on making her feel better. He’s also a little bit pissed at her in a really unfair way — because it’s kind of cold outside and her t-shirt is kind of low-cut and provocative, and he’s been battling with the way she dresses herself since the beginning of their relationship. He is generally pissed at himself for his entire line of excessively masculine thinking — for his general jealousy over it all, too. So he just double-downs on the indulgent self-loathing and internalizes.

They’ve barely said anything to each other since the incident. When he tries to talk to her, she generally looks like she has to expend massive effort toward not biting his head off. She hasn’t yelled at him yet. He asked her if she was okay — that managed to piss her off. He told her that a really shitty thing happened to her — that managed to piss her off. He told her he’s sorry and he wishes he had been closer to her and watching out for her — that also pissed her off. He does not even understand why she is so pissed at him because he had the awareness of mind to not say out loud, some of the more sexist shit that is swirling around in his brain.

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“Some random asshole grabbed my boob! Hard!”

“That fucking disgusting piece of shit,” Jhiqui says, sneering. “Did you call the cops?”

“What for? So they could do nothing!”

“Babe!” Jhiqui says, swinging her arms out wide. “I’m so fucking sorry! Men are awful!”

Missandei grunts, continuing to ignore him, jamming herself into Jhiqui’s body as Jhiqui’s arms come around her.

Jhiqui bombastically calls it sexual assault, and it awkwardly becomes a really big conversation topic at dinner with Nick’s bank friends. They are at this dinner party because Jhiqui’s marriage is on the
rocks and one of their sources of conflict is that she really, really has come to dislike Nick’s vanilla friends. Grey has played poker with some of Nick’s friends. They are generally rather inoffensive. In any case, Grey is not sure why that has resulted in the merging of friend-groups, but Missandei sarcastically told him that her other friends don’t really want to hang out with her lately, on account of her being too amazing.

Jhiqui is speaking with this purpose and this intent — and this pent up frustration — as she makes Missandei detail out every moment. Grey loves so much that he is so fucking absent from the story, off in fucking la-la land as his wife was being assaulted. He also loves hearing it in detail, because what he actually hears is unspoken condemnation because he was so fucking absent and such a failure.

Missandei says she wasn’t sure of what was happening at first, because sometimes boobs get smashed in thick crowds, but then she felt the squeeze and felt her nipple get pinched — this description manages to make both Grey and Jhiqui go a little nuts with rage, though Jhiqui’s anger is more obvious, more outwardly displayed. Missandei raises her hand and mimes it to all of them — she’s kind of trying to inject some levity into the story to lighten the mood, but Jhiqui stays committed to being visibility incensed.

“I hate that,” Jhiqui snipes. “That is all men know how to do. All they know is how to take from people — from women.”

After that, for a while, there is just this bizarre kind of punishment that all the people at dinner are trying to absorb gracefully. Everything Jhiqui says seems to be loaded with context that they don’t even know about. Nothing Nick says lands well with her. At a point, Nick tells them he can’t offer an opinion because he’s a man and therefore he doesn’t think he should have a say or an opinion in these kinds of discussions. To Grey, that sounds like a sensible enough way to empathize, but Jhiqui doesn’t seem to think so. She actually keeps daring Nick to have an opinion and the whole thing would make Grey feel more awkward if he wasn’t just hyper aware of Missandei sitting next to him, quietly eating her dinner.

“Don’t you think?” Jhiqui says suddenly, turning her sights on another one of her guests. “Brad, what do you think? What do you think of all of this?”

Brad was in the middle of shoving a dressed lettuce leaf into his mouth. His mouth is hanging open in surprise — then he slowly lowers his fork down to his plate and straightens in his seat. He says, “I’m sorry that happened to you, Missandei. That’s really terrible.”

There is a deep analysis that Missandei finds amusing, but one that makes Nick and a few others shift uncomfortably in their seats. It’s about how the nipple pinch really was above and beyond. A boob grab is one thing — a certain kind of offense — but to actually target the nipple —

“It’s like the difference between lying about your age and identity theft!” Melissa exclaims, clapping her hands together. She’s been drinking liberally.

“Yeah!” Jhiqui says, holding up her wine. She makes a funny face. She accepts that Melissa is trying to be down. “Kinda!”

“I would freak out so hard if a random man pinched my nipple in public,” Cat says, laying her hand on her own boob and frowning. “Oh my God, we should get a gun for our house,” she stage-
whispers to Brad.

He looks bewildered and freaked out at the very idea. “Uh, no we should not.”

This makes Missandei laugh in shock — choking on her wine — and she cannot believe no one else at the table is cracking up over this. She scans her eyes around.

“Grey, you’ve been super quiet,” Jhiqui muses aloud. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Pass,” he says automatically, his arm outstretched and resting on the table. He is twirling his glass of wine around.

“Pass?”

“Pass on this interrogation,” he says, elaborating. “Pass on the verbal entrapment. Pass on whatever you’re planning to prove about me.”

Jhiqui is sometimes like the living embodiment of that sister-in-law from hell trope that he has seen on TV. She often drives him batty. He often has to apply a fair bit of effort to get along with her for Missandei’s sake. Tonight, he is not up to the task. Tonight, he just wants to eat his dinner in peace and not be heckled based on a bunch of assumptions that people make about him.

So he sits. He sits, he eats, he drinks, he makes quiet observations to Nick about the food, because Nick has really put his entire heart and soul into this stuff, and it’s largely being ignored. Grey sometimes excuses himself to go to the bathroom and there — in the room by himself, he sits on the toilet and rests his face in his hands. He generally thinks that it would’ve been really nice if he had been there for Missandei to fucking clock the guy. He generally wonders if she blames him for not being there.

When he gets back to the table, Don is telling them this story about being felt up by a massage therapist once. It was apparently before Don met Melissa and it was during a couples’ massage. It’s a bit of a long-winded story, and Grey is only listening to half of it as he sips his wine. He feels Missandei’s hand running up and down his spine — she has gradually warmed back up to him over the course of the night, having decided at a point to get over whatever it was that was bothering her about him. He can’t really look at her right now because if he does, he will feel emotional about it. He’s wetting his lips and sucking back another slow sip of Nick’s specially picked pinot noir when his ears prick up at a real bogus statement.

“That’s why it’s hard to actually rape a guy,” Don says, referring to the dependability and biological imperative of the male erection.

“Oh shit, look who came alive,” Jhiqui says, smiling at him.

He ignores Jhiqui’s general approval of him and smacks his lips, tasting tannins. “Males are not invulnerable to sexual victimization and a pleasure response does not signal that emotional harm isn’t being done — like, that is so whack to me. A lot of people feel a lot of guilt for the way they have responded to abuse, but maybe the mind signals arousal because there’s sometimes an evolutionary point in it all — erections and ejaculations are known to occur during times of extreme duress, in the
absence of sexual pleasure. But man, I don’t even want to be having this conversation with you right
now.”

At the end of the night, she goes around hugging everyone after promising to exchange information
with the wives so that they can all get together again. The hug that Jhiqui gives her is extra hard,
whether it’s in gratitude for getting groped so that dinner conversation is hoppin’ or whether it’s for
something more complex — but Jhiqui holds on for a long time, and it makes Missandei feel warm
inside.

Jhiqui also hugs Grey extra tightly — he looks like he doesn’t even understand why, but he takes it.

Don actually apologized to Grey after Grey’s diatribe. They offered to drive her and Grey to the train
station, but she insists that they’d rather just walk there, waving through their blinding headlights as
gravel crunches beneath tires.

She was kind of upset with him earlier in the evening — because he’s a man and he was absent
when it happened and her anger was misplaced — but now she reaches out to grab his hand.

At the train station, it’s definitely a deliberate action, when he opens up the flaps of his jacket before
pulling her body into his. His arms come around her back as she nuzzles her face into the crook of
his shoulder.

She says, “This is super PDA of you.”

He mutters, “Man, I think I will lose my mind if you get felt up by a stranger twice in one night.” She
feels his hand brushing her bottom. She hears him say, “Just keep your butt close to me, okay?”

She laughs into his skin, unsure of just how serious he is — whether or not he is wryly joking.

She tells him that it’s okay if he touches her, because it feels nice and it will help erase how gross it
felt when that shithead touched her. She tells him that she’s gotten so used to him and only his hands
on her body.

That makes him duck his head down, and it makes him sheepishly admit that he wishes that all of
these honest statements from her weren’t contextualized by some fucking disgusting groper. He
admits that he still finds her statements kind of exciting and kind of romantic and sweet. He’s gotten
used to being the only one who gets to touch her like this, too.

He finds that their clothes are a burden — uncomfortably tight and pulled taut as they roll around on
the bed — so he takes them off. He tells her, “Let’s try not to have sex tonight. I don’t want to have
sex in response to this.” He means that he doesn’t want to taint the sex they have with some bullshit.

“You can try to not have sex with me.”

“Oh, I will,” he assures her, grinning as he counterintuitively pulls her shirt the rest of way off. “I
will.” He groans as he presses his bare chest to hers. She’s so soft in these strategic places, and it’s so
lovely.
She smells like her perfume — the scent of it concentrated on the column of her neck. His vision is already going hazy in the dark as his hands run back up her thighs. He settles himself in between her legs, and he rolls his eyes at himself — at the tingly flush that hits his face as he starts to lose his grip on his logic for not having sex with her. She feels so good and warm and safe.

He’s actually about to recant and tell her he has totally changed his mind on the sex, but her legs tighten around his hips — that gets his attention — he drops his weight a little bit more and he remembers the pain of what it felt like, to fall in love with this person.

She says, “I’m sorry I shut you out earlier in the night — right after it happened. I was really wrapped up in myself and how I felt — and I automatically assumed you wouldn’t get it.” She releases a long breath, touching his face gently. “I often forget about what happened to you.”

He sighs, too — he didn’t expect this. He fully lowers herself and just compresses her body underneath his. He feels her arms come around him as he kisses her neck. He says, “I forget sometimes, too. Being with you kind of makes me forget. Maybe that’s one of the reasons I love being with you.”

“I think you are so amazing.” She says it softly. She’s getting choked up.

“Man, are you pissed that I wasn’t there to protect you?”

“A little bit at first,” she admits. “But that was irrational.” She shakes her head. “I’m currently more pissed that I didn’t catch the guy — that I froze in shock — that I didn’t just start swinging punches and beating the shit out of that asshole when it first happened. I was just so self-conscious and got worried about how it would look to strangers. It’s so dumb.”

“Sometimes we freeze because we’re scared that if we fight back, we could get more hurt,” he says. He sighs. “Man, babe. I really hate that some guy grabbed you. Like, I really, really hate it.”

“Baby, I know. I hate it, too. I feel kind of traumatized. Like, I’m going to be talking about this a lot in my next therapy session.”

“I kind of wanna fuck the skeezy feeling outta you,” he says quietly, immediately laughing at himself. “I want to murder that asshole with my bare hands and fuck you in a pool of his blood. I wanted to say that to you at dinner, but man, I don’t want people scared of me.”

“Oh my God, why do I find the terrible things you say to be so freaking adorable and sexy?”

He squeezes her tightly, shutting his eyes. “Sometimes I think it’s weird, the way we idealize victimization.”

“Yeah?”

“Like, the language we use — changing it so it’s more active. We’re no longer victims where things are enacted upon us. We’re now survivors, people who have the strength to withstand.”

He’s bringing this up partly because it’s an ongoing conversation with Amari, who is very wrapped up in semantics and terminology when it comes to this sort of thing. Amari always insists that Grey is a survivor. Grey always thinks that it doesn’t really matter what he is called. Sometimes it even makes him angry, the inflation of these terms.

“Why is that weird?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes it’s like I’m being told that a language switch would make it different than
what it was or make me feel better about it or something.”

He kisses her right away, perhaps to make himself feel better about what he just said. He doesn’t break the kiss as he rolls onto his back, pulling her on top of him. His hands run up and down her smooth back, as he deepens the kiss — kissing her hard and bruisingly. He lightly bites down on her bottom lip when she shifts and their bodies lock into each other in a deeply familiar and sexual kind of way. He breaks the kiss, panting, trying to focus on anything except for the wet heat of her pressing down on the center of him. He doesn’t know why it has to be like this — why the best sex happens like this.

She changes the trajectory of the conversation again though — steering it away from sex and back on topic. She says, “I like calling you that to myself, in my head, though — a survivor. Or I like to call you a fighter in my head. And I don’t think it’s some PR spin. Because — I mean, look at you.” She sitting up, pressing more of weight directly over his hips. She runs her hands up his chest. “You’re so fucking amazing. I can’t believe you sometimes. You’re just a person that works so hard for everything you’ve got. I don’t know anyone who works harder or fights more than you do — at everything.”

It sometimes painful to hear these things from her. He is so undeserving sometimes. But he tries to be truthful anyway. He says, “I’ve been doing it for you. And for us.”

In the morning, she has a far rougher time getting up than he does, because they spent a lot of the night chatting. He likes that she was the one that got violated and that he was the one that reaped the benefits and all of the compliments and all of the semi-sexual massaging that led to nowhere satisfying.

He pulls back the blankets specifically so he can slap her ass into awakeness — she yelps in surprise and then whines as she scrunches her naked body into a tighter ball.

“Baby, you’re gonna be late to work,” he says, tugging her hand.

“Dress me,” she mutters into the pillow, resisting, eyes still closed. “Can you just put clothes on me while I sleep a little more?”

She really does wake up — more comprehensively — when she hears the electronic shutter sound that his phone makes when he takes a picture. She automatically and ineffectively covers her body with her hands — too little too late. “Oh my God,” she says. “You’re going to accidentally send these pics to our friends or my family one of these days, and I will fucking kill you.”

They dress themselves at the same time — for the first time in a long time. She is full of bad timing, because she goes nuts when she sees him putting on his suit. It takes forever because she keeps playing grab ass and releasing these guttural groans as she tells him that he looks so hot. He tries to blow off the heat because they do not even have time to mess around right now, as he tells her that she is so fucking conventional. Of course she likes this. Of course she is attracted to shit like this.

He hugs her and kisses her before they part ways. He tells her to wish him luck. It’s a new thing he’s trying — soliciting well wishes and pretending that they will magically affect his outcomes.
It makes him feel nice though, when she tells him that she has so much belief in him — it is limitless. She says, “Do well, baby. And call me right after you’re finish? I wanna hear about it because I wanna know just how rich we’re gonna be.”
He sits nervously in the conference room, waiting for Dany and an HR rep. This office is not exactly like Lannister-Ostrom — which is massive, super phallic, super metallic in architecture, and dark. This office building has four floors, and the chairs in the waiting room are bright orange. It is still really corporate though. On his last visit, Dany walked him through the various break and lunch rooms on the campus as well as showed him the adjoining gym and locker room because she vaguely knows about his hobbies and was trying to be nice. He thinks it’s funny that she thinks his hobbies are simply eating and exercising.

He doesn’t really care nor has he put much thought into amenities. He ate at his desk or went out to lunch with Tanja or Missandei a lot at his old building. He didn’t care about getting an office with a window. He didn’t care that it was near a train line because he likes walking. He didn’t care about work culture, though he did find nameday celebrations and potlucks to be a royal waste of time.

Right now, he’s trying to make himself care. He’s noticing the funky colors in the decor. At first, he thinks it’s like this place is trying to showcase its wannabe hipster creativity through office furniture — and then he amends his overly negative thoughts and tells himself it’s actually probably because orange is a cheery color that makes people happy. One of the things the head of finance told him was that the Iconic Group is a large corporation with a grassroots, start-up mentality — proudly stating that as if it was a selling point for Grey, because Grey is young and he seems hip.

The description actually kind of grossed out Grey. He is very much a soulless corporate lackey. He is not like Drogo, charismatic and a natural business leader. He is not like Jaime, motivated by a belief system. He is boring and typical. He goes to work because he wants money. He appreciates that work pays him money. He will work for money.

He’s trying to grasp at more than just this though.

Dany guesses that Lannister-Ostrom are giving him a sick pile of cash and stock options. He
confirms that yes, this is true. They are trying to buy his love.

Dany tells him that there is no way that Iconic can match the salary he was offered — the industries are different. Profit margins with apparel and consumer goods are razor-thin compared to finance and wealth management.

“Okay,” he says blankly. He’s waiting for her to sweeten the pot — and when she doesn’t actually sweeten the pot, he says, “So I should go work for Lannister-Ostrom, then?”

Dany lightly shrugs her shoulders. Her blinds are shut but the sun is still bright behind her, creating this golden haze around her head. She says, “We can’t offer you a better salary than what they are offering. We can offer a ten percent increase from our previous offer and another week of paid vacation. We also can’t offer you a vanity job title. We can’t even offer you the freedom of coming and going whenever you please and having run of a whole department.”

“Oh okay?”

“But it’s fun to work here,” she says. “It moves fast. Decisions happen in an instant sometimes. It is always changing. You get to control and touch some of the creative. You get to live and breathe clothing all day.”

“Well,” he says, smiling a little bit. “You know that I’ve always harbored a passion for women’s fashion.” It’s a very old joke — it comes to mind automatically and without much thought on his part.

“I know,” Dany says, responding very seriously, like she doesn’t get the joke. “That’s why I was hoping you’d really consider joining us.”

It finally happens. Grandma finally got worn down by years worth of discussion and argument. She finally relented, maybe because Lucy, her dog, recently died. She has finally accepted that she is old as hell and should not be lonely and alone in the house that her dead husband and dead grandchild used to live in. She is going to get her stuff packed up, and she’s going to move in with Moss permanently. They are going to sell that old house because they don’t need it, and they will use the money from the sale to ensure that Grandma’s healthcare is taken care of for the rest of her life.

Missandei is, unfortunately, ass-deep in the middle of the busy season and she cannot take any significant length of time off. She can only fly home during a weekend — a fact that really pisses her off and simultaneously makes her very sad. She tells him that there’s so much of her childhood home that she wants to see and take pictures of, before it gets cleaned out.

“I can go,” Grey says simply. “Early, I mean. Like, I don’t start my new job for another week. So I can go and help them out.”

She frowns. “Babe, you don’t have to do that.”

“I know.” He’s shrugging. “I want to. I haven’t see your gram or your brothers in awhile. I mean, maybe there’s something new she hates about me that she’s been itching to communicate to me?”
He’s softly humming along to the big, girly pop that is filtering out of their speakers — her cardio mix — as he pushes her head to the side to expose her neck. He scrapes his blunt teeth against her skin — laughing — as her responsive body breaks out in tiny goosebumps. She’s holding onto his body tightly, with one leg hitched over his to keep him in place. She kisses him slow like just kissing him is enough, like she doesn’t have this knowledge and these memories of more, and like it’s the only reason she took off their clothes and pulled him onto bed.

He breaks the kiss to nuzzle her cheek, and he whispers, “I’m gonna miss the naked snuggles.” Her hands have traveled to his biceps, which she grips and pulls so he’d take the hint. He slowly lowers himself on top her. He’s always irrationally worried about squishing her or suffocating her accidentally. She can’t seem to make him fully understand that she loves being buried underneath him.

She tells him, “I’m gonna miss how obsessed with me you are,” as she gently runs her hands up the planes of his back. “And the zero percent body fat oh my God you’re disgusting!”

“Oh my God, you’re so obsessed with me,” he says, raising himself onto his elbows, kind of hovering over her. “And I’m gonna miss your um, twenty-six percent body fat.”

She immediately hits him in the shoulder. “Oh my God, you did not just guess that!”

“Relax,” he says, giving her a kiss. “That’s a nice percentage. There’s still a lot to grab onto.” For emphasis, he grabs onto her butt, squeezes, and hikes her up a little bit higher on the bed, groaning a bit as she scrapes up against him. “You carry a lot of it in your ass and your boobs. A little bit here.” He pinches the area where her hip met her stomach.

She hates that she’s laughing at this — because he’s a punk — but she’s in a fit of laughter as she tries to slap his hand off her stomach. She says, “You’re terrible! You’re terrible! Why are you body-shaming me!”

“For this response,” he says, rolling her over so she’s on top. “Look at you,” he says, staring at her breasts and not her face. “Just overreacting.”

Her short laughs becoming continuous giggling when as he rocks into her, as his hands go exploring.

“Okay, you need to stop.” He is amused, not ticked. “I’m trying to do stuff with you right now so you need to stop laughing.”

Missandei keeps touching his butt because she is being clingy and is bummed that she can’t go back to Myr with him. He’s taking the dog because Missandei has been working ten-hour days. He doesn’t want their dog to be alone in the house for that long.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been alone in our house like this ever before,” she tells him. “It’s going to be so lonely.”

“Well, try to clean up after the rager, okay?” He is trying to keep it light because he doesn’t want her to dwell. He wants her to miss him, of course, but he doesn’t want her to miss him in an inconsolable
way. He grabs her face — her lips automatically pucker — and he gives her a loud, punctuated kiss. “I love you. So much. I’ll call you later tonight.”

He volunteered for this because he feels a sense of duty. It’s just the right thing to do. It’s her family. He’s married to her. He won’t go as far as to say that it’s like they’re his family, too — because he doesn’t think that way — but he does feel a sense of responsibility to Missandei’s grandmother and her brothers and her nieces and nephews.

When Mars shows up to pick him up, Grey notices that Mars has new facial hair — a goatee. Grey hikes up the strap of the bag holding his dog. He’s been excessively fixated on her comfort. She’s been amazing and obedient — scared but quiet. She’s been holding in her pee for hours. It’s heartbreaking, and he loves how brave she is.

“What up, brother!”

Grey grins, ducking his head down to peer at Mars through the open window. “Hi, Mars.”

Grey loves the sun actually. He remarks that it’s so nice to be somewhere warm and dusty and bright. King’s Landing has been cloudy and moody. Momo is out of her bag and sitting on his lap, with his hands stroking her back as she nervously pants.

Mars catches him up on all of the latest gossip — Grey has forgotten that Mars is kind of a gossiping hag. Marselen tells Grey that Moss has started seeing a woman. She is white! Gasp! Grandma hates her for no reason — but obviously because she is white and divorced. Grandma complains that she is too short. Molly — the woman — is really, really sweet though. Mars tells Grey about the Starbucks that is now sitting kitty-corner to his and Moss’ garage and how their neighborhood is kind of getting bougie. They’ve been getting more requests for custom work. Their bread and butter used to solely be repair work and insurance claims. Mars tells Grey it’s all for the best because — as they have learned with Hassan — college is now fucking expensive as shit.

“It’s fucking robbery,” Mars remarks. “Paying for Miss’ school was nothing compared to the bill Moss gets these days. How do people even live? Anyway, how are you guys? Is my baby sis pregnant yet?”

Grey catches the twinkle in Mars’ eyes and the half-smirk on his face. Grey says, “Man, I think it’s totally weird that you guys are constantly asking if Missandei and I are regularly having unprotected sex.”

“Oh, ew.”

“How do you think babies are made, man?”

“Yo, man, I know how babies are made! Trust me. I’ve made three of them. But man, I don’t need the mental image of Missandei naked with you.”
“That’s your loss. She looks amazing naked.”

“Grey! You’re being so gross! I’m her brother!”

“Yeah man!” Grey says, rolling his hand out the open window, catching air. “So stop constantly asking if she’s pregnant or not. If it happens — she will tell you, okay?”

His efforts are pointless, because when he sees Grandma, the first thing that flies out of her mouth in Low Valyrian is an accusation. She is accusing him of not impregnating Missandei, which is pretty factual, so he’s not really sure how to respond to this. He mostly opts to stand there dumbly with 2.0 and just takes the verbal abuse about how dumb he and Missandei are, as Mars laughs from behind him. Grandma is still oddly accusing when she jabs a finger at him and tells him that their children would be so beautiful, and it is all just a waste of time. She asks him what is going to happen tomorrow if she dies and Missandei is not pregnant?

Again, another question he does not know how to respond to. So he says, “Uhhh.”

She’s been extra paranoid and extra vigilant whenever she’s been out in public, ever since the groping incident. She has also been more judicious in choosing her casual clothes. Her necklines have been higher and her layers have been thicker. Chunky cable-knit cardigans are currently a part of her repertoire. She tells herself it’s because it’s been blustery and windy lately, but really, it’s because she wants to ward off would-be gropers.

She hopes this is all temporary and that in a few weeks, she’ll be back to her bold choices and her risk-taking. Or, as Grey and her gram like to euphemistically say — putting the goods on display as if they are on clearance. Grey heard her grandma say that to her in Low Valyrian a couple of times and he loved it and adopted the saying as his own.

She’s waiting for Dany at one of their favorite restaurants — one that is coincidentally near Dany’s office. Dany is running late, and Missandei is trying to figure out which is the yummiest yet lowest calorie appetizer.

Her thick hair is piled on top of her head and contained in a pretty yellow silk scarf. This is the only way she can express her colorful personality at the moment. The baby hairs on the back of her neck prick up as she’s reading the ingredients and calorie information of country pate on her cellphone, when she feels and sees a shadow crawl across the table.

“Um, hey —”

“What do you want!” she pushes out — surprised at how sassy and rude she sounds.

“Whoa,” he says, holding his hands up in a peacemaking gesture.

He is rather tall and broad and classically handsome with a five o’clock shadow. Gross.
“Sorry for bothering you,” he says. “But you look so familiar to me.” She’s trying to figure out if this is a pick-up line or not when he adds, “Did you attend Crownsland U, by chance? About ten years ago?”

“Oh,” she says, scrunching up her nose. “I did.”

He then cracks this grateful smile, flashing her two rows of super white teeth. He kind of laughs reflexively. “I think we met once — at a party. I’m sorry, but I don’t remember your name. I just remember your face. Because it’s a beautiful face.”

He’s supposed to be here to help pack up the house and transfer big loads of furniture into the mother-in-law suite that Moss built in his backyard for Grandma. But he is not at all surprised that they are treating his visit with some pomp and circumstance. This seems like something they would do — like, not jump headfirst into work — like, just partying instead of taking care of work.

The kitchen is littered with middle-age-and-up women who are cooking a million chickens. He has to step around their newspapers nervously as cleavers whack down onto cutting boards. He has to constantly carry his dog around because all of the kids want to play with 2.0 and 2.0 does not reciprocate the love. She is actually scared to death of children because they are rambunctious.

Grey basically spends his first night there just clutching onto his dog and getting wildly hammered with Missandei’s brothers and cousins. They actually made Hassan come home from college for the weekend even though he has a big exam to study for — just because Grey is visiting. This is a fact that almost paralyzes Grey with guilt and an oppressive sense of obligation and responsibility. He keeps nervously quizzing Hassan whenever he comes across the kid even though it’s been fucking forever since he learned differential equations.

“Oh, he’s done,” Moss says, looking at Grey’s empty beer bottle, which he’s been trying to hide. He hasn’t really legitimately plastered since before Drogo came out as alcoholic. “Get him a beer!” Moss shouts at his son. “Go get your uncle another beer! Go! There are some I put in the freezer! Take those out before they explode!”

Hassan is running.

Grey is in the middle of a bewildered giggle fit. In between laughs, he chokes out, “Why is it so urgent? What’s the emergency?”

She doesn’t think she needs to wear a wedding ring, and she doesn’t think she needs to broadcast that Grey exists, for men to respect her space. She is becoming more and more adamant about this as she gets older. This is the context driving her lack of warmth as she talks to random strange and handsome man.

She tells him that she honestly does not remember him — and she is generally pretty good at remembering faces. He tells her he was thinner in college. She almost jokingly blurts out something like, “So was I.” But he doesn’t really need to know about her current struggle with her weight and
He tells her that he just moved back to King’s Landing after living in Sunspear for awhile for a job. He kind of sighs and then laughs again to himself. He is big on laughing to expel discomfort.

“Which party did we meet at?” she asks. “Do you remember?”

“Yeah, it was a party with a bunch of the crew guys, a bunch of rowers.”

Her jaw drops. She tilts her head and she mentally reexamines this man’s height again. “Oh, man. Did you row crew, too?”

His ears seem to perk up at the word “too.” He says, “Yeah.”

“Oh my gosh, you must’ve known my husband!” she says excitedly, finally shedding off the last worries of stranger-danger. “And a bunch of our friends!”

“Oh! Who’s your husband?”

He knows he’s gonna have a really rough morning, because right now, the room is swirling, and he is having a real shit time focusing on anything anyone is saying. Missandei is right. He is kind of bad at listening. He is so full. He probably ate fifty flavors of chicken all by himself, because he’s trying to gain Grandma’s approval through food because he cannot do it by knocking up Missandei. It is a fool’s errand because she doesn’t even fucking care that he is in pain and will have to take the craziest poop in her bathroom later.

“Yo, you okay, man?”

“No, man!” Grey explodes into Mars’ face. “I am not! I am so drunk right now! Yo, do we have a moving truck? Did you guys rent one?”

“Nah, man. I ain’t paying for that shit. We have a friend.”

“When’s he meeting us?”

“He gonna give us a call sometime.”

“Like, when?”

“When he calls!” Mars shouts, now getting kind of agitated at all of the unfun questions. “Relax, man.”

“Man, we should make up a task list because we need to get boxes and tape — and you always need more than you think you do. I can go to the store early in the morning. We also need labels and also to inventory all of the things so nothing gets lost in the shuffle. Do you know how much of this stuff Grandma plans on keeping and what she wants to get rid of or to donate?”

“Labels? Inventory?” Moss makes a face at him. “Don’t be so white, Grey.”

“Man,” Grey says gravely — very seriously. “Wanting to be organized and efficient is not white.
Grandma expects for him to stay in Missandei’s old room — so that is where he stays at the very end of the night. The linens are very clean and neat and she did up a little table next to the bed for his suitcase.

He actually just wants to pass the fuck out so that the spinning with stop, but Missandei has been bugging him all night with her texts, asking him what is going on, asking for the play-by-play, inquiring about whether or not he’s getting along with her family and all of that shit. She also keeps asking for dog updates — and he has sent her pictures of their dog even though their dog looks exactly the same and does not really visually change minute to minute. These are the spectacularly dumb things he does for love.

“Hey, baby! Whoa, you don’t look so good.”

She also insisted on video-chatting with him, not content to just hear his voice over the phone. She’s so fucking obsessed with him. He groans, rolling fully onto his back and trying not to barf and 2.0 pounces on his stomach. “Hey,” he says, greeting her. And then immediately, he says, “Are we gonna do this every night while I’m away?”

“Oh, what? Like you don’t want to talk to me every night?” She’s smiling — she’s joking around. “I’m pretty drunk,” he admits.

“So cute!”

“Huh?”

“Oh, the dog. Not you. You probably smell.”

That makes him laugh, even though he doesn’t want to. Laughing makes him feel sick. But he stares at her through the haze of the ceiling light and through the screen, and he realizes that he does already misses her.

She tries to tell him about how she ran into an old friend of his from crew, and he manages to refute this and tell her that it’s impossible because he has no other friends than the friends he currently has. He has no old friends.

He then says, “Pod? Was it Pod? Pod was our cox. Pod was really nice. Jaime was a real dick to him for no reason though. Oh my God. Cox. Dick. Wordplay, baby. I think Jaime was a bully.”

“No, Grey,” she says, suppressing a laugh. He’s an idiot. “Not Pod. Daario is really tall, so not a coxswain. He remembers you. He said a lot of really nice things about you.”
“Oh shit! Drogo kind of hated Daario, so I couldn’t be friends with the guy because I wasn’t allowed to be friends with people Drogo hated.” He pauses. “Oh shit, I think Jaime and Drogo prevented me from having so many friends.”

“No, hon, it was definitely your personality — that prevented you from having so many friends.” She cracks up at her own sick burn, trying to high-five herself onscreen so he can see.

He does not see because he is not paying attention. It’s hard to talk to him like this because he is so drunk, but she gets other things out of it anyway.

She thinks that he is super adorable, for instance, because he is especially unguarded right now — almost verging on childlike, if not for the potty mouth and occasional blistering comment about what Naathi be like. He keeps muttering that he gets how Naathi got enslaved — it’s because they don’t care about boxes and organizing their shit. She is sure it makes sense to him, and she is kind of perturbed that he stole her line. She is the one who is always saying that she knows why Naathi were enslaved. It’s actually because all they want for their women is to get them pregnant.

She also feels protective. She doesn’t want to hear him bash her culture, not really. That’s really only something that she can do.

And she’s about to tell him that he’s kind of rubbing up against a raw nerve, but then he says, “All night, Moss and Mars kept calling me brother and they kept referring to me as the kids’ uncle. And I just kept thinking that it’s like, so bizarre. It’s so weird because I never even thought of myself in that way, in those terms ever, you know? I ate so much fucking chicken and drank so much fucking beer because I felt so uncomfortable and unworthy and so . . . like, it was really nice. It was unexpectedly emotional. I haven’t been someone’s brother — in like, a non-Black, non-racisty way — in like . . . a very, very long time. Your brothers are so nice and friendly to me. It was even nice — all the times your grandma yelled at me. I think that’s how she shows she cares. Oh baby, I tried to defend you and the baby thing — but it did not work. I think I made it worse because in front of all of her friends, Grandma was like, ‘Why aren’t you doing right by my granddaughter? Are you stepping out on her with a young thing? Is your jizz jacked?’ and I was like, ‘Wow, super rude.’ Just kidding. I did not say that. I actually just froze and I stuttered like a little bitch because I was drunk and sometimes I have a hard time being super eloquent in Low Valyrian. And then I threw you under the bus ‘cause she made me so flustered. I’m sorry, baby.”
Grey didn't miss his wife

Chapter Summary

Missandei joins everyone in Myr.

Grey thinks that the little house that Moss and Mars built in Moss’ backyard is really neat — really simple and rustic — two terms that he has historically had a hard time not making sound like pejoratives. But this time around, he honestly means them as compliments — he’s honestly impressed.

The house is well-planned. It has a little kitchenette, though they are well aware that most of the cooking will happen in the main kitchen, in Moss’ house. They tell Grey that it would’ve felt weird to build a house without a kitchen, but putting in a kitchen was a real fucking pain in the ass, with the plumbing and the electrical.

There is also a sitting room set up for guests, a bedroom sequestered in the back, and a full bathroom with contemporary fixtures — which they think is a nice change from the decades-old rickety shit that is in the old family house.

The old family house is something they all keep talking around and not directly about. They have been careful to not inject any sentimentality or bring up too many memories in casual conversation, just in case it makes Grandma change her mind about moving in with Moss.

Grey is hungover and trying to not barf all over his breakfast of hot tea and a million different meats because even though Naathi aren’t very meat-centric in their diet, Grandma has probably sussed out that he needs the manly nourishment to fortify his virility or something.

He is just guessing — just based on the way she drops dishes down on the table with a clank and barks at him to eat — before she retreats to the opposite end where her hot tea and the half a slice of bread is waiting for her. That is her breakfast. It is supremely unfair.

He keeps telling his therapist that he is disgustingly obedient, a trait that Amari has a hard time not being skeptical of. Grey has admitted that he can be stubborn, and he generally doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want to — yes, these are also personality traits he has. But they are weirdly coupled with an inane obsessive need to not fail people. He keeps shoving heavily spiced meat into his face as his stomach rolls and as the saliva in his mouth thickens and turns a little metallic — that prelude to the waves of nausea that he has to beat down in order not to gag because he would feel like shit if he
gagged on Grandma’s food in front of her.

When he finishes about three-quarters of the spread — he just stares in hopelessness and shock as Grandma gets up from her seat to refill the plates of food.

Finally, he weakly tells her in Low Valyrian that he’s getting full and that he doesn’t need more food.

She frowns and tells him he’s too skinny — but she does drop the spoon.

He feels like an idiot — on many counts. He wonders if maybe he is too skinny. He thinks that only fucking little children cannot speak up for themselves on simple shit, such as being full. He is also aware that a lot of money and a lot of food was procured purely on his behalf because this woman clearly does not eat that much and so if he doesn’t polish off the food, then it will go to waste. He feels guilt over this. He also wonders when the fuck he developed so many fucking complexes over familial dynamics and relationships.

She has refilled her tea cup and is warming her hands around it as she randomly tells him that Missandei’s grandfather built this house that brought up all of the kids.

He freezes for a moment — for a freak second, he wonders if he heard her correctly because his Low Valyrian is rusty due to disuse and also nervousness — and then he cautiously tells her that it must be hard to leave a place with a lot of history.

She totally declines what he is offering up — empathy perhaps — and she says that the house is very old and drafty. It’s not hard to leave it.

Missandei’s grandma ends up more fixated on him — on hosting him properly — than she is in packing up her shit. She keeps asking him which item of his clothing she can wash for him — multiple times a day. He keeps trying to create as little inconvenience as possible so he tells her that he’s fine and he can wash his clothes himself.

And then he watches in horror as she flips open his suitcase and picks out some things — like socks and underwear. He just about spazzes out in a kind of embarrassment and mutters out some incoherent protest — and she reminds him that she has raised two generations of men, more or less telling him that his underwear is not special to her whatsoever.

On his end, every time he and Grandma culture clash on some sort of procedure — it actually makes him think of Missandei. It makes him miss her because he can see these echoes of her in these stupid mini-disagreements with her grandma. They contextualize all of the stories about her sneaking out of the house and then getting beat for sneaking out of the house. They even shed new light on her very soft eating disorder — her obsession with her body, weight, and her beauty.

And then there are times when Grandma turns a certain way or he catches sight of her at a certain angle — and she actually looks like Missandei. Mars and Moss look like Missandei, too, all in different ways. That makes him think about how strange it is to actually have people exist who look like someone he loves. There are probably still people out there who have a resemblance to him, if he were to be honest with himself.
He feels like he is the only one who actually cares about packing up shit and moving houses. He has wasted a lot of time asking Grandma questions about her stuff — reasonable questions about what she wants to keep and what she wants to throw away, questions that completely just annoy the shit out of her. However, he doesn’t feel like he can just make a judgement call and start labeling shit for the garbage and shit for the keep pile based on guesses. He starts to pack up stuff that he knows — for sure — is going over to the other house. He packs up photo albums and picture frames.

Grandma totally gets in his way by trying to tell him a story about nearly every goddamn picture. The stories about Missandei and the other brothers are easy. He likes hearing about Missandei, both about the shy and obedient elementary years and the turbulent and rebellious high school years. He keeps trying to superimpose his own history over it, trying to remember what he was doing and what emotional state he was in, when Missandei had pigtails and was embarrassed of her lunch box because it telegraphed that they could not afford to give her hot lunch money.

The stories about Missandei’s grandfather and of her other brother are sometimes flippant and also sometimes flippantly tragic — like Grandma does not even know how to drag out a narrative for maximum emotional impact. She matter-of-factly tells him she didn’t expect to be living so long — and to have lived so long without her husband. She also didn’t expect to outlive one of her children. She tells him that, sometimes, a long life seems kind of pointless because she has run out of things to do. A lot of her friends have died. That is another strange thing — how people die until all of them are all alone.

He knows this conversation topic generally freaks out Missandei — she doesn’t like her grandma’s ongoing and relentless obsession with death. But he actually is into it. Death is a topic that he has put a lot of thought into, over the course of his comparatively short life. As he wraps up and tapes up framed photos in newspaper, he tells Grandma that he used to want to die, too. At various points in his early life, he wanted to die because dying would end the pain of living. Early in his life, when he was taken away, the dangling hope was this promise that he’d see his mother and his family again, if he put up with the pain. That hope lasted far too long and was far too unreasonable after a certain point. But perhaps it saved him for a time.

She says nothing in response to his confession — which kind of throws him for a loop because usually, people ask a lot of questions to convey their disbelief — that that was his life. But she must accept suffering, and she must understand it, so that is why she says nothing in response to him.

Grey asks Grandma if she believes that she will see Missandei’s grandfather and Melaku after she dies.

She tells him that she is sure that she will see them again. She tells him that she knows that they are taking care of one another somewhere — right now. They are waiting for her to join them.

For some reason, that makes him tear up. He swipes at his eyes in annoyance. She pats his shoulder as she uses it to stand up.

She misses him a lot. It’s been a pain to come home late to an empty and quiet house. It’s been a bummer to eat dinner by herself. And it’s been lonely to go to bed by herself.

When she sneaks a call to him in the middle of the day, he instantly starts complaining. He tells her
that packing up is taking forever because her family is constantly sabotaging him. It makes her smile — because while she did not really predict that this would happen, it makes total sense that this is happening — and it is hilarious.

“You’re on Naathi time now, baby,” she tells him. “It’s that Island mentality. That Island spirit. You gotta slowww down and relax and just take the time enjoy life, you know?”

“The fuck I do!” he exclaims into her ear.

She laughs, because he is so quintessentially him.

The conversation is short because it has to be. She’s at work, so she can’t tell him that she really misses his cute tushy and beautiful-angry face. Instead, she preens a little bit when he gives her a backhanded compliment — when he tells her that he has a greater appreciation for her messiness and her sloppiness, because it can be far, far worse. She tells him that she appreciates that he now understands that she can be far, far worse.

He mutters about how different he could be — right now — if he had never left the Summer Isles — if he had stayed and had a happy and comfortable childhood. He jokes that all of the best things about him would probably not exist. Like his killer sense of style and his collection of suits. His hot, svelte bod. His specialized talent of incisively shitting on the things that other people really love in a way that is really hurtful to them. His unwavering strictness to doing things in the right way, in a way that drives other people mad. So many great things — the stuff that makes him who he is — was probably born out of trauma and hardship.

“Yeah,” she says quietly. This isn’t the first time this observation has been made.

“Man, I am so awesome,” he adds — and he doesn’t sound like he’s being sarcastic for once. “I don’t even know how you’re not blinded when you look at the fucking sunshine I emit.”

“Yeah, baby. If that’s your takeaway, sure.”

He spends a lot of time creeping on Missandei’s shit — in her bedroom. He’s always a tad drunk and it’s at the end of a long day when he peeps her stuff with Momo 2.0. He looks through a bunch of her old CDs — back when her mixes were recorded and organized in a bin. He thumbs through her yearbook and searches for photos of her, and he thinks that he’d def smash that beautiful girl at any age after puberty. He opens drawers and touches a bunch of knick-knacks she has probably forgotten about, like misting body sprays and a million folded origami stars.

He finds some diaries in a box in the closet — and he knows he that he has struck fucking gold. The diaries have fake locks — locks that are easy to pick with a pin or a small screwdriver. He doesn’t give more than half a thought about invading her privacy as he cracks the first one open. He chose the most juvenile-looking one — with rainbow pages — because she was probably the youngest when she wrote in it.

Her handwriting was girly and very loopy — changing every few pages like she was trying to settle on an identity. His heart just generally throbs tightly as he reads through the random shit she used to write about — about her teachers, recess, her friends, these boy names that he has never heard her mention before. To him, she comes across so fucking cute, so fucking insecure, and so fucking self-
conscious in her diary — and it makes him feel such love for her. He’s been trying to pick out passages that might prove to be prophetic. He kind of wants to know if she was already thinking about him before they met — if she was already preparing herself to be ready for him, even before she knew he existed.

There are sparse references to marriage or husbands in the early diary — she was actually ridiculously proud of achievements and wrote a lot about how much she loved soccer. She was fixated on the times she got in trouble for stuff and detailed how she got punished and how she was so upset over it.

This all changes in the later diaries. In the high school diaries, she’s fucking obsessed with Neal, and Grey is over that shit real fast. When he lands on the entry right after her brother died — he knows he has crossed a line.

He stops reading. He shuts the journal. And he makes a mental note to confess to her that he read her shit. He tells himself that he should offer to let her read some of his journal, so that she would potentially be less mad at him.

Most of the big stuff gets done before Missandei arrives. The furniture has been disassembled, moved, and then reassembled. His quads and arms are aching a little bit, from hauling shit in and out of the back of a pickup truck without a ramp because why even spend a modest amount of money and not waste a friend’s time? The friend was named Jamie. Grey told Jamie that he knows a “Jaime.” Jamie really didn’t care. It’s a common name.

They paid Jamie in drinks and food and conversation. Grey has been at least a little bit drunk probably four out of the five days he’s been in Myr. The city is slow-moving like molasses. There’s a water park nearby. There is a bowling alley. He understands why people drink here. They drink so they don’t get bored.

Moss is picking her up from the airport. When Grey was asked if he wanted to ride along, he played it off like he didn’t care. It’s been a whopping week since he’s seen her — big deal.

In truth — he misses her like hell. But she hasn’t seen her brothers in person in almost a year. They deserve the alone time to catch up together.

When she arrives, he hangs back. He lets her greet Mars, and he lets her hug her grandma as he holds onto the squirming dog.

The house is shockingly bare to her eyes — and it almost makes her cry right away. But she manages to maintain a handle on herself as she walks through the house and compliments them on how quickly they managed to packed up all of the stuff without her help and without killing each other. Mars and Moss are great at moving things. They are not good at menial tasks, like packing and unpacking.
“Yeah, Miss, you can thank your man for that,” Mars says, snickering. “He is kind of psychotic. Who knew?”

“Aw,” she says, making a soft face at Grey. “I knew.”

He cuts the eye contact to stare off, out the door and at the grass. He is so ridiculous.

When she walks out to the yard again — she observes out loud that Grandpa’s truck is gone. She says out loud that it makes sense — because that thing was really just really old and probably really dangerous and probably a pollutant. This is another thing she is trying not to get too emotional over.

“Don’t worry,” Moss says, pulling her sideways into a hug. “It’s at the shop. We’ve been slowly — slowly — working on it.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” he confirms. “Of course we didn’t toss it, Miss.”

Her short visit is purely for pleasure, it turns out. No one needs anything from her! Everything is packed and unpacked! Grandma’s new place is super cute!

“Where’s all my stuff though?”

Grey quickly and quietly tells her that he rented a small storage unit for her stuff — until she decides what she wants to with all of her books, old toys, blankets, boy band posters, and that tiny bed that finally saw some action too late in life.

“Oh, gross,” Mars remarks to Grey. “Again with you.”

“Wow,” she says. “You guys have inside jokes with each other.”

“You fuckin’ love it,” Mars says, laughing, reaching out to squish her head in the crook of his arm. “He’s all talk, though. Look at him. He’s barely looked at you. When Moss asked him if he wanted to pick you up, Grey was like, ‘I’m busy.’ And we were like, ‘What are you busy with? You have no business here!’”

“No wonder you aren’t pregnant,” Moss cracks, immediately laughing at what he said.

Grey is awkwardly standing a distance from them, kind of shyly taking all of the licks.

She has known him for a very long time, so she knows him well. She has lived through many years of confusion, with him pushing a constant stream of both cold and hot at her. There were the times he acted like she was a complete nuisance and a pain in his ass. And then there were the times he was so transparently raw in his need for her. Those times were often one in the same
She knows he is a sap for her, and he is too embarrassed to express it in front of her family — or other human beings — but especially her family. He has to cope by low-key insulting her a lot, just saying the weirdest shit just to get her to look at him. Her lips are constantly quivering — from all of the smiles she is trying to hold back. She does not want to encourage this. She does not want him to think it’s okay that he is making jokes about how he doesn’t miss the fact that she snores like a pig.

It’s their last dinner in this house. She’s in the kitchen, sitting on the floor and catching up with her grandma and her sister-in-law as they cook — as Grey messes around with the sink faucet and generally just gets in Grandma’s way and garners a constant stink-eye and sigh. That faucet has been busted for a while. Her grandma is super used to using it all busted. Grandma does not understand the point in fixing it now, when she’s moving out. Grey actually has no smart retort. He just says that it’s not hard to fix, and it won’t take that long.

This is kind of everything she wants — to be with someone great and to have her family see and understand that he is great, and to have him care about her family and understand the magnitude of them.

The first bit of alone time they get is at bedtime in Moss’ house.

Delia gets kicked out of her bedroom because she is the youngest. She has to bunk down with her sister so that Grey and Missandei have somewhere to sleep. Delia takes the banishment well — she quickly gathers up all of her devices because they are apparently the things she needs the most overnight — and she trots off to the bedroom across the hall.

Grey is showing Missandei the photos that he dropped onto a cloud drive. They are photos that he snapped of every single inch of the house, before it was packed up, including the yard. He’s rambling and telling her that he knows she is bummed she doesn’t get to sleep in that house for one last night, and he knows that it’s probably sad to close the book on like, an era or whatever. He tells her he’s guessing all of this, because he’s never really formed sentimental attachments to the places he lived — just the people he’s lived with.

She hugs him and holds onto him after that. She pulls him down on top of her and generally ignores their dog as she sneaks her arms underneath his shirt.

He says, “I was referring to Jaime, for the record,” giving her a smirk.

“Oh my God, you are so obsessed with me,” she says. “Just admit it already!”

He grabs the back of her head then. He digs his fingers into her hair and he pulls her face to his mouth. She just about sighs gratefully when their lips touch because not only has she missed him — she missed the affirmation that can come out of him. She misses how he talks to her and how he treats her and the tone of his voice when they are alone.

She grabs onto his ears and uses them to steer and angle his head as the kiss deepens and the wet sound of it is like thunder in her head. He smells so nice, he feels so warm, his mouth is so familiar, and she gives him a hard, punctuated kiss before she pulls away to breathe. She says, “This room doesn’t have a lock on it. Moss doesn’t think Delia needs privacy.” She’s telling him that they can get interrupted at any moment. She knows her family.
“Good call, man,” he murmurs, cupping her cheek. “What does a fourteen-year-old need privacy for?”

“I’ve missed you guys,” she whispers, changing the subject. “Our house was so big and quiet without you guys.”

“Man, I have missed the shit outta you,” he says, wrapping his arms around her and squeezing her tightly. “Not gonna lie.”

“Oh really?” she says, laughing. “The snoring, too?”

“Yeah, babe. Especially the snoring. It was so hard to sleep without it.”

She purses her lips, just staring at him in wonderment. She earnestly says, “That is such a sweet thing to say to me. Thank you.”

When she wakes up again, the room is still mostly dark and her backside is damp and hot because Grey is plastered to her, doing some hardcore cuddling in his sleep. His hand has made its way under her shirt and is cupping a breast. She has to pee.

She moves slowly and deliberately so she doesn’t wake him. She grabs his wrist and pulls his hand off of her body. The bed creaks as she pushes herself into sitting position, pushing against the force of his arm. He groans in his sleep — and of course — he wakes up.

“Missandei?” he whispers, turning onto his back. “Where you going?”

“I’ll be right back. I just have to use the toilet.”

“Oh,” he says softly, his breathing evening out again. “Okay.”

She knocks on the door because she saw that the light was on from inside Moss’ house. Her hands are shoved in the deep pockets of her knit sweater, and she can hear and see her grandma shuffling to the door, through the window.

She doesn’t really have to explain her presence or why she’s even awake. Her grandma just leaves the door open for her to enter.

She sits at the small dinette — everything feels small and contained — but orderly — as her grandma puts down a cup of hot tea in front of her.

Grandma remarks that everything is different now — kind of explaining why she is awake. Missandei affirms that everything is different — but it must not all be bad.

The conversation goes on like that — with very brief statements that mean more than they let on —
intercut with bland observations about the weather or the family. Grandma says that living with Moss means that she will be seeing the comings and goings of all the people in Moss’ life. Missandei asks Grandma why she doesn’t like Molly. Grandma says she likes Molly just fine — and Missy decides to let the subject drop.

At a point, the baby thing does come up — it actually has taken way longer to come up than Missy expected. She actually expected to be interrogated right away, right when she got picked up from the airport because Grey blabbed and told her family that he actually wants to have kids. Missandei is actually the one who insists on destroying the hopes and dreams of an entire community.

Her grandma dryly states that Missandei is overstating her own importance — a comment that garners a smile and a short laugh.

Her grandma asks if it’s him.

Missandei says it’s not him. He is wonderful.

Grandma says she didn’t think it was him. He is a good man.

Missandei refrains from making a joke about how he’s actually just aight.

Grandma asks her what she is so afraid of.

She’s been thinking about this a lot — so she answers it in a roundabout way. She turns the question back to her gran and she asks the woman why she had kids. The answer is what she expected — her gran does not even understand the logic of the question to start. When her grandma starts to say it’s something they just do — her grandma abruptly stops talking, as if she knows that she was just trapped.

Missandei says that’s not enough of a reason for her — to do something just because other people do it. So much is lost because of children. What is gained?

It’s a strategic question, one that doesn’t necessarily reflect how she feels. But she just needs to remind the both of them of her mother and how her mother has hurt the both of them deeply.

After some thought, her grandma tells Missandei that nothing supersedes the love that a daughter gives to a mother and vice versa, referring to Missandei actually, and not her mother. Men may come and they may go — but a daughter will be there for life. Her grandma tells Missandei that she doesn’t want Missandei to be lonely after Grandma goes off to join Grandpa and Melaku.

She finds that response to be so loving, so sweet, and so deeply cynical.

When she comes back to him, the sky is brighter, illuminating his sleeping body under Delia’s pink covers. She sees that the dog has actually taken her spot — complete with the chest grab and everything.
Missy's husband is annoying

Chapter Summary

Missy is annoyed with Grey until she is not. Then she gives him a sex ultimatum. His priorities are also all messed up.

Grey starts really bro-ing out with her brothers — he starts cracking really specific jokes, having long sports-related debates that neither she nor Grandma can follow, and beer bottles also become a permanent fixtures in his hand. He blends in well with her family — physically, visually, language-wise — that it’s like having a third brother again. He even starts mocking her, teasing her, and making fun of her in the same way that her actual brothers do.

And it’s cool, and she doesn’t take it personally when he insults her housekeeping skills because he always insults her housekeeping skills. But she also does not think his impersonations of her are as hilarious as her brothers do. Her brothers are cracking up left and right — and she finds little humor in it all. This results in Moss’ taunting, sing-song question. He says, “Aw, Lil Miss, are you mad? Don’t be mad. We just playin’ wit chu!”

She holds up her glass of water in a salute of sorts, and she tries to be upbeat — so they don’t have more fodder to blast her with — and says, “I’m not mad! I’m just being me!”

Very clearly, she can hear her husband mutter to her brothers, “She is so pissed with you right now.”

As glad as she is that he is getting along so well with her brothers, she thinks that he is so fucking annoying right now. She walks over to where Molly is awkwardly trying to help her grandmother prepare food. Molly is not a natural cook. Molly buys prepared food and assembles it. They also do not share a language. Grandma keeps smiling at Molly’s face and then complaining about really minor things in Low Valyrian. Moss has essentially abandoned his girlfriend to the wolves.

Molly looks so relieved when Missy walks up. She is desperately cheerful as she says, “We’re making potatoes!”

In Low Valyrian, Grandma asks what kind of woman doesn’t even know how to properly peel and cut potatoes. They are all getting brown because this white woman isn’t soaking them quickly enough.

Missy nudges a huge plastic tub of water over and starts dumping sloppily peeled tubers into it. She says, “Well, this is fun!”
She and Molly continue being the butt of all jokes. However, Molly is lucky because Molly doesn’t understand any of the comments being made about her. She just smiles along when the floor erupts in laughter. Missandei, however, has to plaster this tense grin on her face as the same ol’ stories get told, again and again. There was the time she lied about eating cake and was found out because there was frosting all over her face — what an idiot! She was also like, six years old at the time. So this story is not that hilarious, but people are slapping knees and wiping tears out of their eyes because she’s such a terrible liar and a greedy little fatass.

Grey tells them she still has this love for sweets, except she also is super afraid of becoming a fatass. So she always has him order dessert, and then she always picks off huge bites of it and pretends that she’s not eating a bunch of calories and consuming half of his dessert.

Mars laughs and talks about how women always be like that. They are frustratingly inconsistent, always saying they want one thing but always doing another. Mars’ wife is indulgently laughing and smiling like she doesn’t want to slap the sexism off of his face — which is crazy to Missy because she is pretty sure Grey is never going to be getting sex ever again from her.

She glances at him. And she sees him happy and laughing and having a good time. And she loves it. As she also wants to hard-slap that happiness off of his face.

He’s a little drunk and his breath is sour with beer still — even though he brushed his teeth. When he crawls into the tiny bed with her, he’s in a mood. He starts nuzzling his face into the crook of her neck and starts running his hands up and down her thighs, sometimes boldly pulling on the elastic waistband of her panties. He’s not taking them off. He’s just testing the waters.

She’s not really feeling this, because he’s been annoying all night. And they’re also sleeping in her niece’s bedroom and in her niece’s bed. And their dog is also here. But she’s trying not to hurt Grey’s feelings.

He kisses her — it’s immediately messy and sloppy, with his tongue pushing into her mouth. He’s kissing her too fast and too hard too soon, with a complete lack of finesse. She doesn’t want to hurt his feelings, so she kisses him back a little bit.

He grabs her boob. He squeezes it. And then he grabs her hand and he silently brings in between his legs. He’s semi-hard — and she gives him a little press before she extracts her hand and takes it back.

Luckily, he’s drunk enough that he cannot pick up on her general reluctance and her general disinterest in sex right now. He sighs contently as he collapses down next to her. He pulls her body really close and he presses his lips into her cheek. He murmurs, “You’re the best. I love you so much, babe.” And then he says, “You know, being with your family this past week, just living with them has actually been so great. It’s like, a community here, and it’s like, everyone supports one another. And it’s like — you know — a family here. It’s been so nice to feel like I’m a part of that. I didn’t think I was getting this when I married you. I thought I was just getting you.”

The words soften her up substantially. It melts her and it butters her up really nicely. She turns her face so that she can press her mouth against his skin, and she runs her hand underneath his shirt and around his back, so she can hold onto him. She wants to tell him that she loves that he’s a part of her family — that the two of them plus their doggy are also a family together. She wants to tell him that maybe one day, it will be the three of them plus their doggy. That would be really nice, too.
He kind of ruins the mood a little bit, because he says, “Man, I really wish we could fuck right now.”

Before Moss drives them to the airport, their grandma tries to load copious amounts of food into their bags — dried jerky that she made, jars of jam, small jars of sauces, small jars of pickles. Missandei has to take all of the jars out of Grey’s bag and stuff them into hers, because they will have to check in the bag because they can’t carry this stuff onto a plane. It’d never make it through security.

Her grandma doesn’t seem to get this, despite flying before. So they end up arguing and fighting over this, with Missy trying to explain the situation and her grandma calling her hard-headed.

Everyone hugs everyone tightly, when it is time to part.

As Grey continues to be upbeat and kind of cheerful — as he continues to bleed out her brothers’ vocal affectations and mannerisms for a bit longer — Missy looks at it glass half-full and observes to herself that the fact that he is so annoying to her is actually a good thing. It means that she is not sexually attracted to her brothers.

She sleeps for most of the flight as Grey stays vigilant and awake so he can watch after their dog underneath the seat in front of them. He doesn’t know how she can sleep because he already told her about the news story he read, about the flight attendant that made a passenger put her dog into the overhead bin, about a dog that died because it slowly suffocated to death in the dark. Grey spends the flight hoping that 2.0 doesn’t make too much of a ruckus and also ready to physically fight any flight attendant that asks him to put his dog in the overhead bin.

This never happens, but he is still stunned that Missandei is sleeping through is.

He doesn’t try to have sex with her right away when they get home, which — thank God for small favors. She needs more time to feel attracted to him again.

And he actually helps that along by fading back into his anal retentive, hypercritical, cranky self. He looks at the state of the house, and the first thing out of his mouth when they arrive home is, “Jesus Christ, Missandei, this place is a fucking mess.”

It honestly looks exactly the same to her. She like, actually tried to clean and vacuum and do all of the dishes. It actually looks fairly orderly and neat to her.
He starts walking around making silent observations as Momo 2.0 zips around the house in a sprint, just ecstatic to be out of her carrier and back home again. Grey is muttering, “Wow, shit,” as he looks at the stove. Which — to her — is pretty clean. “Baby, what the fuck did you cook?” He rubs his fingers over the backsplash. He comes away with some smeared droplets of oil. He asks, “Did you just fucking throw butter on the wall? Gah, babe. Oh my God, I’m sorry. I don’t know what you’ve got planned for the rest of the day, but I need to take care of this. I’m gonna need to take care of alla this or else I am going to lose my shit.”

One moment, he’s trying to drag their suitcases to the laundry room so that he can start a load and also pull out and organize all of the contraband they got from Grandma — and the next moment — she has sauntered over to him and is making sexy groaning sounds as she squeezes his butt through his pants. She lightly gets on her tiptoes to bite his ear lobe as she says, “Fuck me. Right now.” He scrunches his nose at her. He’s like, “Babe — you’re being a little —” Then he clears his throat and opts not to finish the thought. He says, “Man, I gotta get a load going. And I gotta maybe spray down the stove top and let the stuff break down the crusted food bits. Let me do that and then I can meet you upstairs —”

“No,” she says, grabbing his shirt in her fist and pulling him close to her body. “I said right now. Right here.”

“He?” he says incredulously. “In the laundry room?”

He’s trying to delay this just a tad because he doesn’t want to have sex with her all distracted about timing and how he’s going to fit in all of the cleaning that he wants to do before bedtime. He has to do like, perhaps four or five loads of laundry because not only does he have to wash their clothes from traveling, he probably also has to strip apart their bed and wash all of their bedding. She probably did not do this in the week that he’s been away. Also, the kitchen looks really sloppy, and the counters need to be wiped down thoroughly. He probably needs to sanitize all of their knives and also their cutting boards. He probably needs to soak and scour some pots because his fucking wife just likes to throw shit into the dishwasher and hope for the best. He has to get a few of these things started before he can even properly think about having sex with her.

“No,” she says, pulling off her shirt and exposing her bra. “Right now.” They are still standing in their laundry room. She is reaching around to unclip. They are actually having this argument.

He feels like he’s being really reasonable as he lifts up her heavyass suitcase, heaves it onto the washing machine, and unzips it. He says, “Babe, just give me a minute —”

“Grey.” Her voice has now hardened, and she sounds a little impatient and annoyed.

He swivels his head around to glance at her. And then he does a doubletake. He says, “Are you naked?” Which is a dumb question because she is definitely and clearly naked.

He actually stoops down to pick up her clothes from off the ground — so that he can add them to the
This is sort of a test. Or, she is sort of taking a stand. Or, she is tired of spending the weekend being shitted on by him and her brothers — being treated like a little kid sister who is hapless and who makes bad decisions and constantly requires guidance from men and elders. She is now back in her domain, where she is in control and capable.

And she also finds it really, really, really hot when he starts donning on his rubber gloves and his sponges and his buckets and his cleaning supplies and gets on his hands and knees to clean like he don’t even give a fuck about gender roles. She really likes it when he gets like this — as it simultaneously frustrates her because he is so frustrating sometimes.

She knows she’s being really reasonable as she stands naked in front of him and says, “If you start a freaking load of laundry — then I’m out. This offer expires. You don’t get this.” She gestures up and down her naked body. He’s looking at her like she has lost her fucking mind. And she is totally power-tripping — but she just feels like she needs this.

He says, “Babe. I don’t get why you are adamant about having sex right now in the laundry room. Like — it’s all hard surfaces. And also — it’ll take me five minutes to get shit going. And then I’ll come up, and we can do a little messing around. Until my timer goes off, then I will need to come back down here to like, rinse off some shit.” He’s smiling — he’s laughing at himself because he is realizing that he is also ridiculous. His eyes bug out — as he stares at her body. He shakes his head, and he says, “What in the world are we actually fighting about right now? I don’t even know!”

She repeats his options to him. “You fuck me now, or you fuck me never.” She’s kind of trying hard not to laugh.

He shakes his head. And then he starts unbuttoning his pants and pulling down his zipper. He mutters, “I guess I’ll fuck you now. God, what is going on here? What is with this? Did you read an article in a women’s magazine about how giving your man sex ultimatums is good for the relationship?” He laughs, and he doesn’t let her answer because he grabs the band of his loose pants in one hand so it doesn’t fall all the way down, and his other is reaching out for her face. He steps towards her, gently but firmly grabs her, and then he kisses her.

The floor is terrible. It’s hard tile, and it’s cold, and it’s rough on their knees. They then try to have sex against the wall — but there is only one bare wall — and it’s actually the door. Then, she suggests doing it on the washing machine or dryer — she suggests turning on the machines. He quizzically asks her why they’d do that, because there’s nothing in the machine — though, if only she’d let him start a load before all of this sex stuff happened, then maybe things would be happening.
a little more organically right now.

She sighs, and she admits, “I was just trying something. I was just trying to be sexy.”

He laughs. Because it’s so fucking cute. He grabs her face, smushes her cheeks a little bit, and he kisses her. He leaves a punctuated and wet smacking sound as she purses her swollen lips together even more. He says, “You are sexy. It is very sexy.”

He smacks the dryer on even though it’s empty. They have a stackable washer and dryer set, except they don’t need to stack theirs. He spins her around and has her lean against the dryer. He doesn’t think the dryer adds anything to this at all, but they are in the laundry room. She seems adamant about doing this in the laundry room. It doesn’t make sense to have sex in the laundry room and not use any of the props.

He throws a thick towel on the ground to save his knees a little bit. He kneels down. Her ass is in his face. This position is a classic for them. It’s one of their greatest hits. It doesn’t necessarily come around all that often, but when it does — she immediately knows what going to happen and where he’s going to go.

He looks at what he’s looking at — at her body and at the evidence of her need and her desire for him. She whimpers a little bit and rubs her thighs together. He always wants to take a picture of this shit on his phone — just to preserve the evidence and also to document it for all time. He sometimes can’t believe this is his life. She’s wet and glistening. He says, “Holy shit,” because it’s so intimate.

She whispers, “Baby, come on.”

And then she cries out when he touches her, spreads her, and puts his mouth on her.

The dryer starts to get really hot, so she tries to come as fast as she can so that she doesn’t get burned. She can’t grab onto anything with her hands besides the super smooth and hot surfaces of the machine. The movement of the dryer is throwing off Grey’s rhythm constantly. He was completely right. Having sex in the laundry room is not ideal.

But she still starts muttering out almost incomprehensive compliments and confessions of love and devotion. She still tells him that she needs him and that she wants him. She still tells him that it feels so good, and it’s incredible how good he makes her feel. She still says, “Oh my God,” in momentary shock and self-consciousness when he touches her inner butt area, even though she completely expected him to go there.

After she comes, her bottom and the inside of her legs are a slippery mess of her arousal and his
saliva — and she smears it on the tile floor as she sinks down in exhaustion. He’s going to want to mop the entire downstairs. Especially this spot that she’s sitting on.

“You know,” she says conversationally — the first normal and rational and not-aggressive thing she has said in a while. “The nice thing about you keeping such a clean house is that I feel really comfortable sitting naked on the floor. I’m not worried about germs at all.”

He chuckles. He’s standing up. His pants are still undone. He undid them in case he got hard enough to try for penetration. It didn’t exactly happen — he was still really hung up on doing it in the laundry room.

He’s rubbing his face with his hand, over and over, covering his mouth, over and over. It’s like he’s sheepish and a little shellshocked and maybe even a little self-conscious about what he just did to her with his mouth. They’ve been together for a long time, but some things are still blush-worthy. “You never worry about germs though,” he says.

For the rest of the evening, she helps him clean. She’s not autonomous in how she helps him. That would be inefficient because he’d redo it all anyway. She just shadows him and does exactly what he tells her to do. She separates the clothes into colors and whites. She makes jokes with him about segregation. She picks up a heavy bucket of water, and she follows him everywhere, so that he can wipe down surfaces faster. She tells him about how annoying he was at times in Myr because he was being such a man. She tells him that she loves her brothers and she loves that he gets along so well with her brothers, but she doesn’t actually want for him to be like them at all. She loves who he is naturally — which is a person who is bitchy, cranky, hyper-detail-oriented, overly critical, and who loves to clean like he has OCD.

He tells her that he had no idea she was so annoyed with him. He shrugs that off. He doesn’t really find anything new or surprising about the information she is sharing with him. He does say that he’s glad that she loves him just the way he is — he was admittedly a little bit exhausted trying to fit in with her brothers constantly. He had to work hard to find material in common with them. This was why he constantly ragged on her. It was what they knew well. It’s what he knows well — her. He knows her better than anyone.

She doesn’t know how he manages to make all of that bullshit sound so romantic.

He does say he’s sorry for making fun of her so hard. He doesn’t really care that she eats his desserts or is bad at cleaning.

She says, “Are you nervous about your new job tomorrow?”

He says, “I’m an adult, and it’s not the first day of school — so yes, I am pretty nervous about my new job.” He grins at her.

She says, “Babe, you’re going to do great. You are so smart and so talented, and everyone tends to love you at work because you tend to be so good at your job.”

He sighs and then he stretches a little bit. He says, “Missandei, I’m going to accept your empty compliment. I know you’re just doped up and biased because I just sexed you up so good, and you are emotionally attached to me. Thank you, baby.”
First day on the new job

Chapter Summary

Grey goes a little nutty his first day at his new job. Missy tries to be a supportive wife until she gets sick of him and leaves him to soothe himself. Jhiqui has a major life event happen. Selmy comes for a visit!

Missy has to maintain two text conversations during the day — on top of doing her own job. The conversations are rather different in content, but they do have some emotional overlap. They are both anxiety-addled. And, while Missandei’s gone through years of therapy to learn how to detect the signs and stop herself from co-dependently people-pleasing at the cost of herself — when it comes to personal relationships, the guilt still sometimes hangs over her head, when she feels like she cannot adequately be there for the people she loves.

One text conversation is with Grey. It’s his first day at work after not working in an office in more than a year. She keeps sending him words of encouragement — reminding him that he is intelligent and valuable and has so much to give — and Grey keeps predictably and quietly shitting on it all because he, like the rest of humanity, continues to be a work in progress. Grey keeps texting her back with short, vague statements like: *Fuck me forever.*

He is being melodramatic and cranky, not sexy, because his standards for himself are impossible and too exacting. Knowing him, he’s probably cursing himself out because he had a hard time finding the men’s restroom in a new, unfamiliar building.

She has to stop herself from texting back and snapping at him, telling him to just shut the fuck up and deal. She stops herself from being a punk ass bitch, because to be one would be to exhibit some of the uglier traits of her family. Instead, she responds to ask him questions like: *What is going on? Why are you frustrated right now?*

She can see the dot-dot-dot on her phone screen as he takes his sweet time cobbling a response. It takes long seconds — nearly a minute. This is the exact kind of shit that he typically goes nuts over, when other people do it to him. But it’s fine. He is human, and he is her husband, and she loves him. Probably.

She actually doesn’t have much time for his shit today. In the back of her mind, she realizes that she should convey this to him. She just worries he’s going to feel hurt or unheard though.

She then corrects herself and tells herself that maintaining his mood is not her responsibility.

His response comes in. He wrote: *My email isn’t working.*

She tensely shakes her head at her desk and silently mutters *what the fuck* into her phone screen.

Rather than expressing annoyance at his fucking ridiculous non-problems, she takes in a fortifying
breath and writes back: *That’s annoying that your email isn’t working. Have you had lunch yet?*

She doesn’t present him with a solution to his problem even though he commonly likes to troubleshoot her own emotional releases all the time. She doesn’t ask him if he’s called IT or like, rechecked the spelling of his email because he might just go ballistic and ask her if she thinks he’s fucking stupid or something. Right now, the answer is kind of yes.

Rather, she has learned that oftentimes — he’s often really cranky because he is hungry.

He responds back with: *Not yet.*

She writes: *You should eat.*

He writes: *I will. When it’s lunchtime.*

She looks up at the clock on the wall. It is eleven-thirty.

She is particularly fatigued by his shit today because she also has another text convo going on with Jhiqui, and Grey’s shit currently pales in comparison to Jhiqui’s. Jhiqui is an emotional mess who cannot wait until Missy gets off work to talk to her. Jhiqui can’t wait to tell Missy that she and Nick are going to try for a trial separation. He’s going to move out of the house for a little bit to see how they feel about that.

Jhiqui’s texts are lengthy and detailed — she is worried about Arqo. She is worried about explaining this to her kid and also the lasting damage this could potentially imprint onto him. She is also expressing extreme guilt because she is the one who is really pushing for this separation. Nick is really upset and doesn’t want to separate. He thinks this is one step closer to divorce. Jhiqui keeps talking about how they shouldn’t stay together for the kid — repeating that that’s what her parents did and her mother was miserable for years.

Missandei is barely getting any work done today. She eventually stops responding to Grey because she can’t juggle two conversations after a point.

Missandei just stops responding to his hysterical texts, probably because she is rightly fucking so sick of him just like he is so fucking sick of himself.

Or she is just busy with work.

So he has no other means in which to vent about how everyone is fucking smarter and cooler than he is — and obviously life is still high school, and he’s a fucking child — fuck him forever.

He has no other means to release this rough ball of anxiety in the pit of his stomach. He’s worried, freaked out that he has made a huge mistake. He should’ve taken the job with Jaime’s dad, where he would’ve been capable and the work would’ve been predictable — and he’d also be richer.

This place is full of creative people who can do artsy shit. He is severely out of place because he’s a robotic number cruncher. He doesn’t know jack. He is going to fail here.

He tries to go off to have lunch by himself because he’s a friendless loser who deserves to be ostracized — but his new team and his new boss insists on all going out together for a get-to-know-
Missandei tells him that he’s on his own for the night — when she finally does get back to him. That is all she says. She doesn’t call him baby. She doesn’t call him sweetheart. She doesn’t tell him she loves him. She doesn’t even drop a fucking smiling or heart emoji.

He looks at his phone and he shakes his head. Something seems off. She must be having a day, too.

It occurs to him to type back to ask her how everything is going on her end. It finally occurs to him that he didn’t ask her — at all — how her day was going before he just started unloading his ridiculous shit onto her.

His response to her is: *I hope you’re having a good day. I love you. <3*

Her response back to him is — seriously: *Pia??*

His eyes bug out. He clicks out: *No, it’s me. Grey.*

She is like: *Oh lololol*

And then, in a moment of desperation and fear of boredom perhaps, he scrolls through his contacts list.

He’s terrible with names and faces. On his way out of the office, all of his new colleagues and employees kindly say goodnight to him. He cannot remember most of their names even though he’s had lengthy conversations with some them because he’s a real dipshit. All he has are descriptions: tall friendly white guy, short friendly white guy, woman with accent, attractive white woman, attractive Black woman, young white woman, very young white woman, hipster brown woman, guy with clear glasses.

So he resorts to waving at all of them, trying to smile at them on his way out.

She calls him on her way to Jhiqui’s house, because she does want to know how his first day went. She’s fighting through a little bit of traffic, trying to get on the on-ramp, when he picks up. He must also be in his car.

The first thing he says to her — through her bluetooth speakers — is, “Are you *driving*?” He does not like when she talks and drives. Because he thinks she’s a distracted driver, and he keeps saying that he doesn’t want to deal with it when she slams into another car and get her head sliced right off her body with a shard of steel. It’s just really romantic stuff, just really classically him.
“You’re driving,” she accuses, pushing her voice to her car’s dashboard.

“I’m a good driver though,” says his disembodied voice.

“Man, whatever,” she says. “Thanks for being flexible tonight —”

“Insert Jaime-style sex joke here.”

“Okay,” she says patiently. “You done?”

Finally — she hears him laugh. It’s low and throaty and deep — and the sound of it fills the entire car. It makes her smile. He says, “Yeah, sorry for being . . . a bit much today.”

“It’s all good. Did you have an okay day?”

“My day was actually pretty good. All the bad parts was stuff I invented in my head —”

“Oh, so just a day in the life.”

He laughs again.

She actually spends her entire drive to Jhiqui’s house talking on the phone with him. It takes an hour in rush hour traffic. He tells her about his insecurities, how he’s afraid he’s made a mistake. He tells her he feels like an imposter. She tells him that she felt the same exact way when she started her current job. She tells him that such challenges eventually make them better people.

She tells him that Nick and Jhiqui are trying a trial separation. That’s why she’s going over to Jhiqui’s house right now.

He says, “Oh.” And then he says, “It’s not a huge surprise though.”

“It’s still a little sad. It’s especially going to be hard for Arqo.”

Barristan meets Grey at his house — it’s the very first time Barristan has been to his home, so Grey had to give Selmy his address. They meet at Grey’s house because Grey has to go home right after work to take Momo 2.0 out to pee and poop. They are also meeting up right now because in the midst of his mental freak out — when Missandei wasn’t answering his texts anymore — Grey spastically just decided to reach out. He texted Selmy to say hello. And also to randomly ask if Selmy had any insight on relaxation techniques that one can cram into fifteen-minute increments.

The text was fucking weird enough that Grey’s phone started ringing right away.

It is so weird to have his ex-boss standing in the middle of his kitchen. Barristan takes a look around at the spotless kitchen, with all of its shiny and smooth, monochromatic surfaces and says, “Looks about right.” And then Barristan looks down at 2.0, trotting after Grey eagerly because she knows it’s time for fresh water. This is their routine.
Barristan watches this and says, “Cute dog.”

Grey — who is so anxious and such a fucking idiot with feelings sometimes — says, “Oh, it’s just a dog. It’s more Missandei’s dog. She’s sometimes pretty annoying. The dog, I mean.”

Which is a complete and utter lie, and he immediately feels terrible for betraying his puppy like this. He fucking loves that his instinct whenever he feels vulnerable is still to start lying and to start pushing intimacy away. He shuts his eyes. He’s embarrassed already. Barristan is watching him impassively.

And then Grey says, “No, I’m fucking around. This is our dog. I’m completely obsessed with her, and I love her so much. She follows me around and watches me all the time. She’s so fucking cute, and I can’t stand it.”

When Missy arrives at Jhiqui’s house, Jhiqui is sobbing quietly as she prepares dinner — and Arqo is sitting at the dining table coloring, acting eerily calm.

Missy ruffles his hair and says, “Hey, monkey, whatcha drawing?”

“A wolf!” Arqo is obsessed with wolves.

“Cool!”

They are nursing a couple of beers on the back deck — looking out at the lake. The dog is a warm, tight little bundle lying in Grey’s lap.

After Grey tells Barristan all of the latest news of his life — new job, rental house, familial obligations here and there — Barristan finds Grey’s anxiety and worries to be novel and also largely unnecessary. He finds the expression of the anxiety to be novel because Grey was always so cool-headed and quiet back when Grey was working for Barristan.

Grey says, “I’m actually a very anxious person.”

“I know that,” Barristan says, chuckling. “You are a high-strung person. I just meant that you never talked about it.” And then he reaches out to nudge Grey in the arm with his beer bottle. “You’ll be okay with your job. I don’t need to tell you that.”

“Sure,” Grey says. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Jhiqui is having a hard time stopping up the tears. She sniffs as she continues stirring sauce. She’s making mac and cheese from the box even though she and Nick hate this shit. It’s so typical that a
child with two foodies for parents will be a super picky eater. She mutters, “Arqo loves his crap. He better grow out of it.”

The three of them eat mushy mac and cheese at the kitchen table as Missy fills in the silence by lavishing attention on Arqo. It’s as if she thinks that she can pretend away what is going on with his family, and she can trick his mind into a delusion if she is peppy enough.

When she realizes she’s doing this, she wonders what kind of effect this can have on children. She makes a mental note to ask her therapist later.

She also thinks about her mother.

“Can I tell you something?” Barristan asks Grey. And before Grey can answer, Barristan says, “It’s funny that you reached out to me today. I thought it was a funny little coincidence — good timing. Grace has breast cancer. The doctor found the lump during her annual a couple months ago.”

Grey is stunned at the very nonchalant way this information was dropped. And, after a protracted bit of silence, he says, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Grace is in good spirits right now — she’s a rock. Our kids have been visiting a lot. The prognosis looks optimistic. We’re all doing fine. But the point is — what you do in life, your job, doesn’t matter that much. I’m not thinking much about being pushed into retirement these days. I’m thinking about spending as much time with my wife and family as I can. And I keep thinking that all those long hours at the office when we were younger, trying to amass more stuff — it mattered and it also doesn’t matter. I’m glad we have the means to treat the cancer. I’m glad we don’t worry about money, but —” Barristan spontaneously yawns.

And then he says, “Shit, I am so old. I think it’s almost my bedtime already.”

Jhiqui rubs her tired eyes quietly and tells Missandei that Nick doesn’t like it when she cries in front of Arqo. He especially hated it when they fought and argued in front of Arqo. She tells Missandei that she and Nick started fighting about how they fought. He is deceptively controlling and resistant to things outside of his worldview — but then, she supposes that the very same things can be said about her. Except people would say that her controlling nature isn’t hidden at all. It is very obvious.

Jhiqui says, “My mom used to shake the house with her crying and her rage. I grew up watching her pack her bags, threatening to leave my dad. It was very normal to me. And I get that it’s not normal, period. But it was normal for me. And he never understood it. He told me it was wrong that my parents dragged their children into their marriage problems. He implied that I was doing the same to Arqo. He told me that his parents never fought in front of the kids. And that made me so angry with him — it was as if he was saying his parents were better than mine.”

Jhiqui is crying as she tells Missandei that she believes that people cry because they are trying to solve a problem of pain. They are trying to work through this pain that they are feeling. She doesn’t think it’s so terrible for children to see their parents in pain. She says that in their worst and most
petty arguments, she told Nick that his parents’ parenting is also crap. His dad is domineering and his mom self-medicates and suppresses her feelings with religion. In their worst arguments, Jhiqui called it super white shit — and accused him of being super fucking white male, in telling her to shut the fuck up with her tears.

“I think I always knew this was gonna be one of our problems,” Jhiqui says. “Even on our wedding day, I knew it.”

“Can I ask you something?” Barristan asks Grey. And he doesn’t even let Grey answer in the affirmative. He just says, “How come you guys don’t have kids yet?”

“Jesus,” Grey mutters, slouching in his seat. He’s wondering how often Missandei gets bombarded with this question — probably way more than he does. Poor her. He says, “Honestly? I want to. She doesn’t.”

“Why doesn’t she want kids?”

“A few reasons. Fear of being a bad mom. Fear of losing her own identity. Not wanting to give up her career. Not being sure of what she wants versus what society has conditioned her to want. Stuff like that.” Grey looks over and can tell a lot of this stuff is flying over Selmy’s head. It must be generational.

“But you want children?”

Grey chuckles quietly. He says, “Yeah, I just think it’d be cool to put a baby in her.”

“Son, some advice. Try saying stuff like, ‘Darling, I love you. I can’t imagine living without you. I want to grow a family with you.’”

Grey scrunches his nose up in aversion. He says, “Selmy, that shit might worked in the Dark Ages, but it don’t fly now. If I say that to her, she will just go el-oh-el-oh-el-oh-el at me.”

“What? What does that mean?”

“She’ll laugh at me,” Grey clarifies.

Missandei gets up to leave when Jhiqui says she needs to put Arqo to bed and then go to sleep herself. Jhiqui confesses that she’s co-slept with Arqo the last couple of days because she loves him so much and it’s comforting for the both of them with Nick gone from the house. She wryly mutters to Missy, “I better not be messing my kid up. But I am probably already messing him up.”

To Jhiqui, Missandei says, “You are not messing him up. He knows that he is loved — by both his mom and his dad. My own mother and father didn’t give two shits about me or my siblings before shoving us on a boat and saying bye to us. My mother didn’t cry in front of me unless she wanted attention.”
Jhiqui sighs, heaving Arqo up higher on her hip. She says, “That’s what I’m saying! You got to be a real person with feelings in front of your kids! They’re like sponges! If you act like a psycho, they will become psychos! If you are repressed as hell — your kids won’t know how to have healthy relationships as adults without a lot of therapy!”

Missandei laughs. “That’s what you got from that!” she asks incredulously. “You saw evidence of your own rightness?”

Jhiqui laughs too — it’s the first time she’s laughed all night. She says to Arqo, “Smooch your auntie goodbye, baby.”

He’s lying on the couch with a sleeping dog on his chest. He’s trying to take photos of 2.0’s face with his phone in selfie mode without waking her up. He thinks that this fucking dog is just the fucking best, and it’s going to be so fucking sad when she dies. His love of her is always a little bit morose because dogs just don’t live long enough.

Missandei ruins the whole thing by coming home and opening the garage door. The whirring of the mechanism jars 2.0 awake — she pounces on his chest because she knows what that sound means. It means that Mommy is home. Momo jumps off the couch and then starts going just apeshit, running around the house and barking with sass.

Missandei looks pretty tired and her eye makeup is all smeared when she walks into the house. The dog knocks against her legs with her paws, and Missandei immediately softens her expression and stoops down to pick up 2.0. She holds the dog against her chest as she dodges her face from doggy kisses. And to him, she says, “I know. I know. I’m not supposed to pick her up when she is excited. I know.”

“How was your day?” he asks, rounding the kitchen island. When she’s within reach, he pulls her to his body with a hand on her hip.

Rather than answering him, Missandei’s hand is on the dog’s butt. She says, “I love squeezing her little booty. It’s kind of weird and predatory. I wish it was chubbier, though.”

As they get ready for bed, he is actually the one who reminds her that they are supposed to go over the Pia’s over the weekend for the housewarming. They also have to go over to Jaime and Brienne’s during the day for lunch, to hang out with the new baby.

Grey typically is not their scheduler, but she has been preoccupied.

He also reminds her that Doreah’s and Tank’s wedding is around the corner. Does she want to wear an old dress, or buy a new dress? If she wants to buy a new dress — when does she want to do this? Or would she just prefer that he choose a dress for her?

She groans as she collapses face-down on the bed. Her socked feet flop up kind of comically. She mutters, “I hate adulting.”
He slaps her butt before pushing her to roll over. He says, “We should go somewhere — just the two of us. Do you realize that we haven’t taken a legit vacation in like, years?”

She frowns. “The last real vacations we took, we were either broken up or on the verge of breaking up. And my family litters all of our vacation time. And you just started a new job — what the hell — you are already plotting paid time off?”

“We never had a real honeymoon,” he says, running his hand down her thigh.

“Weren’t you the one who said that honeymoons are for white people?”

He loudly sighs and then smiles. “Goddamn — Missandei — I’m trying to suggest we do something fun — shit!”

She frowns and then shimmies over, creating space for him to lie down beside her. She melodramatically says, “We’re vacation cursed!”

“No, we’re not,” he says. “Come on. Let’s go somewhere hot. You can wear a bikini. I can see if I can relax enough to get back inside ya!”

“Like where?” she asks quizzically.

“Like, in your vagina.”

She swats at him. “Shut up. You know what I meant.”

“Babe,” he says, as a flash of inspiration hits him. “Let’s go to the Summer Isles together. I can show you my hood!”
Grey buys Missy a dress

Chapter Summary

Grey continues to dress his wife in some stylish threads. She ends up getting flack for being a kept woman.

They get to meet for lunch at a real grown up restaurant by themselves — because Arqo is with his dad. Jhiqui keeps cracking jokes that do not sound like jokes at all. She keeps saying things like, “This trial separation is going like gangbusters!” and Missy isn’t sure if Jhiqui is trying to mock her husband and his penchant for super white, super old-timey sayings — or if Jhiqui is simply losing her mind and gangbusters is part of her vocabulary now.

Jhiqui tells Missy that maybe she ought to just give up on happiness in life and just succumb to everything Nick is about because she's not sure he makes enough money to pay the kind of spousal support that ensures she will never have to work an honest day in her life. Jhiqui lowers her voice and confesses to Missy that she's used her driver's license more in the past five years than she's used her degree — therefore, the prospect of going back into workforce is fucking terrifying. She tells Missy that she’s a needy, helicopter mom who really hates being apart from her child. She tells Missy that she doesn't think she trusts Nick to take care of their kid by himself at all. She worries her child is already dead because Nick is an idiot who forgot to warn their child to slow the fuck down when descending stairs.

Jhiqui then says, “Sorry, I am literally talking about myself all the time. I'm terrible. What's going on in your life? How's your spotless and tastefully decorated house? How's your passive income source? How's your fulfilling and exciting career?”

The frown line in between Missy’s brows deepen slightly.

Against her better judgement, Missy tells Jhiqui something that she hasn’t even told Grey. She tells Jhiqui that she’s gradually warming up to the idea of having a baby with Grey. She tells Jhiqui that she’s not anywhere near a hard yes, let’s definitely grow a new person inside her uterus — but she’s been allowing herself to fantasize and imagine what life with a child and him would look like without being completely scared out of her mind over it.

Missy feels like a real dork as she breaks eye contact to look at her fingernails, in a show of forced and pretty contrived nonchalance.

Jhiqui chews through her bite before she darkly and bluntly says, “Don’t do it. If you have a baby,
your marriage will be over. If you love Grey and want to stay married to him, don’t have a baby with him.”

Missy initially laughs nervously — because she really wants to believe that this is a joke.

Jhiqui goes on, as if what she just said was not a joke at all. She says, “The thing about having a baby is that you are essentially creating a human being that you will end up loving more than your husband. In fact, if it came down to it, you’d knife your husband in the heart without a second thought if it meant saving the life of your child. Also, the first couple of years are fucking terrible. If you hate sleep and love being depressed and cranky and having your relationship tested all the time, then definitely have a baby.”

While this response is not surprising at all coming from Jhiqui, Missy still manages to feel a little tense over it. She feels discomfited. She tells herself that this is probably the point. She’s talking to Jhiqui instead of Brienne about this because Jhiqui is currently unhappy and Brienne is currently happy. Missy’s subconscious is probably trying to sabotage this because its behavior is so predictable.

Trying to be equally as emotionally dismissive, Missy spears her fork through a roasted potato wedge and says to Jhiqui, “You’re only dissuading me because your marriage is currently in shambles.”

Jhiqui presses her lips together tightly, pinching out a frown of her own. She says, “You were less forthright and honest before you married Fifty Shades Darker. I don’t know if I like this much honesty from you. By the way — get it? Darker is a comment on his personality, his skin tone, and probably an ironic comment on his sexual prowess. Or not ironic?” Jhiqui scrunches up her nose. “I honestly can’t imagine what sex with him is like.”

“Stop, you actually love him,” Missy says plainly.

Jhiqui shrugs, not disputing that. She says, “I will fucking lose my goddamn mind if you guys become the sort of people whose marriage only becomes stronger after having a beautiful, non-colicky child together.” She sighs glumly and takes a sip from her glass of wine. “Sorry I shat on your revelation. Tell me more about why you’re changing your mind about having a kid.”

The first week of his new job consists of meeting hundreds of people and taking hours of meetings filled with jargon and content that he basically writes down, word for word — at least until his first meeting with Dany midweek. After that meeting, she pulls him aside to have a quick chat before she runs off to her next. She tells him to stop taking so many notes. It looks avoidant and antisocial. It’s bad optics. She bluntly tells him that his job is no longer about being that specific kind of detail-oriented. He has a team and an assistant for that kind of stuff.

She gives him this feedback without any heat, without a smile. She’s not his boss — he’s not her direct report — so the fact that she is telling him this is because of their personal friendship. She is doing him a favor.

She leaves him quickly without any encouragement or additional criticism.

Naturally, he feels pissed at himself for being antisocial and fucking weird. He spends the rest of the week really tense and anxious, and trying to hide how uncomfortable he is all the time. He feels
mostly unsuccessful in his efforts. He feels like an alien being, trying his hand at mimicry. Look at him smile like a person who has never smiled before. Look at him attempt a joke to lighten the mood only to have it result in a bunch of blank stares because no one ever fucking even realizes he is joking because he is not funny at all.

He’s never had an assistant before. It is not shocking to him at all that he is fucking terrible at ceding control and delegating. He cannot even let Karsi get him lunch. He just uses her as a repository of information. He asks her where specific conference and meeting rooms are. He asks her stuff about the database. She eagerly tells him information and suggests that she can schedule his meetings for him, remind him about them, and she can also maintain the database.

He must look really perturb or unhappy at the suggestions, because she immediately backtracks when she sees his expression. She says, “Or, you know, whatever you need! Like, even if you need for me to run out and get you lunch. I can do that.”

He doesn’t even want to let her do that. He realizes that this is going to be a problem.

After Amari asks him how the new job is going, Grey kind of dramatically tells Amari that he thinks he’s made a grave mistake. He took the wrong job. He’s really ill-equipped to do this new job. He is useless and is slow at learning, and he is just this money-sucking leech that adds nothing. He should just fucking kill himself already.

Amari looks mildly alarmed. He says, “Are you thinking about leaving the job already?”

“Oh, no,” Grey says, leaning further back into the couch. “I’m going to stay and continue slugging through it until I stop sucking so fucking bad. By the way, I’m really bad at letting my assistant do anything for me because it feels dehumanizing to let her go fetch me lunch or handle my calendar. I’m also a massive control freak that thinks it’s faster to do things myself rather than to let others do things in ways that I don’t prefer. I know that I am wrong, and it actually takes a shit ton of time for me to do things myself. I think I’m like this because I spent my entire childhood and adolescence feeling like I was the only one capable taking care of me and that no one else is trustworthy.”

Amari leans forward. He looks proud. He’s smiling as he says, “Why do you even need me anymore?”

“Because I still can’t have penis-in-vagina sex with any consistency,” Grey smoothly says back.

He’s carrying three garment bags as he walks into the house — a couple of hours later than he usually gets home. He breezes by her — she can smell hints of mint from his aftershave — heading upstairs to the bedroom.

She calls out, “Are those for me?”

He calls back, “Yeah,” not pausing in his ascent up the stairs. The dog is scrambling up the stairs after him. “You can try them on after dinner.”
After dinner, he tells her to take off her clothes so she can try on the dresses. Her mood is initially goofy as she slowly does a strip tease for him in their bedroom.

He’s having none of it though. As she jauntily bares more of her body and tosses her shirt into his face, he gestures to the dresses in bags, draped on the bed, and seriously says to her, “Hey, you need to be careful with these. I’m taking back the ones that you don’t pick.”

She straightens, seeing that he’s not in a very fun mood. She clasps her hands together in front of her pelvis, inadvertently covering her crotch. She’s trying to be funny as she deadpans, “So you don’t want to have sex with me right now? Oh, okay.”

She kind of understands why he’s so serious when he unzips the first bag, flashes her the dress inside, and she positively gasps and chokes on her own spit. She reaches out to start trying to grab it from him — he pulls it away from her grubby hands. She blurts out, “Oh my God, how much does that cost?”

He gives her a half smile. He enigmatically says, “I called in a favor.” And then he releases a breath — because perhaps he’s been a little nervous to show her the dresses and solicit her approval. He admits, “I called Tanja, and had her let me look at samples.”

Her blood is pumping so hard in her head that she almost has a headache from it. She is probably so, so superficial and vain. She forgets to breathe as he finishes extracting a minimalist warm gray dress from a bag and holds it up to her body. Then he extracts a blood red dress with insanely symmetrical lacework. Then he extracts a tiered light beige mini dress

She lets her knuckles skim over the material of the mini dress. Her eyes kind of roll back in her head and she whines out, “Oh my God.”

“So you like them?” he asks hopefully.

He nervously conveys to her that he has completely over-thought the shit out of this simple task. He rambles as he tells her that he knows she sometimes thinks he dresses her too conservatively. He tells her that’s why he picked out a red dress. He wrings his hands together, and he tells her that he knows she really likes red. The look on his face almost makes her tear up. He then cuts eye contact and tells her that he knows she sometimes feels like he doesn’t give her a choice — and he knows that she
was upset when he rearranged her side of the closet without clearing it with her. He just wasn’t thinking and just was on a really hot cleaning streak. He tells her that he picked out three dresses for this reason. He tells her he thought a lot about the physical parts of her that they have both said they love.

She spends the rest of the evening with him taking the dresses off and on, stepping into different pairs of shoes, taking pictures of herself, discussing the pros and cons of different accessories, hairstyles, and makeup with him. He keeps telling her that some of her choices are too “on the nose,” and he keeps disappearing into her closet to bring out an item or heels that she has completely forgotten about.

He brings out her old Givenchy heels, for instance, setting them in front of her feet.

“Oh,” she breathes out, as she holds onto his shoulder for balance as she steps into the shoes and he buckles them up for her on the ground. “These were the first things you ever picked out for me.”

Because the gray dress has a high front slit, Missandei starts doing these inelegant roundhouse kicks in a pair heels to show him how well she can move in this dress.

He keeps blocking his face because he cannot trust that she won’t accidentally park a stiletto into his face. He keeps saying, “Stop it, please stop. You’re going to trip and sprain your ankle again.”

“Babe, relax,” she says. “I’ve been doing calf exercises. See how high I can jump in my heels?”

“Missandei!” he shouts, pushing her hand off of his non-erect penis. “Stop it! You’re annoying me so bad right now!” He’s trying to sleep, and she keeps jarring him awake by doing shit like trying to pluck his nipple hair or shoving her hand down his butt crack.

Her logic here is that it’s Friday night. He’s not an old man. And she doesn’t care that she’s annoying.

In a creaky, witchlike, old-lady voice, as her hand runs over his abs, she says, “Now, now, don’t be scared, dearest. Granny just wants to take a peek at what’s inside your diaper.”

“What. The fuck.”

His hands grasp onto their sheets, and he stares up at the ceiling as she slowly kisses her way down his naked torso.

She tells him to just lie back and close his eyes. She tells him she’ll take really good care of him.
He says, “Babe, you really need to cut that voice out. It’s creeping me out so much.”

She laughs.

He releases out a soft gasp and looks down at the top of her head. She is lightly biting down on his penis as she laughs, her hot breath breaking through his sweatpants. Her fingers are lightly tugging at the elastic waistband of his pants.

To him, in her regular voice, she’s saying, “Relax,” as she pulls down his sweats with his help. He nods dully — as his pulse thuds in his head. She looks up at his face and she says, “You don’t have to do anything, okay? Just lie there and relax. I’ll tell you where I’m going to touch you and what I’m going to touch you with. And whatever happens — happens.”

His body tenses, and he says, “Fuck.”

“You’re so sexy,” she whispers, as she looks back down. And then changing her voice, she says, “Granny’s going to wipe your pee-pee with her tongue now.”

“Missandei! You’re so fucking gross!”

He’s holding the car keys and the door to the garage open for her as he hollers out, “Missandei! Come on!” He’s been waiting for her to finish putting on her makeup and to decide which pair of shoes to wear.

She’s rushing down the stairs, saying, “Sorry! Sorry!” She rushes past him clutching her handbag. A waft of her perfume lingers around his face.

He’s holding flowers in his arm. As a housewarming present, he picked out a simple crystal vase and had a florist fill it with a mix of white hydrangeas and lilies. Missandei has reminded him that pink is Pia’s favorite color and her favorite flowers are probably roses. He already knew that. In response to her subtle advice-giving, he gave her a withering look and shook his head.

“Can I drive?” she asks, already sitting in the driver’s seat.

“What the fuck?” he says. “Okay, sure.” He tosses the car keys to her, which she manages to catch in midair after a quick mental freakout.

She knows that Grey thinks that Pia’s new condo is entirely ridiculous. She can pick out the disdain coming off of his brain waves as he silently looks past the bodies of guests and runs his eyes on the various mirrored surfaces that Pia likes to decorate with, the metallic gold painted everything — from votive holders to napkin rings — the fuschia throw pillows and faux fur throw blankets on the sofa. Pia’s place is feminine, bright, happy, and unabashedly girly. It’s the polar opposite of his minimalist, non-gendered, cold aesthetic. This is why he hates everything.

Missandei leaves Grey to hurt Pia’s feelings as Pia excitedly runs up to him and immediately angles
for his approval. She says, “What do you think, Grey! Do you like it!”

Missy is already walking away, on the hunt for a beer or maybe a fizzy water. She finds a cooler in the middle of the kitchen floor and stoops down to pop it open and dig through it.

Her friendships with Doreah and Clea have been on the outs lately — even before she made Pia cry without remorse. Missy’s not a bridesmaid at Doreah’s wedding even though Clea and Pia are. Doreah was a chicken, made an excuse, and told Missandei that the reason why Missandei isn’t a bridesmaid is because she’s married. Doreah wants her bridal party to all be single ladies. Doreah cited tradition.

Tradition is the reason why Missandei is opting to wear the gray dress to the wedding. She told Grey that the gorgeous beige dress looks too close to white, and the gorgeous red dress is too attention-grabbing.

She’s still rummaging through the cooler and hidden from view when she hears the two of them talking from the other side of the counter.

Doreah is saying, “Did you notice what she’s wearing?”

“The jacket is cool.”

“Well, yeah the jacket is great, but she’s wearing all black, you know? Remember when she used to wear like, colors? Remember when her hair was purple in college?”

“Yeah, that outfit totally screams Grey.”

“It’s so fucking weird and controlling — that he dresses her.”

“It’s so submissive and weak — that she lets him.”

She’s pretty much seething as she slowly stands up and makes herself known to Doreah and Clea. She has a icy beer bottle clenched in her fist.

Doreah’s face — when she sees Missandei — is initially like, oh shit!

And then Doreah completely does something wild. Doreah pretends like what just happened didn’t happen at all. That’s how much Doreah hates confrontation. Doreah pops this manic smile on her face and says, “Hey, babe! We haven’t seen you in forever! How are you?”

Missy blows past that. She cannot believe that this shit actually ever works. Rather, she says to them, “For the record. I dressed myself tonight. I picked out this outfit myself.”
“We weren’t saying that it’s weird that he dresses you,” Clea says quickly, trying to smooth things over.

“That’s *literally* what you said,” Missy asserts. “Your exact words were, ‘It’s fucking weird and controlling.’ You also called me pathetic and submissive. If you have a problem with me, I wish you’d just say it to my face instead of gossiping behind my back.”

“I think you misheard us,” Doreah says.

Missandei’s jaw drops. “Uh, no.”

After perhaps another five minutes of panicked lying on the parts of Clea and Doreah, Missandei finally just lets go of most of her anger because they obviously feel bad. She is still massively annoyed with them — annoyed at how they are responding to being called out. However, as a peace-making gesture, Missy smooths her hands down her leather blazer and says, “For the record, I know my jacket is fresh as fuck. Grey is not controlling. I just don’t wear as many colors anymore because Grey threw away a lot of my old clothes and said they were ugly.”

Doreah and Clea are not laughing. They just awkwardly avoid eye contact. Clea actually mutters — kind of under her breath — because she’s so uncomfortable, “That actually sounds pretty controlling.”

“That was a joke!” Missandei bellows. She cannot believe she is explaining jokes to people now. “Obviously he’s super controlling!!!”

She catches Drogo and Grey facing each other on the couch, throwing caramel corn into each other’s mouths, and laughing riotously after landing shots. Sometimes they reach out to high-five each other.

She watches this and wonders why her own friendships can’t be fun and light, why they can’t sit around throwing calories into each other’s faces. She wonders just how many people think she’s a weakass bitch because she lets a man with really good taste dress her.

“Ha!” she says in victory as she successfully blocks caramel corn from going into Grey’s mouth.

“Interference,” Drogo says.
Grey has a panic attack

Chapter Summary

Missandei drops what she thinks is good news. It results in her husband having a panic attack.

The second she flounces into the passenger-side of their car, she unbuttons her jeans and starts vigorously rubbing her tummy with both of her hands. She tells him she’s either about to start her period or she needs to go poop or she’s just gassy from beer. “Help me push the fart out,” she says, grabbing his hand to place it on her stomach.

“This is really sexy,” he says, as he starts running his thumb back and forth over her bare skin.

That makes her laugh appreciatively.

She softly runs her hand up and down his arm as he drives, and she tells him that she thinks he’s so handsome. She hits the overhead interior lights on as she tells him that she loves looking at him.

He reaches up to lightly smack the lights with his fist, dimming the car back into darkness. He says, “Sorry. I just need to concentrate on the road. I just don’t want to get into an accident and have something happen to you — and have it be partly my fault.”

She suppresses a smile — even though he’s not even looking at her. He’s actually hyper-focused on the road. He doesn’t love driving at this time of night. He is always on the lookout for drunk drivers swerving in and out of their lanes.

She murmurs, “We’ve been getting along really well lately, haven’t we?”

“Yeah,” he says softly. “I think so.”

“I really love it,” she confesses.

“Me too.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”
“Would it bother you if we raised our hypothetical child with a little bit of religion?”

She completely blindsides him with the question. The question contains two things that he has not been thinking about very much lately — religion and babies. He thinks that he misheard her at first, so he asks for her to repeat the question, which she does, and he learns that he did not mishear her.

Rather than answer her question directly, he asks for more context. He asks her why she’s asking him this — what it means, what it signifies, what she’s thinking about, what answer she’s angling for. His anxiety is suddenly taut and immediate, and she can tell, because she reaches out to grab his hand, squeezing it before she intertwines their fingers together. She says, “I’ve been wondering. Like — you put up with a lot of Naathi marriage traditions and rituals for me — and that was really sweet. But you obviously mocked some of it, too, because you don’t believe in that stuff. I don’t either. But I was thinking — I really like some of that stuff. Like, I really like death rites. I like that we memorialize and pray to my grandfather and brother every year. I like feeling that they are still with us or that we can still talk to them sometimes. I like the idea that I can still talk to my grandma and she’d still be with me — even after she dies. Would it bother you if I taught our hypothetical kid to do this stuff?”

Again, rather than answer her question directly, he instead asks her, “Missandei, why are you asking me this now?”

She simply says, “I want to know how compatible we’d be as parents.”

By the time they get home, all he has managed to do is let his face get scorching hot from anxiety and blubber out a few weak answers. He keeps saying variations of, “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” and she keeps lightly telling him she’s just curious. She’s not trying to put any pressure on him. Whatever he says now isn’t going to be carved into stone. People can change their minds over time.

As she readies herself for bed, she wonders out loud — just how staunch his atheism is.

From the doorway of their bathroom, he says, “You think I’m an atheist?”

She glances at him, with her hands vigorously rubbing moisturizer on her face. She says, “Well, yeah.”

In bed, she lightly groans as she presses her hands down on her own stomach. She knows that her period is well on its way — she has prepped by slapping an overnight pad onto her underwear. She sighs breathily, as she rolls over to turn off the lights.
She tells him that they’ve been getting along so amazingly lately — their marriage seems really great. And she’s also talked a lot with Jhiqui and the degradation of Jhiqui’s marriage — because that is currently Jhiqui’s favorite subject these days. A lot of what Jhiqui says has to do with all of these differences — these vast differences in life perspective. And it seems like having a child really brought stuff to the surface, these conflicting ideological stances that they didn’t even know they had. Jhiqui keeps complaining about Nick’s lack of stereotypical manliness, even though that’s initially what attracted her to him. But maybe things changed after they had a son. Jhiqui became a stay-at-home mom, and they started to live out these really traditional gender roles. Like, life takes weird and unexpected turns sometimes.

Missandei tells him that she overheard Doreah and Clea call her submissive in her relationship with him. It was kind of shocking to hear because she doesn’t think she’s submissive to him at all. It hurt her feelings that her friends think she’s a pushover, even though she has worked really hard to no longer be one. She says, “Ah, I’m just all over the place right now. Sorry if this isn’t making any sense.”

He quietly says, “No, it makes sense.”

They lapse into a lengthy silence after she finishes speaking. She probably assumes that he has fallen asleep on her, and he is kind of shocked that she hasn’t slapped him in the face for his supposed inattentiveness — but this is how far they have come. This is how tolerant and understanding of him she is. She is not pressing him for answers at all.

He sharply inhales. And then he just baldly asks, “So, are you warming up to the baby thing?”

“I think I am,” she says simply. He hears her laugh softly. He hears her say, “Does that make you happy?”

Honestly, it scares the shit out of him. It’s exactly what he wants — and his heart is beating so fast that it feels like he’s about to start hyperventilating. He immediately sits up and snaps on the light. For a brief second, he sees her beaming face blinking at him with love — and then he sees her face twist into concern when she sees him grimace and press his hand to his chest.

Her hands clutch at his arms.

She’s crying and trying to hold onto him as he shakes and sweats and is incapable of telling her what is going on or what is happening. Her grasp on him is making him feel worse — making him physically feel more hopeless and scared as he fights to breathe. She’s repeatedly asking him what is wrong. All he can do is grit his teeth and try to tune her out so he can focus on breathing so he doesn’t pass out and die. He can hear her sobbing in the distance, like she is in a tunnel.
She hears him mutter that he thinks he is dying, and she immediately scrambles for her phone with her shaking hands and starts calling an ambulance. He’s telling her to stop and hang up. She shouts at him and tells him to stop. And then she desperately repeats to him that he’s going to be fine.

By the time the ambulance arrives, he’s on the downswing of his panic attack — and he has figured out that it’s a panic attack, and he is not dying. He can’t help but be a little irrationally ticked off at Missandei — because he told her to hang up the phone and she did not — as the medics measure his blood pressure and tell him that it’s really high.

He refuses to go to the hospital. Missandei, with her puffy face and swollen eyes, asks him if he’s sure. There are ambulance lights, waking up the entire cul de sac, and he is inexplicably embarrassed that a big deal is being made of this. The medics tell him that they get calls for panic attacks all the time. He tells them he is sure that he doesn’t want to go to the hospital. They have him sign some paperwork, stating that he is declining further medical care, and then they leave.

The entire ordeal, from the start of his attack to the moment the ambulance leaves, probably takes about 40 minutes.

She’s standing in her nightgown and his jacket, crossing her arms over her body in their driveway. She’s talking to their neighbors, who have woken up and come out of their houses to ask if everything is okay. Grey doesn’t know what she is saying to them, but he is just so frustrated and pissed that his brain is fucked up, his body is fucked up, and now everyone in the fucking neighborhood knows that he is mental because his wife is just freely sharing the information with Hal.

When she walks back inside the house, he is waiting for her in the kitchen, holding their dog in his arms. He quietly says, “I asked you not to call the ambulance.”

She stiffens. She looks resolute and strong as she says, “I didn’t know what was happening. It was so scary. You said you thought you were dying. Of course I was calling the ambulance. I thought that you were —” She cuts herself off, as her lip quivers and as she wipes at her eyes with her fist.

His misplaced anger toward her then dissipates. He bends down to drop their dog onto the floor so that he can free up his arms. He beckons for her to come to him, which she does — at first hesitant — and then really fast. She throws herself against him, wraps herself around him, and squeezes him tightly.
He tiredly drags her upstairs and back to bed — her steps are heavy because she refuses to let him go — so they awkwardly lumber to their bedroom and collapse onto the mattress together. He rolls over onto his back and pulls her over him. He strokes the back of her sweaty neck and he dryly says, “I cannot wait to talk about this in therapy.”

She responds with, “You seriously scared the shit out of me.”

He says, “Yeah, I know. I’m sorry I scared you.”

The next day, Missandei has to cake a lot of makeup on her face to try and sort of disguise the haunted look of residual terror on her face. She has to put on a lot of concealer underneath her eyes and put on a lot of eyeshadow in order to try to hide her puffy eyelids. She glances at him through the mirror and says, “I look like a drag queen. Jaime better not comment on this.”

Grey leans over to kiss the side of her neck. He says, “He’s probably too preoccupied with his baby to notice your face. Not everything is about you, Missandei.”

Jaime looks utterly zombielike when he opens his front door and lets them in. And the first words out of his mouth after he says hello is, “Dude, what’s up with your face?” He is talking to Missandei. “Not into the natural look anymore?”

Missandei frowns deeply and throws Grey an accusing look. She says, “See!”

Grey bounces the baby in his arms and paces a very short distance back and forth in front of the coffee table. Brienne put out a few mugs of hot tea and a plate of store-bought crackers for them. Her hair is unwashed, there’s a baby blanket thrown over her shoulder, and she looks pretty ragged.

Grey is regaling them with the story of his panic attack. He gives them just the facts — and Missandei fills in the details of her fears and her visions of a lonely Grey Gardens-style future because that's what happens to people who lose the love of their life young.

“Or they remarry?” Jaime says, scrunching up his nose comically and just lightly pissing Missandei off with his pragmatism.

“Nah, man,” Grey drawls. “If I die young, I want her to mourn me for the rest of her life and never move on.”

“This conversation is adequately dark and morose now,” Brienne cuts in as she munches on a cracker. “Thanks, guys.”
Grey realizes just how much he has been missing Jaime, because Jaime cheers him up about the panic attack thing — just really effortlessly. Jaime normalizes it and spouts off a bunch of very normal-sounding factoids about panic attacks. Jaime also shares the one time he witnessed a panic attack — one of his clients — and he almost called an ambulance for her, too. But she told him what was up and that she didn’t want to fucking spend the money on an emergency room visit, so he better not call. And he was like, oh shit — appreciatively impressed that he got told whilst this poor woman was dealing with a panic attack.

Jaime also smoothly pivots and orients the conversation on the thing that kind of instigated Grey’s panic attack. Jaime rubs his hands together and eagerly says, “Dude, you guys talking about having babies?”

Jaime forces his own baby onto Missandei, even though she initially declines to hold the baby. She tells him she doesn’t feel comfortable holding a child this young — they are so floppy. Jaime tells her that she’ll be fine, and plops the baby into her arms. He tells her that she needs to get the practice in.

He is so blatantly on board with the idea of them having a baby — for his own selfish reasons. He says he wants them to know his and Brienne’s pain. And joy, he supposes.

“Ah, she’s a natural,” Jaime announces, leaning back on his couch and briefly shutting his eyes. Then he says, “Jesus fucking Christ I am so tired.”

“You’re tired?” Brienne asks him, accusingly.

The visit winds down when the baby starts crying and Brienne speculates that the baby is probably hungry or tired or needs to poop — one of those things. She wryly says her maternal instincts are really on point. She apologizes for the entire lack of fun on her end. She tells them to stay awhile though — chat with Jaime.

Jaime is really tired — and thus every word that comes out of his mouth looks really labor intensive. They muddle through another ten minutes of small talk before Grey nudges Missandei and says, “Wanna head out?”

They spend the rest of the afternoon doing errands. Things finally ease into a little bit of normalcy. She forgets that there’s a crapton of makeup on her face. He starts to forget the embarrassment of
being such a mentally weak little bitch. They casually go grocery shopping and then grab a bite to eat on the sidewalk — a quick and easy sandwich place. They are trying to make it fast because he purchased a beef roast, and he’s getting more and more paranoid the longer it sits at room temperature in their car. She reminds him that she is Naathi and he is an Islander. They come from people who leave food out in the sunlight for hours or even days. He tells her that their people just didn’t really know science back in the day. They also probably had a shorter life expectancy. He lightly teases her for being a little illogical.

She wraps her arms around his as she finishes the rest of her sandwich. She briefly leans into him to smell his shoulder. She whispers sentimental and emotional things into his ear as she leads him back to their car.

They run into Hal as they unload bags of groceries from the trunk of their car. Or rather, Hal purposely walks up to them with his own plastic bag of onions and tomatoes from his backyard garden.

After handing it over Missandei, who opens the bag and gushes about how amazing the tomatoes look, Hal pensively looks at Grey and says, “How are you doing today?”

Grey sheepishly says, “Better.”

Hal nods. He says, “Good.”

And all in all, it’s not as terrible a conversation as Grey was expecting.

He walks up to her at the kitchen sink and he shuts off the faucet as she’s in the middle of washing off the dirt from the onions. She blinks her lashes rapidly in surprise and then says, “Hey!”

He steadily and evenly says, “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I don’t want you to think that I’m scared shitless and therefore I don’t want to have a baby with you. I am scared shitless, but I still want to have a baby with you. I am really glad that you are coming around to the idea. I understand that this doesn’t mean you are one-hundred percent all in. I understand that we are just talking about this more. The timing of the panic attack was really unfortunate.”

By the time he tells Amari about his panic attack, it’s pretty old news to him. He goes through the ritual of sharing and just recaps what went down, what he felt, what he and Missandei discussed afterward. He tells Amari that the reason why he eventually figured out that he was having a panic attack and was not dying was because he suddenly realized that it felt like the claustrophobia-related panic attacks he had when he was really young.
Amari wants to talk about that — but Grey isn’t in the mood for it at the moment.

Rather, he pushes the discussion sideways a little bit. He says, “I’ve been thinking. What if it gets to the point where Missandei is ready to have a baby — so we start trying for a baby. But at the moment, I can only muster a hard-on like, once a year. If we can only have PIV sex once year, and we’re in our thirties — how many shots at this do we even have? Like, I know there are options out there. I know there’s in-vitro or adoption or whatever. But what if I just want to get my wife pregnant the old-fashioned, cheapest way?”

Amari frowns slightly. “Well, Grey, we’ve been working on that.”

He nods. “I know. I know we have. And it’s been good — you’ve been great. But it’s a bit of a slow process. What if I want to be ready and healthy by the time that she is hypothetically ready? What if I want to speed this process up? What do I have to do?”

“Grey, there’s no magic silver bullet —”

“Do I just have to talk a lot about what happened to me, until it costs me nothing to say it out loud? Like, is that what it’d take?”

“Grey —”
Grey is ready to really level up in therapy. Missandei wants to try something new in the bedroom. He's a hard no on it. They go have dinner with their long lost "friend," Daario!

To convince Amari that it's a really good idea to put exposure therapy on the fast track, Grey dubiously starts making these really dark statements in a joking tone to convey to his therapist just how fucking mentally ready he is to kickstart his healing into motherfucking hyperdrive.

He tells Amari that he and Missandei are tossing around the idea of vacationing in the Summer Isles. He hasn’t been since he went in his early 20s in college. That experience was a mixed bag — simultaneously terrible and awesome. It was awesome because he went with his boys, and that trip was when their friendship really cemented and became something that felt permanent to him. It was terrible because of all of the memories of human trafficking and rape. Obviously.

And he’s always wanted to go back to the Isles — but he’s always been a little afraid to go back. Obviously because he’s scared of getting triggered and just losing his fucking mind while he’s there. However, he has always wanted to show Missandei this place of his nightmares because it’s where he came from. She’s already shown him where she comes from — and that continues to be a really big deal for him — to know what made her. He really feels like he wants for her to get the full picture of where he comes from. He wants her to know it all — to know everything about him. So far, he’s only told her about it. A visual reference would be really nice for her. Naturally, she isn’t sold on this being a great idea for him, so she has been resistant. That silly, hysterical bitch.

He tells Amari that he can do a lot of great emotional and mental work in the Isles. He and Missandei will do lots of sightseeing. Maybe they’ll spend a few days relaxing at the beach. Maybe they'll spend a few other days looking up records of his family to find out if they are still alive. If his family members are still alive, maybe he’ll drop in on his parents and just fucking cut their beating hearts out of their chests in cold blood for fucking him up the way that they have! That would be great!

“Grey,” Amari says, interrupting the cheery diatribe. “I’m concerned.”

“Don’t be,” Grey says, his tone darkening. “I’m Westerosi now. What can they do to me?” He is referring to the authorities. And fleeing them after he kills his parents. He’s asking, “What is a corrupt government going to fucking do to me? We don’t have an extradition treaty with the Summer Isles.”
When he gets home, she’s cooking dinner. He gives her a quick smooch on her cheek and a tight grope on her bottom that makes her yelp before he announces that he told his therapist about his Summer Isles vacation idea, and Amari thinks it’s a great idea!

“What?” Missandei says. “No he doesn’t.” Her tone — and face — are very skeptical.

“So he didn’t say that,” Grey admits. “But he doesn’t think it’s the worst idea. He’s a little concerned about how I will handle parts of it — but I told him I have you.” He touches her, lays his hand on her stomach. “You’re my life raft.”

She swallows as she continues stirring a pot of sauce. “Okay, that’s a bit overstated,” she says. “That also puts immense pressure on me to keep you well-behaved and happy.” She frowns. And then she sighs. “I don’t want to prevent you from going back — it’s been a long time, and it’s probably overdue. But I don’t want you to go back to a bad place — physically or emotionally.”

“Yeah, I get that,” he says, rocking backward on his heels. He lifts his hand from her so that he can clasp his fingers on top of his own head. “But I bet it’ll be fine. I’ll probably only try to choke you out in my sleep once. I’ll probably only go to jail for assault once.”

She frowns. She stares at him. She says, “That’s not very funny, Grey.”


The possibility that she might, one day, let him impregnate her gives him a really urgent and renewed sense of purpose when it comes to his mental health. He applies a lot of concentrated effort toward communicating with her, checking in on his own feelings, and figuring out ways to advance their partnership. He remembers to pepper in compliments with his criticisms. He lies back in bed, and he lets himself relax as she lowers herself beside him. He has worked all the more harder, to keep the bitter self-recriminations from entering his mind.

He tells her this, too. He tells it to her very plainly and very boldly. He tells her that he’s working even harder on his mental health because he wants to be healthy for their baby — in the event that life arrives there.

This gives her a major complex — he knows this because she tells him so. She looks so adorably nervous and awkward, as she quietly tells him that this isn’t a sure thing. She still doesn’t know if she wants to have a baby at all. She doesn’t want to build up his hopes only to destroy them later. She wants for him to be prepared. She doesn’t want to disappoint him.

He reminds her that before he knew her, he was self-destructive and he didn’t even bother living. He was intent on subsiding and then dying. He reminds her that her presence in his life made him hopeful, and she made him want for it to be different. She is everything to him.

He also sardonically reminds her that not being able to have sex with her conventionally was the one and only thing that finally drove him to therapy. He really needed therapy. He really should’ve been in therapy a lot earlier. He tells her that, right now, he’s never fucking wanted to get better so much in his entire life. The idea of a future together for them inspires this. He doesn’t just want to live a long time — he wants to live well and happily for a long time. For her. For them. For their
hypothetical offspring. Or not. Even if it’s just for them, that is okay.

He takes off his clothes, pulling them off his skin, exposing himself to her. He smiles at her as he crawls up her body. She almost can’t look at him because she’s so emotional — and he tells her that the capacity of feeling that she has for him is just stunning sometimes.

He lets his body relax as he lowers his weight onto her. He palms her cheek to turn her face so that he can kiss her.

It’s taken him over a year to get to the point where he can have sex this way — or more accurately, it’s taken him his entire adult life to get to the point where he can have sex like this.

Quickies are a thing of the past. Neither of them can arrive at completion with any kind of swiftness. Sex has to be pretty deliberate in the sense that they have to be prepared to block off a good chunk of time before they engage in it.

Sex is now about taking turns, giving each other orgasms. On the whole, she comes more often than he does because it’s a lot easier for her to. It took him awhile to get used this unevenness. What helps is the realization that she is a woman and contended with the very same thing with him at the beginning of their relationship — and also with her other sexual partners outside of him — an observation he’s never crazy about making, but one that is important to remember nonetheless.

His concept of what sex is has broadened. He now hears stray statements on TV, in articles, from other people, and from Drogo — about how it’s not real sex, not really, when it’s oral or a blow job. In the past, Drogo has benignly said stuff like, “It’s just a blow job.” Which used to make Grey flinch inside.

It took awhile for him to reframe it all to himself. He now believes that it’s sex the moment pleasure is given. It’s sex starting from the first touch or the first kiss. He doesn’t have to finish in order to qualify what he has done as sex. She doesn’t have to be penetrated in order to qualify what they have done as sex.

It took a very long time to accept that she is okay with the ambiguity, that she even prefers it. She has whispered to him — she has told him she likes that it takes a long time. She likes that this is not something they can do on autopilot. She likes that there has to be a deep level of engagement in it in order for it to work.

He finds that what Amari and she have told him is actually true. He needs to relax the fuck out. When he can stop making it so performative in his head, when he can just act out on instinct and just have fun with it, when he can let go of outcomes — he can get hard. It’s still very difficult. Because when he realizes that he is hard, he immediately loses it. He’s working on not punishing himself for this.

“Hey, can we try something new?”

He is immediately nervous. He freezes and goes rigid. She is scooting backwards on the bed, to give him a little bit of space. She’s naked, her eyes are bright and wild, her lips are wet and puffy. He says, “What? What do you want to do?”

“Can I — um, can I —” She breaks off a little awkwardly, running her lips together. She’s nervous,
too. She laughs a little bit at herself. She says, “I don’t know whether or not to be classy about this and try to use a euphemism that might be too ambiguous — or should I just be crass?”

His anxiety amps up. He says, “Missandei, just say it.”

“Can I eat your ass?”

“What.”

He’s not feeling this at all. He’s not into it at all. After she asks him if she can eat his butt, he announces that they are done for now. Sexy time is over for now. He doesn’t want her face in his butt. No. Nope. No. “No. Sorry. No. Veto. No.”

She’s trying not to get mad, let her feelings get hurt, or feel embarrassed about this. He can tell. Her arms are crossed over her breasts. Her lips are pursed together as she says, “Why not?”

“Um, I just told you. I don’t want your face in my butt.” As her expression pinches together tighter, he sighs. He says, “Baby, it’s gross. That’s where poop comes out of.”

“I don’t understand,” she says carefully. “If it’s so gross to you, how come you eat my ass?”

“Uh, because it’s not gross when I do it.” Obviously. Get with the program.

She looks like she does not even know what to make of this. She looks like she’s trying to wrap her mind around this. She gently says, “That doesn’t make sense. You sound like you’re being a little hypocritical.”

He sighs. He cannot believe he has to explain this shit to her. He says, “Baby, it’s not hypocritical. My ass is gross. Your face is beautiful. Why would we stick your beautiful face in my butt? On the flipside, your ass is gorgeous. My face is aight. So yeah, makes sense to get it in there.”

This is when she loses it. This is when she slaps her hand hard into her other hand and says, “That doesn’t make sense at all!”

“Baby, of course it doesn’t make sense,” he says, holding up his pointer finger and holding it to his head, to his brain.

“How come it’s okay for me to put my fingers in your butt but not my face and tongue?”

He’s not really crazy about how graphic this conversation has gotten. He now really wishes they had both taken the euphemistic route. “Because you can wash your hands afterwards.”

“I can wash my face and mouth, too.”

“Baby —” he says, pausing. “It’s just not the same.”

“Stop calling me baby. You’re trying to placate me. With your stubborn idiocy.”

“Okay, we really don’t need to start insulting each other.”

She grunts in annoyance and then starts pushing herself off the bed. She stands up and then picks up
their clothes from off the floor. She takes the pile of it into the bathroom, where the hamper is. She comes back into the bedroom a moment later, wearing underwear, pulling a t-shirt over her head.

He still hanging out on the bed all naked. He asks, “Why is this so important to you? Why are you suddenly so into ass eating?”

“I dunno,” she says. “I just wanted to try something new. I just want to find more ways to make you feel good. I was just thinking, hey, you orgasm when I massage your prostate. Maybe you will orgasm if I eat your butt. Also, your tush is not gross. I love your squishy tushy.”

“Well great,” he says. “Now I feel like a real asshole, Missandei. Thanks a lot.”

She shakes her head in exasperation.

He clears his throat. “Okay. Well, I’ll consider it. I will need to wash the shit out of my ass and do a few enemas before I let you get in there. It’s not something you can do lightly, Missandei. You can’t just go sticking your face into people’s butts spontaneously.”

“Oh my God,” she whispers — into her cupped hands, which are now covering her mouth. She looks weary. “That’s exactly what you do,” she says quietly. “You stick your face into my butt without warning — all the time.”

He’s laughing now. He’s such a fucking asshole. He totally knows this. It’s hilarious. She’s totally right. Double standards are funny! He’s chuckling as he holds onto his stomach, as he says, “Well, sometimes I tell you, ‘Hey, man, it’s happening,’ right before I get in there. That’s a warning. You can’t say that’s not a warning. You can’t say I never tell you what’s up.”

He can see her struggle mightily — to not let herself smile at him. He can see her losing the fight. God, this woman thinks he’s so fucking hilarious. God, she’s so fucking in love with him.

He is pretty sure that she is telling him — for the very first time — that they are having dinner with Daario and Dany. She corrects him and says that she is actually reminding him. He should already know about this dinner.

He stops himself from calling her a dirty liar. He thinks that he’d fucking remember her asking him to betray Drogo. He says, “Are they dating?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “Maybe casually.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “No, thanks. You can go. But I don’t feel like it. D didn’t like Daario. And D especially won’t like that Daario is with his ex.”

“Oh, thanks for giving me permission to go out to dinner with my friends,” she says sarcastically. “And what is this? Middle school? You’re allowed to hang out with people Drogo does not like.”

He scoffs. “Man, Missandei. I don’t even have time to explain bro code to you.”

She looks at him incredulously with her mouth ajar. She gestures to his suit, then she gestures to their spotless kitchen. She says, “What are you so busy with that you can’t explain something that will take two seconds to explain to me? Your life is not that busy!”
His mouth curves into a smile. Because she’s so fucking cute when she’s irritated with him. He purposefully riles her up some more. He says, “Baby, chill. You’re blowing this a little outta proportion right now.”

He eventually relents and concedes to dinner — only after he texts Drogo to tell Drogo what is up and asks Drogo if he should shun the fuck outta Dany and Daario or nah? He texts Drogo because he knows that Drogo would be hurt if Drogo found out about this after the fact. He puts himself in Drogo’s shoes and imagines how he’d feel if he died and Drogo started hanging out with Missandei’s new boyfriend. And even from the fucking grave, Grey isn’t very fucking cool with that.

Drogo is a far more enlightened being. He aggressively writes back that he does not even give a fuck who Dany is fucking these days. This means that he still cares a fair bit, but Grey opts not to comment on it. Drogo tells Grey to go fucking have fun. Drogo petulantly tells Grey that he hopes Grey falls deeply in love his new best friend.

Grey writes back to tell Drogo to chill out. No one can replace Jaime’s spot in Grey’s heart.

His phone starts ringing right away. He picks up the call right away. He starts laughing into it. He says, “I’m fucking with you, man! And seriously, are you cool with this?”

Daario is super enthusiastic and looks strangely happy to see him. It’s really fucking weird because only three people and one dog are ever this excited to see him. Daario goes for a hug right away when they arrive at the restaurant.

Daario is like, “Holy shit! Grey! It’s really you!” as he holds his arms out. “Shit, it’s been so long! How are you, man?”

Grey is like, whoa, we are strangers to each other. Grey holds his hands up automatically — defensively warding off the hug without a thought.

Daario stops, mid-reach. He pulls back, replacing the look of surprise on his face with another smile. He course-corrects and holds out his hand instead.

Grey warily shakes it. Daario is probably being really nice because he’s banging Dany, and Dany told Daario that Grey is best friends with Dany’s ex. Daario is probably being really nice to him because Daario is trying to impress Dany. Daario is so fucking fake.

Grey says, “Hey.”
Grey is really committed to being a complete asshole to Daario. Missy is not really that surprised — but she still finds that she can muster up some embarrassment over it. She’s embarrassed because Daario has only said really, really nice things about Grey. And Grey has only treated Daario like an inconvenient turd on the bottom of his shoe.

Daario tries to reminisce about the past to soften Grey up for instance. He asks Grey if Grey remembers the final heat of the Blackwater Regatta their senior year.

In response to this, Grey says, “Yes.” And that is all he says.

Daario tells Grey that he looks like he’s still in great shape. He asks Grey, “Do you still row or surf or do any other sports?”

Grey says, “No,” to that.

This causes Missandei to smack him nervously and correct him. She tells Daario that Grey recreationally plays some sports. “He golfs, plays basketball, a few racquet sports, and he runs marathons.” Grey tenses beside her — probably because he’s ridiculous and annoyed that she made him sound like a liar. But he is a liar.

Daario is admirably unfazed. He laughs, and he nods out a smile. He tells Grey that Grey really nabbed quite a lady, referring to her. Daario says, “She’s gorgeous and smart. You’re a lucky man.”

Grey manages to look really annoyed that Daario complimented her. If she had to guess, she’d guess that he is annoyed because he hates it when people tell him shit that he already knows. She watches as Grey responds by stonily saying, “She’s okay. She’s just aight.” It elicits this really confused and bewildered expression from Daario. Dany is not bothered by this at all. Missy is charmed by this. Because there’s someone out there for everyone! Missy starts softly laughing as she reaches over to rub his thigh underneath the table. What a silly weirdo.

She leans over to press a kiss to his cheek. She warmly says, “I love you.”

He kind of makes a show of dodging her lips. He says, “Yeah, it’s fine — whatever — God, stop smothering me,” as he grabs her hand underneath the table and holds onto it.

She really should’ve left him at home. When they go to hug one another before parting ways, Missy whispers a sorry into Dany’s ear. Out loud, Dany says, “Don’t worry about it. I am sort of impressed by his loyalty. But less so by his apparent belief that women are objects that belong to certain men.”

Grey can overhear this — because he is right there. He expresses no contrition — on his face or verbally. He just says, “See you tomorrow, boss.”

He makes a move to shake Daario’s hand. He says, “Good to see you again, man.”

She drives them home because he had a drink and she didn’t. As she starts the ignition, she turns to
him — smiling — and she says, “Are you pleased with yourself?”

He shrugs, before letting a little smile slip out.

She swats at him. She’s laughing. She says, “You are the worst! I can’t take you anywhere! You were so rude and embarrassing!”

He starts chuckling, too. He rubs his chin as he murmurs, “Did you like the part where I refused to hug him? That was really funny.”

“Oh, yeah!” he says, laughing louder. “Good God, what’s it even like? Being married to such amazingness?”

He pulls her giggling ass into bed, and he starts stripping her naked. He tells her to help him take off his own clothes. He starts rummaging around in their side table for a condom — he leaves it on the tabletop, just in case. She tries to crawl down the bed so that she can deposit his shoes at the foot of it and get to the bathroom to clean in between her legs. She’s still on her period. He grabs her ankle and drags her back up. She drops his shoes, squeals, and inexplicably covers her face as she laughs. He turns her over and tells her it’s fine. He’ll go grab a towel in a bit.

As he works on prying her hands off her face, he thinks that this is amazing. He thinks that this is awesome. He thinks that she is the very fucking best. He presses himself into her, and he wraps her legs around his hips. He grinds her into the bed and holds her face securely in his hands as he kisses her.
Grey hates getting personal

Chapter Summary

Grey and Missy spend their evening apart. Grey tries to avoid bonding with Nick. Missy tries hard to bond with Clea. No one accomplishes what they are trying to do.

Grey has to hang out with Nick — all by himself — because Jaime claims he’s “busy as hell” with the baby. Grey would invite Drogo, but Drogo and Nick are not really friends, on account of having nothing in common beyond both knowing what Jhiqui looks like naked.

Grey couldn’t figure out a nice way to say no fast enough when Nick reached out to ask him out on a “man date.” Nick laughed nervously after he said “man date” to Grey over the phone. It made Grey wary that the nervous laughter and awkward wording are just amuse bouches to hours-long main courses of this shit.

Grey started to try and defer, to try and push the date further down his calendar so that he wouldn’t have to deal with Nick while Nick is at his maximum level of pain — but Missandei caught Grey being a shyster. She caught him, shamed him, and told him to grow a pair and be a better friend.

Well, she’s an asshole. Because this is terrible.

Grey feels really awkward and uncomfortable because there’s this undercurrent of emotion permeating through everything. Like, Nick is pretty determined to not talk about Jhiqui right away, but it definitely looks like it’s heading in that direction. Grey can tell that they are fucking staring down the barrel of a heart to heart because Nick looks kind of distraught when Grey easily drives a ball over 250 yards after taking his first practice swing. Nick’s eyes follows the ball as it flies past the marker — and then he says to Grey, “Wow, you’re so athletic and strong. It must be cool to have muscles. I once read an interview where Ryan Gosling called his muscles his pets. Sometimes I pretend I’m an actor, and I have to get buff for a movie role. And I work out like, a week before I quit. You work out all the time. I so admire your discipline.”

Grey honestly wants to respond with something like:

Fuck me. Fuck me now. Fuck me dead forever. Fuck you, Jaime. Fuck you, Missandei.
Doreah says no to dinner because she is really busy. It’s crunch time for her. Her relatives are starting to fly in for the wedding. On the other side of the city, Jhiqui is determined to prove that she has the capability of being a really good single mom, so she refuses to get a babysitter to take care of Arqo just so she can go out and have fun with her friends.

This is why it’s just Missy and the single ladies — why it’s just Missy and Clea and Pia. This is why they end up going to a trendy bar. This is why Pia starts throwing out the idea of dancing. This is why Clea starts vigorously texting the guy that she’s been seeing — he is 26 years old. He is a younger man. Fear of rocking the boat is why Missy hesitantly says nothing after Clea announces that the guy she is seeing is downtown at a lounge, and he’s open to meeting up with them, if they want. Clea says that he’s with friends.

Pia hopefully asks, “Are the friends single?”

Clea says, “Yes!”

Holy shit, there are so many contracted, pensive silences. He’s trying to think up better activities to do — so that next time, this emotional shit does not stink up the outing. Maybe next time, they will do something that is more fast-moving. Maybe basketball. Though, Nick looks really fucking terrible at team sports. Maybe they can go somewhere loud next time. Maybe they can go to a movie — a comedy or something. Maybe they can go to a concert. Maybe they can box together. Maybe they can just fucking fight each other next time so that Nick can punch out his feelings and Grey can just get hit in the face and go unconscious so he doesn’t have to deal with this shit.

“Sorry I’m so lame,” Nick says, sighing. He has finished hitting balls. And this actually means that he is discouraged and has professed that he is not great at hitting balls and does not find it fun. He has admitted that he’s scared he will throw his back out if he hits too many balls. His body twists all weird and awkwardly and unnaturally. This was why he just handed over the rest of his bucket to Grey. This is why he is just watching Grey drive balls now.

Which is awkward, too. Because Nick’s taking up space and feeling self-conscious about taking up space. Grey has already told Nick to watch out a few times — Grey has directed Nick to move out of the way unless he wants metal to the face.

Giving that bit of feedback to Nick felt like punching a puppy in the face.

“Hey — why don’t you go grab a seat over there?” Grey points to a bench. He thinks that this is fucking fantastic. He has already considered helping Nick get better, but he also remembers that when he tried to give Missandei tips, she almost beat his face in with a club. Grey knows that he’s kind of an asshole teacher, and he only knows how to instruct with insults and a litany of criticism. He does not think Nick can handle that right now.

“Oh, okay,” Nick says, quietly sitting down on the bench.

“I’ll be fast,” Grey promises.

“No, no. It’s cool. Take your time.”
This night is not shaping out to be what she was expecting at all. She thought she’d have dinner and really deep, really emotional conversations with her friends about their hopes and dreams. She thought that she could smooth over things with Clea if she just got the chance to remind Clea that she’s actually not a confrontational flaming bitch all the time. Sometimes, she is fun and nice.

Instead of a sit-down dinner, Clea tells them that there’s a pizza place adjacent to the lounge that they can grab a quick bite at. Instead of deep emotional conversations, Pia keeps smacking her lips together and asking them if there is any lipstick on her teeth. There is not.

Grey slams out a dozen balls in record speed — and in the course of doing this, some dipshit walking by calls him Happy Gilmore and makes a comment about how Grey’s game isn’t going to get better that way. Grey sends a ball sailing 280 yards. And then Grey looks at the dipshit — who is arranging his bag in the spot in front of Grey. What a fucking testicle. Grey says, “Cool glove, bro.”

It is not fucking cool at all. Good God, he hates people.

Then, Grey just stands there and stares. Or glares. For a pretty long time.

“Yes?” the guy in front of him says, looking over his shoulder — now irritated. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, bro. My long drive. Why don’t you show me how to hit a ball proper?”

“Hey, man, I’m sorry if you took what I said the wrong way. I did not mean any offense earlier. I didn’t mean to start something with you.”

So fucking annoying. “Yeah, dude. No offense taken. I just wanna see how a pro like you moves the ball.”

Grey feels like he has accurately sussed out this dipshit. This dipshit is a passive-aggressive little dildo that likes to mutter shit under his breath and then squirm like a little baby when called out because he’s so fucking scared of the prospect of getting smacked.

Grey stands there and waits. And waits. And waits.

The other guy finally gets fed up. He pissily says, “Whatever.” And then he takes forever adjusting his bitchass stance. And then he pulls his driver back too short. And then he adjusts his stance again. And then he finally chaotically drives the ball.

Grey watches the ball veer impotently right. He says, “Okay.” And then dumps the rest of Nick’s bucket over. Eighteen balls roll out. He lines up half of them up that he can just fucking finish this fast and move the fuck on with his night.
Missy really isn’t into making new friends right now. This is like, one of the things she has adopted from Grey — general antisocial behavior and a hatred of small talk because she is less of a people pleaser now. She is not ashamed.

She’s not really feeling it as she follows her friends through a dimly lit lounge and walks up to a seating area full of really attractive young men and women.

Grey made the call to eat a quick dinner before leaving the house to meet up with Nick. He did that because he thought that would get him out of spending quality time with Nick. But his decision-making has backfired. They finish at the driving range way faster than he expected. It is fucking 7:30.

Nick is so uncertain as they walk back out to their cars with the clubs. Grey let Nick borrow his extras, so he loads both sets into his trunk.

“That was fun,” Nick says. “Thanks for hanging out with me.”

Fucking shit. Nick is giving him an out. Fucking shit.

Grey reluctantly says, “Hey. Wanna go grab a bite or a drink somewhere nearby?”

She has a sickly smile plastered onto her face as a guy shouts over the house music to be heard. He leans over and asks her what’s her name. She says her name.

He is like, “What!”

She realizes that it’s a hard name, and it’s kind of loud in here. So she raises her voice a little bit. She shouts, “Missy!”

“Sissy?”

She says, “Yeah!”

“Oh! I’m Brandon!”

She says, “Okay!” And she generally tries to assume that this guy is friendly and is just benignly curious and polite. He probably doesn’t want to sleep with her. They just met. Like, she needs to get over herself. She shouts, “What do you do! For a job!”

Nick has become so nervous hanging out with Grey — for reasons Grey does not really understand — so despite having a really thorough knowledge of restaurants, Nick does not offer any suggestions
on where to eat and drink. He just stands around as Grey starts looking up places based on distance on his phone.

Grey suggests that they take one car to the restaurant.

Pia is sitting across from her, just flirting hardcore with a white guy in a Kangol hat. No judgement. Clea is cozied up with the guy she is dating, whose name Missandei still has not learned.

And when Brandon finds out that she is not single, he is completely done asking her questions about herself. The topic of her availability comes up because he straight up asks her if she has a boyfriend. She tells him that she actually has a husband. He looks taken-aback at that. Then he asks her why she’s here then — without her husband.

She thinks it’s a weird question. She tosses him a look. She tries to make a joke out of it. She says, “Oh, are boring married ladies not allowed here by themselves!”

It might sound a touch too passive aggressive. His eyes go a little blank. His eyes stay bland as he goes, “Oh! Of course they are! Everyone’s welcomed!”

And then he turns around and gives her his back. He starts making conversation with another woman.

Awesome.

Grey suspects that the heart to heart that he is dreading is going to come after they order their drinks. So Grey immediately goes to the toilets after ordering — he’s that scared that Nick is going to say something of substance to him. Grey pretty much runs to the urinals to let Nick and his emotions cool down a little bit.

When Grey gets back to the table, Nick is flipping the dinner menu over and over. Grey thinks that this is fine. This is cool. Reading is fun. He can deal with this.

Nick says, “We crossed paths a couple of times in college. Do you remember?”

Grey honestly does not. He says, “Sorry. I don’t.”

Nick waves his hand. “It’s cool. Both times were really brief, and there wasn’t really an introduction. One time, it was when you stopped by the library to grab some notes from Missy while a group of us were studying together. The other time was in the quad. Me, Jhiqui, and Missy were walking, and we bumped into you and your friends. You guys all paused to chat a little bit with each other.”

“Oh,” Grey says, unsure of where this is going.

“I remember because after you left, Jhiqui said something to Missy like, ‘Fuck that guy. That guy sucks.’”

“Sounds like something she would say about me,” Grey says smoothly.
“Later, I asked Jhiqui why she didn’t like you. She told me you were an asshole. I was curious, so I asked for details. She told me a really convoluted story that didn’t really make complete sense — but she told me you were messing around with Missandei and playing her — and I took the intent of what she said at face value. I was like, well, that’s not nice. I wondered why Missy would be involved with someone who didn’t treat her well. Jhiqui said Missy was insecure and had low sense of self-worth.”

“Okaaay,” Grey says slowly. “Where are you going with this?”

“My wedding was really the first time I really got to know you. It was when you killed a chicken for me.”


“Yeah,” Nick says. “I was not ready for that, man. I was not equipped for that. I’m like — I’m really squeamish with blood. Anyway — um, I thought that it was really fucking cool, that you killed a chicken for me. Like, that was really above and beyond normal wedding guest duties.”

Grey kind of awkwardly laughs.

“Like, that was really nice. And really intuitive. You knew that Jhiqui’s brothers and cousins were making fun of me. You felt sorry for me. You did a lot of things quietly to make it easier. You really helped me save face. And I remember thinking — an asshole doesn’t do shit like that. I remember thinking that Jhiqui was really wrong about you. I remember thinking that she completely misjudged you. And she influenced me a lot. She made me think a certain way and feel a certain way. I don’t think she’s always a very good judge of character.”

By the time ten o’clock hits, Missandei has been pounding tonic water, so she is pretty sober and standing outside of the building, waiting for Pia to come out from the restrooms. Clea walks up and tells her they want to change locations. They want to head to a dance club a few blocks away.

Missandei tells Clea that it all sounds pretty cool — but it’s kind of getting late. They all carpooled together. Missandei wonders, out loud, how late Clea would like to stay out.

Missy does not think that there is anything egregiously terrible in what she is saying, but Clea crosses her arms over her chest and says, “You want to leave? Already?”

Missy refrains from pointing out the obvious — which is the fact that it is dark outside, and she’s been a good sport about the way this night has unfolded. “Um, I don’t think I’m dressed for dancing. I’m not really wearing the right shoes.” She gestures down to her heels.

“It’s okay,” Clea says. “You don’t need to wear the right shoes.”

“I’m kind of tired,” Missandei admits. “I mean, if you guys don’t mind taking a cab back to your cars later — you can do that. I mean, I can pitch in for cab fare, too — since I’d be leaving you in a lurch by leaving.”

“I thought we were hanging out tonight,” Clea returns.

Missandei wants to say something like: So did I.
But she doesn’t say that. Instead, she says, “Um, we did hang out. Did you feel like we didn’t hang out enough?”

Clea shrugs. She is obviously so very irritated with Missandei right now. Missandei does not even understand how Clea has a leg to stand on right now. Missy has been incredibly cool as Clea freaking ignored her all night. And now Clea is pissed that Missy wants to go home? After being ignored for hours?

Clea says, “Whatever. I don’t care.”

*That.* Missandei does not like *that.* She doesn’t like petulant passive aggressiveness. She says, “Okay.” And then she waits.

In that time, Pia exits out the lounge with a big goofy grin on her face. She’s adjusting her jacket as she says, “Ready, guys?”

To Clea, Missandei finally says, “You obviously have something you want to say to me. So just say it.”

Clea is tense and quiet for a stretch of time — presumably as she thinks over what she wants to say or not say.

In that time, the guy she is dating is drunk off his ass and breaks right into their conversation. He and some of his friends have apparently been eavesdropping. He literally barges into between them — bodily — and says, “Okay, ladies, break it up. Break it up. We’re all trying to have a good time here!”

Missandei raises up her hand and takes a step back. She says, “Please do not touch me. And please do not interrupt my conversation with my friend.”

She is sufficiently stunned when Clea suddenly yells — right in her face, “You are such a bitch sometimes!”

Nick confesses to Grey that Grey makes him really nervous — which is a statement that doesn’t really surprise Grey because Grey knows that his severe stoicism often translates as snobbery to other people.

What does surprise Grey is when Nick starts talking, in anguish, about just how cool he thinks Grey is. Nick says that he thinks Grey is so fucking cool. Grey is too cool to be friends with Nick. Grey is good at sports. Grey is handsome. Grey is stylish and dresses nicely. Grey is a great dancer. Grey is really smart. Grey is hilarious. Grey is Black.

Grey is like, uhhh . . .

Nick sighs and says, “Before Jhiqui, I was super ignorant and didn’t know anything about other cultures. After Jhiqui, I started, you know, reading a lot and trying to dismantle my white privilege, my cisgender male privilege, my able-bodied privilege — and the funny thing is that the more informed I became, the more nervous I acted around people of color — because I was just like, you know, super hyper-aware that I’m white. And I didn’t want to act out white fragility, so I just like — um, I just let my wife win all of the arguments. And I think she started to look down on me because
of that. And when I realized what was happening, I tried to stand up for myself more — but she just hated when I spoke up. And we fight even more now. We fight so much that she doesn’t want to live in the same house as me anymore.”

Grey sighs. Because this is fucking sad, and he feels bad. He says, “Man, that really sucks. I’m sorry.”

Missandei does not like it when people yell at her. She does not like emotional yelling at all. Clea has been drinking — so maybe that’s the reason this is happening — or maybe it’s not. Missandei does not think alcohol is a great reason for bad behavior. Clea starts to tell Missy that she has been a real shitty friend the last couple of years. She tells Missy that Missy is really judgemental. And she acts like she’s better than them. Missy never wants to go out anymore. She hates fun now. All she ever does is hang out with her husband. All she cares about is her husband. What the fuck? She used to be fun.

Missandei doesn’t yell back. She just coldly absorbs this.

Pia is desperately trying to make peace between them, trying to smooth things over by reminding the both of them that they are friends. Pia is telling Missandei that Clea has been drinking and does not mean what she is saying.

The other people in the group started drifting away once things got really dramatic. The guy that Clea is dating eventually pulls her away from Missandei. He calls her babe. He tells her that it’s okay. Clea’s kind of freaking out still. So he has to drag her down the sidewalk.

When they are finally alone, Pia cautiously takes a step toward Missandei. Pia says, “Are you going to go home now?”

Missy says, “I don’t even fucking know.”

Nick observes that Grey and Missandei seem really compatible — really in-tune and supportive of one another. Nick observes that coming from the same sort of racial background must be nice. They are probably able to relate to each other in really unique and specific ways.

Reluctantly, Grey says, “We do. But it doesn’t mean our marriage is without conflict or problems.”

“Oh, of course!” Nick says, nervously twisting his glass of beer in place. “I didn’t mean to imply that you guys don’t work on your marriage. I’m sure you do. Sorry.”

Perhaps spurred by Nick’s excessive consideration or Nick’s excessive oversharing or Nick’s excessive displays of submission — Grey finds himself fucking blurting out, “Like, we only had penetrative sex once in the last year.”
She has nothing to prove, but she does not go home right away. She slowly starts walking in the direction of the club, with Pia quietly falling into step next to her.

“I think she’s had a little bit of a tough time — because Doreah’s getting married, and Doreah’s her best friend,” Pia says. “Um, it’s hard when all of your friends are getting married and moving on with their lives. I wouldn’t take what she said personally.”

“Okay,” Missandei says, crossing her arms over her chest as she walks, to ward off some of the cold.

Grey’s face is leaking out a grotesque amount of personal information to a man that he does not consider a close friend like, whatsoever. He is telling Nick about how he has not been able to maintain an erection. He tells Nick that it’s an ongoing problem he’s had since puberty. He tells Nick that this issue stems from childhood sexual abuse and also parental abandonment. He tells Nick that he’s been going to therapy, and that’s been very nice and helpful. He tells Nick that Missandei is honestly the very best person he knows and that he loves his wife so much. She’s been a real trooper with the sex stuff and the emotional stuff — not just in the last year, but really the last decade — really just the entire time they have known each other.

Grey says, “Ha, major TMI, right? It’s like, shut up already, Grey, right?”

Nick breathes out a soft, “Whoa.” And then before Grey can feel too terrible about his verbal diarrhea, Nick says, “Oh my God, I’m so in awe of you. You are so strong — and brave. Oh my God, thank you for trusting me with your truth.”

Grey is like, “Oh my God, stop.” And then he covers his tired face with his hands.

At first, she’s not entirely sure why she trekked all the way over here. After the bouncer checks her ID and she pays good money to gain entry into this claustrophobic place, she walks by a few guys waiting for the toilets. One of them grabs her arm as she’s passing by. She looks up. He’s smiling at her and mouthing hi.

She violently rips her arm out of his grasp, looks into his face, and viscerally says, “No,” before she continues walking.

She spots Clea after five minutes of searching. Pia is confused and not sure what is going on, but she faithfully follows Missy around the place. Pia lightly knocks into Missy’s back once Missy stops.

Missy turns around. Into Pia’s ear, she tells Pia to go have a fucking fun time with strangers. Missy will be parking her fucking ass at the bar with the car keys. When they are fucking done having fun, she will drive their fucking asses home — if they want her to.
After he and Nick part ways for the night, Grey decides that he just wants to hear her voice as soon as possible. He wants to talk to her about his night. He wants to talk to her about everything and anything and even nothing. He just wants to pull her into bed and just bury his face in her soft breasts, honesty.

He is disappointed to find that she isn’t home yet. He texts her to ask her where she is at.

Her phone glows and vibrates before she finishes cobbling out a response to him. She rejects the call. Then, she finishes typing out her text. At the end of it, she adds that it’s too loud for her to talk to him right now. She tells him she’s at a dance club. She’s designated driver for Pia and Clea. She tells him she’s sober and is having so much fun. Not.

He asks her if she is for real, if she is messing with him.

She tells him she is for real. She is not messing with him.
Clea barfs in Missy's car

Chapter Summary

Missy comes home after a night out on the town with her friends. Grey does not like drunk shenanigans.

He figures that since Missandei isn’t home yet, he might as well try to rub one out clinically to help his stupid brain move toward healthy and whole. When she’s home, he doesn’t like to masturbate because he gets a little paranoid that she will catch him in the act and will want to be supportive and loving, will want to do something terrible — like help him finish. She is the sort of person who thinks that it’s supportive and loving to witness his vulnerable moments and co-opt them as her own. She likes to say that this penis shit is not his problem. It’s their issue.

It’s sweet, and she’s cute. And the words coming out of her mouth are sometimes a crock of shit.

He really doesn’t want to let her watch him try really hard to come. He really doesn’t want to let her see how sad and pathetic it looks for him to jack off desperately and furiously — only for it to fizzle out and go soft. He thinks he looks really fucking awkward and ugly and pathetic when he’s jacking off. This is why he can’t do it in front of a mirror. He doesn’t want to look at tragic shit.

And — he is pretty sure if she watches him, she will lose some attraction for him. He feels so self-conscious about this. She won’t want to have sex with him as much anymore. And then where will they be?

Nick told Grey that he and Jhiqui often go months without sex. Jhiqui does this thing where she slaps Nick’s hand off her body and looks at him like he makes her skin crawl. Whenever she does that, Nick feels ashamed, disgusted with himself, and really hurt. Gradually over time, he has stopped trying to initiate sex because he just can’t get constantly shut down all the time. This is how they have gone months without having sex.

Grey would like to avoid this with Missandei. Sex is already logistically hard for them. Sex is already fraught with emotion and constant displays of vulnerability. He already feels like less of a man — all the time. He constantly worries about not satisfying her sexually — all the time. It would not take much to really hurt his feelings and make him never want to try ever again. He doesn’t think that he can really handle hearing her say mean things to him, like the things that Jhiqui has reportedly said to Nick. Grey is just scared of accidentally giving Missandei more reasons to not want to have sex with him.
At one in the morning, she feels someone gently touch her back. She swivels around to see Pia holding onto Clea — who does not look great. Clea looks super drunk and nearly passed out. Pia gestures to the exit, and it’s the signal Missy has been waiting for all night.

Outside, Pia explains, “I told her you were waiting for us. She kept drinking and refused to leave. And then she got so drunk that a bouncer said she could not stay anymore.”

“That’s funny,” Missandei says in a serious deadpan. “It’s funny because when we were 21, Clea used to get kicked out clubs all the time for being a sloppy drunk. Life is cyclical. Hang tight. I’ll go grab the car.”

Grey wakes up when the garage door opens and Momo 2.0 flips out, starts barking her face off because she so excited that her mommy is finally home. He grunts and drags himself out of bed. He blindly palms around for a shirt and some pants. He checks the clock. It’s nearly two in the morning.

He stumbles through his own house, opens the front door, and tiredly walks outside barefoot. He blocks his eyes from the bright headlights pulling into the driveway. Then he starts spastically waving through the lights to get Missandei to stop the car so she doesn’t accidentally run over their stupid fucking dog and just devastate the shit out of both of them. He starts hissing out stuff like, “Momo! Come here! The fuck! Momo! Get the fuck over here! I’m going to beat the shit out of you if you don’t come here right now!” progressively getting louder and more agitated the longer the stupid dog doesn’t listen.

After she kills the engine and lights in the middle of the driveway, the passenger and driver’s side doors get pushed open. He hears 2.0’s saucy, super loud bark — fuck that dog — and he also hears Missandei softly call out his name. She has reached down to pick up their dog, holding 2.0 in her arms. Awesome. That dog has trained his wife real good. Awesome. Missandei says, “Have you been waiting up for me?”

He says, “I’m not that romantic. I was sleeping. You woke me up.”

Instead of bantering with him about how unromantic he is, she just says, “Oh. Sorry, hon.” She sounds tired.

He yawns, right on cue. He says, “No worries,” through his yawn.

Pia and Clea left their cars in the driveway. So he is not surprised to see Pia sheepishly wave to him from beside the car. She has no cool, so she immediately and guiltily says, “Don’t come any closer!”

“The hell, Pia?” he says quizzically, already defying her wishes by walking closer. And as he nears the vehicle — he smells it.

Pia immediately fesses up. She really has no chill. She says, “Clea threw up a little bit in your guys’ car! We pulled over and tried to get her to barf on the street, but she had really bad aim!”
He rubs his entire face with his hand and groans into his palm. Pia is making him question their entire friendship by repeatedly saying shit like, “Grey. Grey. Grey, are you mad? Don’t be mad, Grey. Grey. Grey. Please don’t be mad! She didn’t mean it! Grey. Grey, are you pissed? Aw. Grey.”

And like the dad he never had and has never known, Grey says, “I’m not mad. I’m just disappointed. And a little sad.”

He uses Missandei’s phone to mutely shine a light on the vomit pile on the floor of their car. It is pink and chunky. Missandei responds to his seriousness with her own brand of seriousness. She’s still carrying their dog around as she tells him that they had pizza for dinner. He dully says, “Oh, so that’s why it looks like that.”

Pia gets a whiff and also a look at it, and she immediately spins around on her heels and starts noisily gagging.

“She’s been doing that the entire drive home,” Missandei explains to him.

He gets tired of the wet and choking sound of Pia’s revulsion real quick, so Grey says, “Pia! Hold it together! Jesus Christ!”

“Huh,” Missandei says softly, hiking their dog up higher in her arms. “It didn’t occur to me, that I could just yell at her to stop gagging and that I could just yell at drunk-Clea to stop vomiting in my freaking car.”

And on clue, Pia releases a really loud gag that transitions to a groan and drips of saliva falling onto their driveway.

“Man, can you just go home?” Grey says. “I think we’ve got this, Pia. You should just go home, maybe shower, and go to sleep.”

After Pia gives them both hugs and kisses, after she slides into her car and hightails it outta there, Grey looks down at Clea’s unconscious body, slumped over in the backseat. It is so gross. Her hair is a stringy mess and there’s a dark swatch on her shirt. It is vomit.

To Missandei, he says, “Well, look what you did.” He’s joking. He just likes victim-blaming.

Again, she is too tired to respond to his punchy jokes with her own jabs. She just sighs and says, “Grey, do you mind? Carrying her up to the guest room?”

He clears his throat. He says, “Yeah, sure. Of course.”

He bends down and into the car. He grabs the hem of Clea’s dress and pulls it down her thighs a little bit so that everyone knows he’s not being predatory around a vomit-covered, scantily clad unconscious woman. He hasn’t been about that life in a while, not since Missandei figured out that binge-drinking and see-through clothes do not wash away low self-esteem.
God, he’s bummed that she is not in the mood to listen to his zingers about her. He’s on fire right now.

Clea totally smells like vomit. It’s pretty gross. He’s so glad he woke up for this.

He digs his arms underneath her body and lifts her up. He bounces her a little bit to get a firmer grasp on her.

He carries Clea’s unconscious body into the house and takes her up to the guest room. He feels really awkward carrying Missandei’s unconscious friend like this. He hasn’t carried a person or a woman like this in a long time. He’s forgotten how vigilant he has to be, in order not to slam her head and legs into walls and the corners where walls meet. It also feels weird to touch this woman’s body because he barely has a hugging relationship with Clea.

He gently lays her down on the guest bed. He’s relieved when Missandei appears in the room soon after, the dog trotting in after her. She’s got a small stack of clothes in her hands. She says, “I’m going to change her clothes now.”

“Alright, I’m out,” he says, immediately running out of the room, already stripping off his stinky shirt.

It’s not a surprise to her at all when, after she’s done with Clea, she walks back down to their driveway and sees him shirtless — and shoveling chunks of vomit from the floor of the car into a plastic bag — with his hands. She doesn’t bother asking him why he doesn’t leave the puke for morning. She doesn’t ask him this because she basically knows everything about him. She just sighs and says, “Babe.” And then she ruefully shakes her head.

He quietly says, “Go on to bed. I’ll be up soon.”

She says, “No,” as she kneels down next to him on the ground. She says, “I’ll keep you company.” She doesn’t offer to help him clean because she will just get in the way of how he likes to clean.

He smiles and shakes his head ruefully as he vigorously rubs the upholstery. He’s just glad it’s leather. “Man, how lit was your night? Did you get turnt up?”

She quietly laughs. She reaches out and presses her hand to his bare shoulder. She says, “Are you cold? Do you want me to grab you a shirt?”

After he finishes his first round of cleaning on the car, it is fucking three in the fucking morning. He pulls Missandei to her feet, grabs her hand, and sleepily tells her to go the fuck to bed. He will be up
after he gets their car into the garage.

His body is sore, his eyes are dry, and his brain is delirious as he looks at her standing in the doorway leading into their house. She looks like a mirage for a moment. He asks her why she keeps waiting for him — he wants for her to save herself and to leave him to deal with this shit alone. She admits to him that she feels really guilty that he was woken up for this.

He cups her butt as they walk up the stairs together. He feels her up to comfort her, to assure that he does not hold the whole vomit-palooza in their car against her. It happens. They both have friends who are inconsiderate sometimes.

He jumps into the shower for a quick five minutes, to clear off any vomit residue from his body and hands. He’s pretty hairless, so he dries fast. He’s only a little bit damp when he finally, bonelessly collapses into bed, right on top of her body. He smears his face against her boobs. *Finally.* She wraps her arms around him. He groans in relief, as his weight sinks deeper into the bed and into her, as his muscles start to relax.

At five in the morning, he’s jarred from sleep and can hear heavy footsteps — Clea’s — running to the bathroom. He hears a soft muffled collision as she probably body-slams into the toilet. He hears the sound of her retching. And then he hears Missandei sigh next to him, which means she has also woken up.

Missandei presses her hand into his stomach. She says, “Sorry, baby,” because she knows that every space that Clea vomits in, he will be cleaning obsessively later.

Grey and Missandei sleep in pretty late the next morning — but Clea — being super hungover — sleeps in even later. It’s ten o’clock before they wake up again. Grey is pissed that it’s so late because he had a whole list of errands and shit that he wants to do today. He makes breakfast-slash-lunch in a huff. He’s pissed that he’s actually making fucking lunch and that the breakfast part is just a delusion he is feeding himself so he doesn’t freak the fuck out over the passage of time. Missandei reads the news on her tablet. She hears his bad mood, but it’s like white noise to her at this point.

Clea pads down the stairs an hour later, wearing Missandei’s pajamas. She looks confused. And also pretty embarrassed.

Clea tells them she has no appetite. Grey makes her a breakfast sandwich anyway. It’s not a sausage or bacon and egg with cheese sandwich — he feels compelled to explain this to her because people have expectations when they hear the words “breakfast sandwich.” He tells Clea that he made a regular turkey sandwich on wheat and put a fried egg in it. The egg is what makes it a breakfast-themed regular sandwich. She looks as if she does not know what to make of this, so she just stares
at him. He then gives Clea a banana — just in case. He also gives her water laced with an electrolytes additive. He tells her it’s what he drinks when he runs. He plainly tells her it won’t cure her hangover.

And that’s it. He’s done having this scintillating conversation. He’s tired and cranky, and he thinks that Clea is a bit of a dick. He’s honestly a little miffed that Clea was mean to Missandei.

Missandei made the fatal mistake of killing time at the club by texting him the entire story of her fight with Clea. She tried to play it off like she’s not hurt. She tried to remind him that her account of the story is biased. And she also said that she’ll get over it. He is sure that her feelings are at least a little bit hurt, and Clea is a real fucking asshole.

He grabs his earbuds and pops them into his ears. He’s on his way out for a run, many hours too late. It’s going to be so hot outside. It’s going to be so fucking annoying because he’s going to get all hot and sweaty.

He gives Missandei a quick kiss bye. He smacks his lips against her mouth and then the side of her face as he murmurs, “Love you,” before he goes to the door and leashes up their dog. This is going to be fucking terrible for the both of them — because she runs so fucking slow. He’s taking the dog so that the dog doesn’t bother Clea. Their dog is awesome. But people with hangovers are the worst.

After Grey is gone, Clea quietly asks, “Is he mad at me?”

Missy raises her brows at the front door — at the space that he just occupied. She honestly says, “Yeah, I think he’s a little mad at you.”

“Okay, well, I didn’t mean to be an inconvenience,” Clea says, squaring her jaw. “I told him I didn’t want any food.”

Missy refrains from sighing. Because she is tired and also not keen on being a translator for her husband again. She’s tired of constantly explaining that cranky weirdo to her friends. Some people actually naturally like him without listening to a detailed list of his merits.

Missy also doesn’t see much point in embarrassing Clea further by telling Clea that Grey is pissed because he’s a clean freak and she ejected her body fluids all over his stuff. He is generally not cool with that kind of behavior.

Missandei refrains from reminding Clea about all the places that Clea has vomited in. Missy also isn’t sure how much Clea remembers about last night — if Clea remembers their fight at all. Missandei doesn’t bring that up either.

They just have a really awkward morning together. It’s about half an hour before Clea gingerly slides off their stool and tells Missandei that she’s going to head home and continue sleeping. She’s okay to drive now.

As Missy hands Clea a bag of her washed and dried clothing, Clea does say, “Thanks for last night.” She keeps it vague and ambiguous.

Missy says, “You’re welcome,” as she walks Clea to her car.
When he gets back home from his shitty run with the dog, he is pretty glad to see that Clea’s car is gone. He’s pretty excited to continue on with his Sunday in a normal manner. He has so many fucking cleaning sessions with Missandei’s car, and he’d like to do that in peace, without feeling pressured to entertain a house guest.

He greets her with a, “Sup?” and a really bro-y head nod as he pours himself a glass of water. He looks warm and extra sweaty from his afternoon run. After gulping down the glass, he’s walking past her and heading up to shower.

She spontaneously reaches out and grabs ahold of his tacky forearm. She says, “Hey.”

He stops and says, “What?”

“Thanks for last night.”

He says, “It ain’t no thang.”

She frowns and says, “Babe,” because he is being a little bit standoffish with her.

“What?”

“You seem upset. Is it the barf?”

He sighs. He says, “No, it’s not the barf, though the barf is disgusting, and I don’t even know what kind of grownass adult does not know how to control where they vomit —”

“Then what is it?”

“I’m just tired,” he says defensively. And then he sighs. “And I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be curt with you. I’m just all hot and sticky — and I felt like everyone was staring at me on my run because of the dog. And tomorrow is Monday already, and it’s like — where the fuck did the weekend go? Also, Clea is an asshole to you.”

She smiles a little bit. She tugs at his arm to get him to step forward. She pulls him to her — firmly — and then she winds an arm around his neck and slants her mouth over his. He tastes warm, damp, salty, and a little alkaline. When they break apart, she says, “That’s sweet.”

“What is?”

“That you feel protective of me.”

“Well, no shit, Missandei,” he throws back, as he simultaneously pulls her in for a hug.

“Okay, that’s less sweet,” she says, digging her nose into his neck.
Doreah is about to get married

Chapter Summary

Grey learns about the downsides of having two wives. Drunk Missandei makes a rare appearance.

As she continues to examine whether or not she wants to have a child, she also begins to delve deeper into what it would look like to have a child with him. There is a large part of her that does not understand his desire to have a baby. He is distinctly unsentimental and does not qualify procreation as an honorable act. He does not think that a baby would be cool because it’s a new miraculous person that is half him and half her. He does not think that they exist on this planet to multiply. He actually thinks that the world is overpopulated and that maybe people should be limited to, at most, two babies. When she tells him that they cannot reasonable regulate reproduction like that for ethical reasons, he just shrugs. When she tries to get him to expand on his reasons for wanting a child, he actually shrugs again and rhetorically asks her why he wants a 36-inch TV instead of a 42-inch TV that costs only a modest amount more, in the living room. He tells her it just looks right. It just feels right. A 42-incher is just too much and fucking gross. A 36-incher is utilitarian and classier-looking. Though it’s still a TV and he actually hates the way TVs look in general.

She can only stare at him, confused and in slight disbelief. She frankly tells him that his explanation — and the metaphor — is not good enough.

So he tries again. He frowns and he thinks about it silently for a few seconds, and then he reluctantly admits, “Sometimes I think about how fucking sad I’d be if you died young or early. Like, if you contracted a fatal disease and died at like, 40. I think I would want to kill myself. But if we had a kid, then I wouldn’t be able to kill myself. I’d have to carry on, for the kid. Also, after you are dead, I’d still have someone here that is a part of you, and that would be comforting. Plus, it would be fun — just the two of us, teaming up to just influence and mold the psychology of another human being. We’d make the best person, babe. Or at least, we’d try to. It would be nuts, babe.”

As horrific as this explanation would probably sound to another woman, another person’s wife — Missandei is actually mollified by it. She perks up some and says, “Oh! Okay, that makes more sense to me.” He likes puzzles and over-analyzation. It makes sense to her that he would be interested in socially and psychologically conditioning a brand new person.

When she asks him — hypothetically — if he would prefer a boy or a girl baby, he tells her that he does not care. Boy, girl — it doesn’t matter. It’s all the same.

She quirks a brow and tells him it’s actually not all the same? Like, boys and girls are different biologically and also have different experiences based on societal norms?
He shrugs.

“What if our child is gay?”

“Then he-she-they are gay?” Grey says.

“You wouldn’t care?”

Now he’s looking at her like she’s an anomalous monster. He says, “It would bother you if our kid was gay?” It is like he is asking himself, out loud, if he married a bigot.

“No,” she says patiently. “But I think I would worry more about him or her, how people would treat them. How hard life would be.”

“Life is just hard, period, Missandei,” he says. “Also, hardship builds character and prepares children to become adults that are not fragile and who can survive an apocalypse.”

“Of course you’d say that.” Then, after a terse bit of silence on Missandei’s end, she announces a secret fear that she has. She asks him, “What if our child ends up hating me?” She is thinking about the stories she hears from people like her colleague Donna, whose daughter ran away and started living with a drug dealer, for reasons Donna does not understand. Missandei also thinks about her own relationship with her mother. And her father. And her grandmother. And her brothers. And her younger siblings. And her grandfather. And her dead brother. Maybe what she really fears is falling so deeply in love with someone new and then having that person just go away, whether by choice or by freak, terrible accident. She is not sure she can handle another hit like that.

Instead of being the kind of man that cannot fathom a child not loving Missandei because he loves Missandei so much, Grey appears to carefully considers the question. Missy steels herself for his response, because — as has been established again and again — he is really romantic in a conventional way. He says, “That’s just a risk we take when we let people into our lives.”

Again, she feels placated by his steadfast pragmatism. She nods. Then she says, “Hon, would you ever spank our child?”

He’s eating an apple that he has carefully cut into slices. He says, “I cannot say for sure. I’d like to think I wouldn’t. But you never know what you will do in moments of extreme frustration. I’ve hit our dog before when I was pissed.”

She sighs. She lifts her face to stare at his. She is almost one-hundred percent completely sure that he is going to be better at parenting than she is.

Jhiqui ends up going stag to Doreah’s wedding. Nick is looking after Arqo for the entire day and night, and Jhiqui is trying not to let the impending failure of her marriage define who she is. She’s feeling really down and embarrassed about her separation from Nick. Her mother and the rest of her family doesn’t understand it and have told her she is being selfish. Her friends with Nick have generally avoided her calls and texts. Her friends from college have also been dodging her calls. Probably because she has been mean and has been really not fun to be around. Missy is the last standing constant in Jhiqui’s life.

For this reason, Missandei winds her arm with her best friend’s, and she tells Jhiqui that they are
going to be a threesome tonight, just three peas in a pod.

As they get ready for the wedding, as Jhiqui rolls up her hair with hot curlers, staring at her reflection in Missy’s bathroom mirror, she dryly asks, “Has anyone told Grey this?”

No one has. This becomes clear when he silently gets home from his run, avoids seeing Jhiqui’s car by walking in from the back patio door, and ascends the stairs with one hand holding his balled up sweaty shirt and the other one working on loosening the tie of his shorts. When he sees Missandei partially undressed and sitting on their bed, he thinks that it’s a sign. When she spots him, a big smile beams from her face — he thinks life is fucking great — she excitedly says, “Hey, baby! How was your run?”

He mutters, “I’m gonna run into you,” as he crawls onto the bed, as he crawls over her, pushes her to the bed, lets go of his loose shorts, grabs both of her hands, and pushes them up over her head. He’s sitting on her as he simultaneously leans down. Close to her face, he says, “You look good. You wanna fuck for a bit before you have to go and put your face on? Do you want to rub your naked parts on me for a while? Want to do some sex shit that freaks at least one of us the fuck out?”

She’s gasping and cracking up underneath him — because she is consistently so charmed by him. She yelps out, “Baby!” all scandalized as she giggles. “We are not alone!”

And then he freezes above her as he spots Jhiqui walking out of their bathroom with half of her curlers in her hair. She looks uncomfortable and awkward as she says, “I actually have no snappy comment. I just want you to know that I am here.” Then she adds, “Sorry.”

Grey is completely caught off guard by the sight of Jhiqui and awkwardly trips over his own limbs and grabs onto his loose shorts as he scrambles to get off of Missandei. He mutters that he had no idea Jhiqui was over. He generally pretends that what just happened didn’t just happened, and he starts anxiously asking them what their plans are — how long it will take to get ready for the wedding. He pulls on the ties of his shorts, tightening the waistband. He tells them it won’t take him too long to get ready, but he needs to shower. He realizes that he is standing shirtless in front of Jhiqui. He crosses his arms over his chest. And then he uncrosses them when he realizes just how defensive the motion looks. And then he tells them that he can shower in the other bathroom. He just needs to grab some clothes and stuff.

He makes this motion, like this parting motion with his hands as he says to Jhiqui, “Um, I need to get on by you. To get my stuff. Then I’ll be outta your guys’ hair.”

After he grabs clean underwear, socks, and his suit, he quickly heads out of the room. Missandei reaches out as he walks past and loudly hits him on the ass. She says, “So cute!” as he jumps in surprise a little bit. He’s muttering at her to knock it off. She is laughing as he runs out of there.

Jhiqui releases a tension-relieving laugh after he hightails it like his feet are on fire. She glances at Missandei, whose amused eyes are comically wide, and then Jhiqui chuckles again, apparently
finding the situation funnier and funnier the more it sits with her. Jhiqui wryly says, “I like how traumatized he looked when he realized I was in the room.”

“I like how awkward he was about not wearing a shirt around you,” Missy says, grinning.

“I like how he covered his tits. And how he couldn’t look me in the eye at all.”

“I like how hard he worked to not make any accidental body contact as he squeezed by you to get into the closet.”

Jhiqui laughs at that. Then she says, “I’m kinda bummed that I interrupted. Because what was the weird sex stuff he was referring to? What is the stuff that was going to freak one of you guys the fuck out? Also — that part was crazy hot. Shit, when did Grey get hot?”

It takes him twenty minutes to get ready, and that includes showering. He generally feels mortified. He generally dips his face underneath scalding hot water and tries to remember what he said because he kind of blacked out a little bit. He also tells himself to freaking get over it. It’s not even a big deal.

When Missandei hears him exit the guest bathroom, she calls out his name from their bedroom. He hollers out, “What!” back at her.

She says, “Come here!”

Uh, he doesn’t really want to. So he says, “Why!”

“Just come here!”

When he arrives back in their bedroom, Jhiqui is dressed but still has curlers in her hair. And Missandei is just standing there in her bra and a thong. She smiles at him and says, “Aw, you look so nice, Grey.”

He dramatically covers his face and is like, “What the! Put on some clothes! Christ, Missandei!” He says this because he’s a really uptight person who really likes it when people act civilized according to rules of decorum. He is not a free spirit. He does not even like running with his shirt off even though it would probably feel super refreshing. He is not an exhibitionist. The sight of his undressed wife standing mundanely in a room with her friend is just wigging him out.

“Ah,” Jhiqui says. “There’s the crotchety guy that I know and have come to begrudgingly love.”

“Babe, Spanx or no Spanx?” Missandei says, explaining the reason why she called him back into the room.

He’s still averting his eyes. He says, “No Spanx. You’ll be glad later after eating a full dinner. And also after you get wasted and need to go to the bathroom.”
Jhiqui and Missandei start making fun of him and embarrassing him in order to amuse themselves. They tell him that he has two dates tonight. They make a few low-key threesomes, menage a trois jokes before they feel emboldened to make a few really flagrant jokes about who’s top, bottom, and middle. Jhiqui runs her hand down low on his back, which makes him jump and shout, “Stop!”

Which makes her innocently ask, “What?” before she starts laughing in his face.

He miserably stands around and waits for them to finish getting ready. He miserably holds open the garage door for both Missandei and Jhiqui. Jhiqui snatches the keys from his hand. He is like, “Why!” She tells him that she is going to be their designated driver. She’s a mom and she is getting her son back tomorrow. She does not want to be hungover when she picks him up. She doesn’t want to set that precedence. She just wants to live vicariously through Grey and Missandei.

He reluctantly gets into the back seat. He takes in a deep sniff to see if he can detect the sour smell of vomit from the car. He can. That’s annoying. Missandei and Jhiqui are animatedly gushing about how it’s been so long since they’ve gotten all dolled up and gone somewhere like this — years. Then, Jhiqui starts the car.

They get handed a glass of rose right as they enter. Jhiqui gives Missandei hers. Jhiqui actually starts encouraging Missandei to drink heartily even though Missandei has expressed that she does not drink very much these days because being hungover hits her harder than it did in her early 20s. But, Missandei drinks anyway — because she has a desire to please Jhiqui and to distract Jhiqui from the awkwardness of having to explain to distant friends and acquaintances where Nick is.

As Missandei loosens up with the alcohol, she and Jhiqui start introducing the three of them — to complete strangers — as a fucking “throuple.”

As they make small talk with Tank’s aunt and uncle, Missandei is twirling her glass of wine as she says, “You know the show ‘Sister Wives’? It’s like that.”

“Oh!” Tank’s aunt says.

“She’s kidding!” Grey swiftly corrects, giving Missandei a look.

Dany brings Daario to the wedding. And Drogo shows up with a 25-year-old spin instructor from his gym named Melody. When Missandei spots each of them and then sluggishly makes the correlation — that these exes are dating new people in front of each other’s faces — she pops her hand to her mouth and lets out a muffled, “Oh shit!”

She is definitely on her way to shitfaced. And the ceremony hasn’t even happened yet.

The ex run-in is anticlimactic. Grey watches from afar as Drogo and Dany cordially say hello to one
another. Drogo says hello to Daario. Drogo does not punch Daario in the face. Drogo just says bye and leads his date to the cocktail line.

“Oh, boo,” Missandei says. “No drama.” And then she says, “No more drama. No more drama. No more drama. Mary J. Blige.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Jhiqui says, laughing fondly as she catches a glimpse of Missandei’s face. “You’ve smeared your lipstick.” She takes Missandei’s clutch and starts digging through it. “Let’s fix that.”

Grey actually becomes the third wheel as the throuple he is a part of devolves into a couple. Missandei and Jhiqui start talking in their female language of half-sentences and shocked exclamations like, “No! Did she? No! Can you even? Never!” as he stands idly by and just puts up with it.

He wanders over and leaves them to follow, or not, as he starts talking to Drogo and his date. She seems smitten. Drogo seems friendly yet a little apathetic. Then, Jaime and Brienne join them. They are still zombie people and keep obsessively checking their phones for text updates from Brienne’s parents. Jaime gives Tank’s friends from the bachelor party — Cam, Reg, and Mike — this death glare. Cam, Reg, and Mike probably think Jaime is being low-key racist to them, so they actually walk right on over to say hi.

Cam is like, “What up, Bradford! What up, John! It’s been a minute,” as they walk up.

Everyone else’s expression is quizzically like, who? What? Where? The fuck?

“Jaime’s Bradford because that’s the whitest name they could think of,” Grey explains, mostly to Drogo and Missandei. “And I’m John, short for John Legend. Because I’m an R&B icon.”

“Oh!” Missandei says loudly — derisively — crossing her arms over her breasts. She realizes who Cam is now. He is the douchenozzle that was mean to Grey at Tank’s bachelor party. She sarcastically says, “I love it when people who were born in fucking King’s Landing get all up in arms about what they think is and isn’t Black enough.”

Jaime’s brows shoot up to his hairline at that.

“Oh, hello!” Cam says to her, appraisingly. He holds out his hand. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

She refuses to shake it. She just says, “I’m Chrissy.”

Cam chooses to respond by rolling his eyes at her. This makes her blood boil because it’s so dismissive and rude — and he doesn’t get that she is hilarious. Though to be fair, she was pretty rude just now because she refused to shake his hand, and Jaime started all of this by mean-mugging. Technically, all Cam has done is walk up saying hi and referencing an inside joke that he might not realize gets in Grey and Jaime’s craw as much as it does.

Shit. They might be in the wrong here. They might actually be the assholes here.

There are too many blank and semi-confused looks in the group staring back at her, so she sighs loudly and says, “Chrissy Teigen, hello? John’s wife. Get it? Guys, are you not fans? Her cookbook is a pretty fun read.”
Jaime finally releases a laugh. He says, “Missy, I probably don’t tell you this enough, but I think you’re great.”

“So, your wife seems cool,” Cam says, after he has pulled Grey aside for a quick, private chat.

Grey grimaces. “She’s been drinking.”

“No, I really mean it. She seems nice.”

“Oh, okay,” Grey says doubtfully.

“Look,” Cam says, changing the subject. “I’m actually glad to run into you, man. Tank told me what was up after that weekend. And you know — I was outta line. No excuses. I was just in your face all weekend, and that was uncalled for. My bad, man. We cool?”
Missy gets plastered at Doreah's wedding

Chapter Summary

Weddings are different as you get older. Missandei learns this the hard way. Grey makes a new friend, sort of?

His pulse is jumping as he follows Cam to a private corner of the hall. He gets this flashback of never being chosen with any swiftness in class projects or for games at recess. A kid named Tommy was forced into being his friend for a whole week when Grey first started school for the first time ever. He was remedial and illiterate in all languages, in addition to not being able to speak the same language as his classmates. So he didn’t open his mouth at all. He was ostracized because he was weird, and he was weird because he was so traumatized and so damaged by the time he got to them. He presently thinks it is bizarre that he is remembering and fixating on something as frivolous as getting chosen last for football, rather than focusing on the source of the pain.

He also remembers coming home to a bowl of sweet, sugary cereal. He’d inexplicably cried whenever he was offered food that was familiar, so his aunt had to feed him cereal and only cereal. They rode on a long bus ride one time together. She had to skip a day of work that she could not afford to, just for her to ask a white doctor if it was okay for her to give him cereal for all of his meals. He was malnourished, but at that point, he wouldn’t eat anything else or he’d vomit up anything else he tried to eat and they were more worried about getting enough calories in him rather than the nutritional value of the calories.

“Look, Tank told me some about you —”

“What did he say about me?” Grey asks quizzically, his body stiffening with guardedness.

Cam quirks a brow and crosses his arms over his chest. He says, “That you’re real. That you good. That I misjudged and was outta line.”

“Oh,” Grey says, his voice sounding so hollow that it echoes in his head.

Then he raises his gaze, and he spots her.

He’s already pretty bad at accepting and giving apologies — the direct eye contact requirement of apologies often thwarts his ability to seem very legit in it. So to see Missandei drunkenly hovering a ways behind Cam, trying to spastically gesture to Grey — it is incredibly distracting. She is silently asking him if he is okay through charades. She is also asking him what they are talking about. She is unable to observe that her very intrusive presence in his eyeline is causing his attention to drift.

To Cam, he says, “I’m sorry, man, but my wife is just being someone’s fucking drunk uncle right now, and it’s hard to pay attention to what you’re saying.” Grey is actually pleased at how genuine his apology sounds. He gestures to Missandei, which causes Cam to swivel around suddenly to look
at her — which causes her to immediately duck down — behind nothing — just behind air.

She manages to look kind of embarrassed, being caught badly eavesdropping.

Grey gestures to her. He’s trying to gesture for her to go away for a moment. She looks at them quizzically. She actually holds her hands up and shrugs. And then she cups an ear, miming that she can’t hear him. And of course she can’t hear him. He’s not saying anything.

So he shouts at her. He says, “Can we please get some privacy!”


With his eyes trained on her retreating bare back, Cam says, “She’s fun. When I met you, I thought you were with a white girl for sure. But — your wife — she gives you dimension.”

“Yeah,” Grey deadpans. “She gives me gravitas.”

“Gravitas,” Cam repeats slowly. “See, it’s shit like that gave me the wrong impression of you.”

“My vocabulary?”

“And your face.”

“My face?”

“It likes to smile,” Cam points out. “Probably too much.”

She drinks enthusiastically for several reasons. She drinks because she been deeply responsible and adult-like lately. She thinks she deserves a break. She also drinks as a salve on a festering wound, in order to just not give a fuck — in order to not feel as hurt over her estrangement from her friends. She drinks to lessen the awkwardness, so that when Doreah later thumbs through her wedding photos, she can laugh over how plastered Missandei was.

Missy also drinks because Jhiqui is in pain, and Jhiqui has been nostalgic, waxing poetics about simpler times and how it used to be when they were young. Missy is trying to prove to Jhiqui that they are still young and that there are still happy times ahead.

Missy also drinks because it’s an open bar and her own calorie-counting, water-sipping guests were kind of annoying at her own wedding. She wants to be better than that.

She makes small-talk with her friends, as she works hard to be entertaining and funny, as she slurps down briny oysters, feeling the slippery little buggers slide down her throat like fat boogers. She vaguely realizes she will pay for all of this later, hunched over a toilet. But now, she just watches as Drogo watches her with such transparent amusement as she tells them all about how she didn’t actually wake up like this. She gestures up and down her body. She wonders if she’s still hot or if it’s already taken a turn and maybe now she’s merely hot for an older lady. She points to her head and tells them that these curls take fucking hours. Jaime is staring at her with patience — he is tired today and he also does not give a shit about her hair today. She looks over at Drogo’s date — her name is
Keri — and Keri has long blond hair. Keri is one of those pretty people who come off initially cold because they are actually socially awkward, having never learned the vitalness of sociability because Keri does not need to, on account of being so beautiful. She tells Keri that her hair is pretty — like gold. Missy also decides to spread the compliments out. She tugs the end of Drogo’s tie, and then she cups his cheek. She tells him that he shaved really close today, and it makes him look young.

The familiarity and intimacy of the gesture must stir up some jealousy from Drogo’s date because she actually pointedly asks how they know each other.

The real answer is that they met because they both fell for the same person, in different ways. So they had that person in common.

“Oh, just from college,” Drogo drawls. “We’re old friends.”

Missy perks up and just beams a beatific smile at him. She is happy because he didn’t qualify her place in his life as contingent on Grey. Drogo didn’t describe her as his best friend’s wife. “We met at a party,” she supplements.

“It was your nameday, actually, not just any ol’ party.”

“That’s right!” she says, softly gasping at the memory. “You crashed my party.”

“Crash is a bit strong,” he says, smiling at her. “I was a plus one.”

They are slowly sipping from glasses of wine as they stand almost shoulder to shoulder, surveying the room as they talk. Grey keeps being confronted with his apparent whiteness, from the way he talks to the way he stands to the things he drinks. Upon taking the drinks from a server, Cam admitted that he doesn’t get wine. Grey admitted that he actually knows a fair bit about wine, on account of his wife, his friends, all that stuff.

Grey finds out Cam was in the military in casual way. It sounds like happenstance, both the unveiling of the story and Cam’s story of his enrollment. Cam also skips way ahead to the end and tells Grey that he left the military for a woman, actually. They are no longer together — but maybe one day it will work out.

Grey says, “Oh, so your date —”

“Just a friend,” Cam says smoothly.

Grey kind of wants to know what happened to the relationship, but not enough to actually ask a direct question about it. He doesn’t want to lose this tentative truce they’ve achieved by asking about shit that is none of his business.

“Tank says you’re not from here?”

Grey blinks. Then he sips from his glass. He says, “No. The Summer Isles.”

“I’ve been there.”

“Yeah?”
“For work,” Cam supplies, keeping it vague, whether because he has to because of the nature of the work or whether because he just chooses to keep things relatively light. “You’re very light-skinned for an Islander.”

“I get that a lot,” Grey says. “Maybe my father wasn’t really my father. Maybe some white guy was.”

“Really?” Cam asks, sounding inordinately serious.

“Huh?” Grey clears his throat. He was trying to make a joke. “I have no idea, actually.”

“Were your parents dark?”

“I can’t really remember clearly, but I think so. Darker than me. My siblings were too, I think.”


She is full-on plastered by the time he finds her again. His fingertips run across her bare shoulder blades and make her shiver as he rounds her, as she looks at him in wonderment.

He drops his hand. He looks at her with his brows furrowed. He says, “What?”

Instead of answering him directly, she raises her arms and encircle them around his neck, lightly intertwining her fingers together. She presses the front of her body into his warmth. She feels his hands come up to touch her hips — for a moment ready to push her off before he relaxes into the hug. Then he presses his palms into the small of her back as he pulls her tighter to him. He whispers, “You know I hate PDA.”

“I’m drunk,” she whispers back. She refrains from smearing her face into his neck because it will ruin her makeup.

“Oh, I know,” he says, laughing a little bit, his arms squeezing tighter around her.

She bites him. It’s a spontaneous decision. Her last thought before she puts her teeth on the side of his jaw and nips it is that she thinks he is so hot.

He jumps. Then he says, “What the fuck! Missandei!”

She laughs in his face.

During the ceremony, she sits next to the marriage-hater on her other side, so some of Jaime’s feelings and emotions bleed into her. She is a little haughty over her ability to string words together, so she privately tells herself that her vows at her own wedding were killer — better than Doreah’s vows to Tank.

Tank cries, just a little bit during the ceremony. This is probably the only similarity he has with Grey,
but it’s enough for her to remember how it felt to watch him promise himself to her forever. That was nuts.

She reaches over to grab his hand. She also leans over to kiss his cheek.

He flinches and yanks his face away from her mouth. He thinks she’s trying to bite him again.

She’s only been able to make polite small talk with Pia and Clea. They look busy taking photos and also sitting far away at the bridal party table. She only gets to compliment their dresses and their hair and makeup. Out of respect, Clea says the same thing to her — says that her dress is really pretty.

Missy smooths her hands over the soft material. She’s drunk, so she isn’t even meaning it in any particular way when she says, “Oh, thanks! Grey picked this out for me.”

There is a protracted silence over that, an awkward one.

She tries to be funny as she says, “Oh shit, it’s only because he thinks I am bad at dressing myself.”

Without thinking, Jaime carelessly says to their table that he can’t wait for the first wave of divorces to start rolling through. He says this because he’s sick of going to weddings.

Jaime remembers Jhiqui a bit too late. Nevertheless, he still ducks his face down a little bit as he says, “Sorry.”

She’s in the middle of taking a piece of chicken breast from the communal plate. She is unfazed. She says, “Technically, we’re separated. No one has filed just yet.”

Grey stops himself from drinking excessively at the wedding because of Drogo. Drogo has had one bottle of beer, and just with dinner. They’ve had discussions about what actually triggers the uncontrolled drinking. Drogo has said it’s a combination of his genetics and also of social conditioning and of emotional trauma. He grew up watching his dad just become a lunatic after drinking. He grew with the concept of, that is just what virile men do. He had a bunch of friends with the same story, who made it feel normal and right, to drink until they couldn’t remember who they were. Drogo has said that one of the hardest things in therapy and in giving up drinking the way he used to is that he had to truly give up his concept of who he thought he was — and he is very emotionally tied and sentimental about who he thought he was.

Missandei doesn’t completely get it. Because of course she doesn’t. Her perspective on it is distinctly an outsider’s perspective.
But Grey can remember who he and Drogo were to each other back when they were young — and sometimes he really misses it. It felt easier and funner. This current life feels harder and more deliberate and constantly intentional. He misses how it felt to first become friends with Drogo, to feel worthy enough to have a friend who is someone like Drogo. He misses how it felt to sit on sunken couches, passing a bong back and forth. He misses the aimlessness of the activity, hearing Drogo’s raspy laugh, spending hours talking about shit like it cost nothing to reveal parts of themselves to one another.

They have these stories that they used to be able to trade back and forth — anecdotes that made Drogo laugh until he started to cough and gag from the exertion of laughing so much. There was the time Grey got Jaime’s hand sliced by a broken beer bottle, and they had to go to the emergency room, sure. There was also the time Drogo destroyed public property — he broke a stop sign while drunk once. There were long days in the beach, littered with beer cans and surfboards, charcoal and plastic bags of marinated meat. There was the red tip of a joint and a blood-red sunset. Then there was the warm sand underneath his body and bright stars in the sky.

He doesn’t have any of that beautiful shit anymore. It’s probably a byproduct of age, but substance-abusers tend to also think that it’s a byproduct of sobriety.

“Baby, you want another drink?” she asks, her lashes hanging low. She has been calling him baby in front of other people excessively. She has been swaying in her seat. He keeps waiting for the next time he needs to get up to get her to the toilet.

“No, I’m fine.”

“You sure?” she asks, pulling her amber colored glass closer. She picks it up. He can smell it. She takes a slow sip as she eyes him.

He can sort of tell what she is thinking about him. It makes him suppress a smile. He says, “I’m sure.”

Jaime and Brienne aren’t drinking either. They are anticipating the moment they can leave and go back home to their kid. Jhiqui isn’t drinking for the same reason. Drogo’s date worries about empty calories. Actually — the only person that is really going for it here is Missandei. It is bizarre. They are all so old now.

She isn’t self-conscious about it. He looks down the curve of her neck, to the swell of her breasts — just mundanely.

It makes her smile widen.

He leans forward. He says to her, “Really, let’s go to the Summer Isles for vacation. Let’s book it.”

She says, “You really want to, don’t you? You weirdo.”

He says, “Yeah.”

Her eyes are suddenly wider and brighter than they have been for hours, as if she is trying to convey to him her seriousness here. She says, “Okay, let’s go. Why not? Let’s just go and be devastated for weeks together.”
Missandei swiftly passes out after she’s put into their car — which does not surprise him or Jhiqui whatsoever. Jhiqui actually laughs as she snatches the keys from the valet, as Grey gives the guy a few bills. Jhiqui confidently tells Grey that Missandei won’t barf in the backseat. Grey actually kind of feels defensive over the statement — because that is his wife and he didn’t meet her yesterday. He tells Jhiqui that he knows Missandei won’t barf in the backseat. He confidently says that she never vomits inappropriately.

The competitiveness falls away as Jhiqui drives them home.

His arms are crossed over his chest because he hates being driven in his own car — and he half-expects Jhiqui to start up a heavy and meaningful conversation about marriage and the longevity of a relationship — but instead, she says, “How much do you think that wedding cost?”

“Oh shit,” he says. “I’m really good at estimating cost. Give me a second.”

He gives Jhiqui a real hug before she ducks into her car to go home to her son. He jumps and regrets his gesture when she sneaks a hand down his back to squeeze his ass. She snatches her hand away and laughs as he defensively rubs his butt cheek, as he crankily tries to get over being violated like this.

She laughingly says, “I’m not going to say something nice to you!”

He says, “Okay?” And then he says, “What the fuck?”

She’s still laughing as she pats him on the chest. She says, “You’re so uptight sometimes.”

He says, “Yeah, I know. Good night.”

She says, “Later, Fifty Shades. That was fun.”

He does not know if she is referring to the wedding or the ass-grabbing. He does stand in his driveway and blocks his eyes from the headlights, and he watches as she reverses her car. He waves blindly as she leaves.

He carries her up to their bedroom — their dog is smart and knows to keep quiet because Missandei is just dead to the world. He leaves Missandei there and lets 2.0 out to the backyard and runs water in the kitchen sink, wetting a towel. He takes that, the dog, and a bottle of water up the stairs.

In their bedroom, he pulls off her shoes and strips the dress off of her. He uncovers sexy, matching underwear, which reminds him that she definitely wanted to end the night with something romantic and probably dirty, before she drank her own body weight and passed out.

He strips her the rest of the way naked — kind of absently wondering if this will be what it will be like to have a child to take care of — before looking down at her body and immediately correcting
himself. This is definitely not what it will be like to have a child to take care of. He throws bed sheets over her body before he starts taking care of himself, before he heads into their bathroom to change.

The sun is streaming through their slats of their blinds when she finally wakes up. She is alone in bed and also naked. And also really, really fucking hungover.

He’s in the kitchen on his laptop. He doesn’t move or take his eyes off the computer as she trudges down the stairs in her robe. The first thing she asks him when she gets near enough is that she asks, “Did you have sex with me last night?”

He grimaces and flashes her the quickest bit of eye contact before turning his attention back to his screen. He sarcastically says, “Yeah, I waited for you to pass out before taking off your clothes and shoving myself inside you. Because that’s the sort of thing that I’d do and the kind of person I am.”

She wrinkles her nose. Her head is pounding. Her question was meant to be relatively innocent. She mutters, “That’s not what I meant. I just was curious why I was naked.”

“It was just easier,” he says absently. “And you were hot and sweaty.”

“What are you doing?” she asks.


“Oh,” she says. She does remember most of the wedding. She remembers agreeing to go the Summer Isles. She sighs. She’s not going to fight him on this right now. She thinks, might as well. She says, “I’m going to lie down on the couch.”

“That’s a good idea,” he says, finally looking up at her again. “You don’t look great.”

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