Like Two Branches in a River

by 2shytheshippy

Summary

"What?" Arya snapped her head to look at her father. "You're leaving us?" Ned looked to the floor. "We're leaving to go to King's Landing." By the tone of his voice, it was apparent that there wasn't any room for compromise. "Arya Stark leaves the life she knows behind and meets Gendry Waters who forever changes her life.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Past and Pending

A masculine voice yelled out a play as the players got into place and waited for the ball to be hiked. They began to move around in organized chaos as one team tried to help their player score a touch down and the other tried to prevent it with a tackle. There was a mixture of playfulness and seriousness in the air as the game took place. It was obvious that only very few knew what they were doing which made Arya cringe. There was bad, and then there was shouldn't be playing at all.

Intently, Arya watched the pick up game from the sidelines and found that she enjoyed it despite most of the players lacking a basic understanding of football. As if it was second nature, she mouthed the plays that were being run and corrected the mistakes while she watched. Her brother Bran looked to have potential, but he seemed to overthink and second-guess himself. Jon and Robb moved around the field with confidence and their presence commanded attention. In addition to their speed and strength, they were incredibly intelligence and thought quickly on their feet.

Behind Arya, Sansa and her friends spoke about boys, clothes, and gossiped about their peers. Occasionally, there would be uproar of laughter before a series of soft whispers. Of course, it was all to get the boys attention because, apart from Arya, none of the girls there were interested in watching the football game. They were only there to be seen. Personally, Arya could have cared less for boys. She thought that they were entitled, sexist idiots. The only thing she envied about them was their endless freedom and they weren't scrutinized as much as girls.

After the game ended, Arya walked over to her brothers and watched the older two teach Bran the proper throwing technique. Bran tried to mimic his brothers, but kept failing miserably every time he threw the ball. No matter how much Bran tried to follow their directions, he repeatedly missed his target. Arya laughed to herself and shook her head.

She grabbed a stray ball off of the ground, placed her fingers in the correct position on the ball, squared her shoulders, and threw the ball. The ball hit the target dead in its center as she mischievously grinned before looking at Bran, and then walking back to the bleachers. Bran audibly groaned.

"I'm never going to get this," he complained as he dropped the ball to the ground.

Jon picked up the ball and handed it to Bran. "Yes, you are," he assured. Jon then tried to show Bran the proper technique again while he used himself as an example.

Melancholy crept in Arya's heart as she watched her brother's interact. It was times like these that reminded her how much of an outsider she was in her family. Arya was 100% positive that her family loved her, but they didn't know how to respond to her. She acted too much like a boy for her mother and Sansa to understand her and Arya would always be a girl in the mind of her brothers-they couldn't treat her like one of them guys. Arya was in a lose-lose. Her father was the most understanding, but even then, there were times where her behavior baffled him as well.

When Arya was younger, she used to ask if she could play football with the guys. Her brothers wouldn't mind playing with her, but the other boys had refused because she was a girl. Robb and Jon explained to her that the boys were afraid to hurt her since girls weren't as strong as guys, but Arya knew better: they were afraid of being beaten and embarrassed by a girl. They didn't mind teasing girls and making fun of them, but they sure as hell hated to lose to them. Despite her brothers playing football with her, it was also apparent that they had reservations about her playing as well. Although Arya disagreed with their sexist mindset, she knew that her brothers were the only ones with her best interests at heart. It still didn't make it any less infuriating that they tried to coddle her because she
was a girl, but at least, they did it for what they believed to be the right reasons.

Over time, Arya found herself annoyed with her family’s treatment of her. They believed that her behavior and interests weren’t appropriate because it didn’t fit the restrictive gender roles of what a female was supposed to be. She didn’t understand it. They all spoke about how they wanted the best for her and for her to be happy, but they continuously questioned the things that made her happy, which led to her feeling bad about having interest in those things. Although she pretended not to care at times, she really did. She wanted her family to accept her for who she was like they did with the other siblings.

A recognizable laugh permeated the air and Arya searched for the person it belonged to. In no time, she found Sansa laughing at one of her thousands of admirers before coyly smiling. As the boy handed her a flower, she wildly blushed. Inwardly, Arya gagged and felt slightly sorry for the guy. Sansa wouldn’t be Sansa if she didn’t eat up that lovey dovey I-got-a-crush-on-you shit up, but, ultimately, Arya knew better: her sister wouldn’t date this guy. Oh, he was sweet and charming, but he lack confidence—swagger. Sansa seemed to enjoy being around guys who demanded attention and this guy wasn’t that type of person.

Sansa was beautiful, smart, funny, and bubbly. Of course, guys were drawn to her like the flame her hair resembled. And, of course, they were going to get burned.

Her older sister didn’t understand why Arya didn’t behave like most girls. It was obvious that the two sisters were as different as night and day. For a while, Arya could see unspoken questions swirling in Sansa’s eyes, but she remained silent. Arya supposed that Sansa thought either she would eventually understand her younger sister or that Arya would grow out of her behavior. But, Sansa never did understand and Arya never grew out of her behavior. One day, Sansa finally voiced her thoughts:

Sansa looked in the mirror as she carefully applied her lip-gloss. When she when she rubbed her lips together as she slowly twisted the top on the small tube before placing it in her purse. Noises from Arya’s portable game filled the car when Sansa finally asked, ”Do you want to be a boy?” She stared straight ahead.

Arya continued to play her game before momentarily giving Sansa an unbelieving look.

”No,” the younger girl denied. ”God, you're so stupid.”

Sansa gasped as she immediately whipped her head around.

”I am not stupid—don't call me that,” Sansa cried.

”Then don’t ask stupid questions.” Arya glared at her game. She refused to look at Sansa because she didn’t want her sister to see how much her question had hurt her.

Sansa’s concern for her sister stemmed from the fact that she believed guys weren't interested in Arya because she dressed and acted like a boy. Besides not having any interest in girly things (or wearing them), Arya wasn’t pretty anyways. She didn’t have Sansa’s natural beauty or guys drooling over her. There was a reason she was called Arya horse face and Arya underfoot. Even if she did dress up, it wouldn’t change the fact that she was ugly. What was the point in trying to look nice if people didn't think you were nice to look at in the first place. Arya rather be unnoticed than the object of some guy’s attention, which was not going to happen anyways.

”What do you expect me to think,” Sansa began. ”You wear boys clothes, act like a boy, and show no interest in boys.”
“So, your logical conclusion is that I want to be a boy and like girls—you think I am a lesbian?”
Arya's tone was mocking and laced with condescension to which Sansa ignored.

"I don't know," Sansa shrugged. "I just want to understand you. We've never really seen eye to eye on many things. Your behavior confuses me and you could care less for my girly-ness."

Arya bit her lip and glanced at her sister. "Sansa, I am a tomboy. That just means I like the same things as boy not that I want to be one or that I like girls. I don’t want to be a boy and I don’t like girls.

Softly, Sansa asked, "Is there a guy you have a crush on?"

It was clear that Sansa was trying to find a way to bond with Arya, but she was done with this conversation. Arya thought that if Sansa really wanted to bond with her, she would ask her what her interest were. But, Sansa didn't work that way. She tried to make things fit into her understanding of the world. It was either this or that. There was never any middle ground with her.

"No," Arya answered sternly. The tone of her voice indicated that the conversation was over."

There were a few more attempts on Sansa's behalf to figure out her younger sister, but they were all disasters as well. The more time passed, the more apparent it became that Sansa may not ever comprehend who her sister was. But, Arya no longer cared.

When the Stark kids arrived home, Arya went to her room and played online games. She had cleared a few more levels and was working on a game high in points when someone knocked on her door.

"What," she yelled without looking from her screen.

"It's Jon," her brother yelled through the door.

"Go away," she responded as she continued to play her game.

Jon jiggled her handled and discovered that it was locked.

"Don't be like this, Arya," Jon said quietly.

"I wouldn't be if you hadn't signed up for the fucking army," Arya pounded on her computer keys.

"Arya, watch your language," the admonished girl rolled her eyes as she scored a game high. "I just want to talk to you."

"Funny, you had all the time in the world to talk to me after you signed up for the army, but you waited until the day before you were leaving to tell me." Jon had announced that he was leaving for the army on their way back home. He had spoke to their father about it, but remained tight-lipped about his new career from the rest of his family.

Despite her better judgment, she opened the door.

"Hell, Robb got an internship at dad's job and he can't shut up about it," her eyes were teary and forlorn. "But, you got a job where you could lose your life at any second and didn't tell anyone, but dad about it."

Jon pulled her into his arms and gave her a tight hug.

"I'm sorry," he wiped his sister's eyes, and then placed a kiss on her forehead. "I was afraid of how you guys were going to take it."
"It doesn't matter, you should have said something sooner."

"I know," he admitted. Jon picked his up from the floor, and then opened it. He pulled out an autographed football. "Courtesy of the Winterfell Direwolves."

"Seriously," Arya gasped.

"Seriously." Jon repeated as Arya threw herself back in his arms. She then took the ball from his hands and stared at it in pure amazement.

"Don't think this means that I've forgiven you." Arya read all of the names on the ball and she tenderly held her new gift.

Jon smiled tightly. "I don't." He gave her another hug. "I wish I could stay longer, but I have to go, kiddo."

Arya bit her lip and looked down as hugged her ball. "I know."

Gently, Jon placed a hand on Arya's chin and made her look at him.

"Everything's going to be alright, Arya," he reassured.

"No, it isn't," she said plainly before going to lie on her bed. Jon left Arya to her solitude.

The next day, Arya slept in until the afternoon.

She went into the kitchen and fixed herself a bowl of cereal.

"Welcome to the land of the living," her mother quipped as she brought a cup of coffee to her lips.

Her mother hated when Arya woke up late. Catelyn believed in making use of every minute in your day—this explained one of the reasons why Sansa was her favorite. Arya just wanted to be young. She wanted to have fun, get dirty, and sleep in late. But, mostly, she was still upset about Jon leaving.

Arya rolled her eyes and began to eat her cereal.

"I know you are upset about Jon leaving; we all are, but you'll see him again." Catelyn gave a stiff smile to her daughter as a way of reassurance.

"Mom, don't," Arya began. "It's not as if you liked Jon when he was here, so don't try to pretend you did to make me feel better."

"Arya, sweetie, you don't understand," her mother defended as she reached for her youngest daughter hand. Arya quickly snatched it away before her mother could touch her.

"You're right: I don't." The two sat in silence for a moment. "But, you were the one who made him leaving."

"I did not make Jon join—"

"Yes, you did," Arya interrupted. "If you hadn't acted like a bitch to him his whole life, he wouldn't have left."

"Arya!" Anger filled Catelyn's eyes as she barely kept her temper in check. "You go to your room right. I refuse to be spoken to in such a disrespectful tone. I don't know who you got your bad
Arya didn’t move as she looked at her mother. "Well, I learned from the best," she gave her mother a pointed look.

Catelyn slammed a fist on the table, and then pointed to the door that led to the stairs. "GO TO YOUR ROOM NOW!"

For the rest of the afternoon, she stayed in her room uninterrupted. Although she knew her mother told her siblings not to bother her, she locked her door just in case and played her music loudly. Her time was spent between reading books, sports magazines, buying new music, and playing online games.

Most of the time, she played online games though. She and Mycah made sure to find teams that weren’t crowded, so both of them could join. Mycah wasn’t as good as she was, but he was fun to play with, which was all that mattered to Arya. He was better at cooking and enjoyed reading, but only played games and sports because Arya liked them. That’s what best friends did. When he wanted someone to help him cook (while his parents monitored them) or try out the food, Arya offered her assistance.

Mycah was the only one who didn’t judge her and accepted her for who she was. He didn’t care that she was better than him in most things and offered his help whenever she needed.

"Hey, Mycah, can you come over tomorrow," Arya asked in her mic while she shot an opponent.

"Sure," he agreed without hesitation. "For what?"

"To play some football." There was a knock on her door. "I have to go; I'll see you tomorrow."

"All right, bye," Mycah said before hanging up.

Arya put her computer on sleep and cut off her music before going to the door. She opened the door expecting to see her mother, but instead, her father stood on the other side.

"Dad," Arya said in surprise.

"Mind if I come in?" Ned's arms were folded across his chest as he raised an eyebrow. Even though his statement was phrased as a question, Arya knew that he only asked as a courtesy.

The young girl opened her door completely to let her father in. Ned followed Arya into her room as she picked up a stationary chair for her father to sit in and she took the one with wheels. The chairs were placed to face one another and the two sat down.

Father and daughter sat in silence for a moment as Ned collected his thoughts. Both he and Catelyn were reserved people, but Arya voiced her thoughts on a daily basis, damn the consequences. Every since Arya was a little girl, she had always been passionate and said what was on her mind when she deemed necessary. She had an even hard time censoring her mouth the issue was incredibly important to her. As proud as he was of Arya, he had no idea where her passion came from or her outspoken nature. She was the wildcard of the family for sure.

Although he would never admit it aloud, Arya was his favorite. Ned loved all of his kids and would do anything for them, but he connected to his youngest daughter in a way that he hadn't connected to his other kids. Despite her loner nature, he could see that she wished to be understood and did want friends, but she refused to compromise who she was to become someone she was not. It was something that drew Arya to Jon over the years. The two of them were looking for a place where
"Arya, I understand that you were upset about Jon leaving, but that does not give you the permission to disrespect your mother even if you believe Jon left because of her," Ned began. Arya's expression was ambivalent, which wasn't surprising considering her nature. She did feel sorry for calling her mom a bitch, but at the same time, she felt her mother mistreated Jon for far too long. "She is still your mom and you have to respect her even if you don't want to."

"Respect her," Arya scoffed. "She doesn't even respect Jon. She always makes him feel like an outsider even though he has lived with us ever since he was born—before I was born. Don't you all always say 'treat others how you want to be treated?'"

Ned inwardly groaned. Of all of their children, Arya loved using their words against them the most. If you say 'do as I say and not as I do', she'll respond with 'but you also say that actions speaks louder than words.' She knew how to argue her case and simultaneously frustrate you with her non-stop persistence. If she ever did get married, it would take a man who knew how to go head to head with his daughter.

"I know, Arya, but having Jon around is difficult for your mom, so I wish you could be more understanding," he explained in a soft tone.

Arya crossed her legs, and then her arms. "But, why is she mad at him, you were the one who cheated. Jon didn't ask to be created, so why should he suffer the consequences?"

A regretful expression crossed Ned's face. "I'll admit, what I put your mother through was wrong and even her treatment of Jon is wrong, but I expect more of you." He placed a hand on Arya's shoulder. "You are an incredibly bright young girl and more mature than most 13 years olds your age, despite your outspoken nature, but you need to treat your mother better and I am not referring to just yesterday. I know you love her, so start showing her. And as right as you may be about what I did, Arya, you are not the parent, but the child. I do not have to discuss or explain my actions to you."

Ned stood up and opened his arms for a hug.

Arya tightly wrapped her arms around her father. "What is my punishment?"

"The is the first and last time I'll let what you did slide, but next time I won't be so understanding, okay?" Arya shook her head in agreement before her father placed a kiss on her head. "Tomorrow, my boss and his family will be having dinner with us, so make sure to be home a little early to wash up and put on some nice clothes."

"Okay," Arya said softly.

The following day, Arya got up early and ate breakfast with her family. Quietly, she ate her food as she listened to the chatter around the table. Sansa asked Robb about his internship and Bran and Rickon were discussing an anime cartoon. Her parents were having a conversation about Robert Baratheon, her dad's boss.

"Are you sure you have no clue why he is coming by to see you?" It was odd to Catelyn that Robert would not just visit Ned, but have dinner with him as well. He was the kind of man who enjoyed going out for drinks and eating dinners at fancy restaurants.

"Cat, you never know with Robert. He could just want to come by for dinner with his family or it could be something else," Ned shrugged and stuffed some eggs in his mouth. "You seem to think I
know what is going on in Robert's head."

"Well, you two were close friends once upon a time," Catelyn took Ned's plate and put some more food on it, and then sat it back down in front of him.

"Once upon a time," he stressed. "The last time we really had a good talk was when Robb was an infant. Every since then, we've both been busy living our lives and running businesses—we just became too busy for one another."

The conversation then transitioned onto another topic as Arya picked at her food.

Mycah had to cancel on her because his grandparents were in town for the day, so Arya went to the park with Rickon. She read a book as he played on the slide and monkey bars. Once Rickon started to pester her about playing with him, they took started to race on the swings to see who could go the highest or they jumped off to see who could go the furthest. After that, they took turns spinning each other around on the tire swing to see who could get the dizziest.

After they left the park, Arya bought the both of them ice cream they decided to wander around the neighborhood. Eventually, they ended up back and home and decided to go swimming in the lake in their backyard. They could only swim for an hour before they had to get dressed for their guest.

"Arya, do you mind wearing this for tonight," Caelyn asked as she handed her daughter a dress. Her daughter took the dress without complaint and looked at it.

"Okay," she agreed. As Arya was walking away, she hesitated. "I'm sorry for calling you—you know...that." Regret colored Arya's face even though she did not agree with her mother's treatment of Jon.

"I don't appreciate being called such a foul word," Catelyn clasped her hands together in front of her body. "But, apology accepted."

Arya gave her mom a small smile.

"Did Sansa do your hair?"

"Yes," Arya touched her hair insecurely.

Catelyn tucked a strand of hair behind her daughter's ear. "It looks nice...you're going to look great tonight."

The young girl stared at her mother blankly and said nothing.

Dinner turned out to be a disaster or, at least, for Arya it was. She hated the Baratheons. She hated Robert Baratheon, Cersei Baratheon, and especially Joffrey Baratheon. The younger two kids were all right, but the others were just the worst. Robert was a drunk who kept looking at her because she looked like her deceased aunt Lyanna, which made her feel uncomfortable. Cersei looked down upon them because she was a stuck up rich bitch. And Joffrey was a snide jackass who thought that he was better than them.

To add another cherry on top: the Baratheons were spending the night in their guesthouse.

Mrs. Baratheon didn't think the hotels were good enough for their family to stay in and the Starks guesthouse as "just" a step above the hotel. If she had her way, they would have left that same exact night.
Arya just didn't have the energy to argue with her parents over something she knew she couldn't prevent. She was still upset about Jon leaving and on thin ice with her parents with the whole "bitch" fiasco. They may have not punished her, but she didn't want to push any more buttons. So, she went straight to her room and went to bed. You can't get in trouble if you are asleep.

Mycah arrived to her house around ten in the morning. Arya had texted him to come by and see Nymeria, who had just gotten out of the hospital. She had been hit by a car and severely injured. Her best friend adored her wolf and was upset that Nymeria had gotten hurt. Despite the severity of the injuries, Nymeria had made a full recovery and they two teens sat around her and talked for a while.

Two in the afternoon, the two finally started playing football in the backyard. Arya outplayed Mycah, as usual, and he didn't care, as usual. Despite being bad at sports, Mycah actually did try, which Arya liked. At least, he tried to make it fun for her.

When Mycah playfully tackled her was when everything turned to shit.

Arya paced her room back and forth with her hands balled into fists. She was absolutely fuming.

After Mycah tackled her, Joffrey had come over to them acting like tough shit, especially since he had been trying to impress Sansa. Mycah and Arya tried to explain to the Baratheon boy that they had been playing around, but Joffrey tried to fight Mycah for "picking" on a girl. After it was clear that Mycah had no clue how to fight and was at a clear disadvantage, she stood up for him and punched Joffrey in the eye.

Joffrey pretended to be some innocence bystander and Sansa kept her mouth shut about the whole ordeal, which resulted in Mycah's father getting fired from Baratheon corporations since he didn't know how to control his kid. Arya was put on punishment for the rest of the summer to appease Robert.

Her father knocked on her door as he opened it.

"Can you please leave, dad," Arya requested of her father.

"I know you are upset, sweetheart, but what was I supposed to do," Ned genuinely asked. "I believe you, but that's my boss."

"And I am your daughter!" Arya yelled as tears formed in her eyes. "You're supposed to take my side."

Ned was upset by his daughter's state of distress.

"Arya, life isn't that simple. I made the best decision possible in the situation I was put in. I know you hate my decision, but I am the one who had to make it. Do you think it was easy for me? But, I had to. Being adult means making the hard decisions even when it pains you to do so."

"Even if the hard decisions are overkill," Arya sarcastically asked. She was not upset at the fact that she got punished, but the severity of her punishment and Mycah's father being fired.

"Sometimes we have to make extreme decisions in order to maintain the peace." As smart as Arya was, Ned could see that she had a lot of learning to do. Life wasn't about what you wanted or thought was right and fair—it is harsh and is about compromise.

"Or maybe you decided to quickly."

"Maybe," he agreed to placate her, but she didn't know Robert like he did. Suddenly he announced,
"Mr. Baratheon needs me in King's Landing."

"What?" Arya snapped her head to look at her father. "You're leaving us?"

Ned looked to the floor. "We're leaving to go to King's Landing." By the tone of his voice, it was apparent that there wasn't any room for compromise. "Based on my discussion with Robert, it seems as if I am going to be there a while and I don't want to be without you, your mother, and siblings. Whether or not you like my decision, I am not splitting our family up."

With that, Ned left Arya to her own thoughts.

"Winter is coming," she mumbled to no one in particular.
Chapter Summary

She supposed that her parents had been under a lot of stress. The school wanted to permanently expel her because of the severity of Joffrey’s injuries, Robert wanted to press criminal charges and have her in juvie, and all of the other countless stuff that stemmed from her fighting Joffrey. Her parents were trying to fight the expulsion, but the school did not want Arya back on their premises and neither did Robert.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arya gently caressed Nymeria’s hair as she solemnly stared at her direwolf. She tried to push the huge wolf away, but the animal wouldn’t budge.

“Nymeria, go,” she commanded and tried to force Nymeria to walk away, but the animal held its position. Nymeria then nuzzled Arya for a moment before lapping her owner’s face with her huge tongue. Arya hugged her beloved direwolf as she rested her face in Nymeria’s warm, soft fur.

The direwolf then walked backwards and stopped. She stared at Arya for a moment before turning around and walking to Mycah.

“I promise I’ll take good care of her.” Arya had to leave Nymeria with Mycah because she couldn’t bring her to King’s Landing. The Baratheons had a strict no pets’ policy. Another reason to hate them. Her family wasn’t even staying in their house—it was the guesthouse. She didn’t understand why she couldn’t bring Nymeria.

“Thanks, Mycah.” The boy walked over to Arya and gave her a big hug. Although the Stark girl wasn’t big on hugs, she received it anyways.

It wasn’t just Nymeria—it was everything. It was Jon leaving without a proper heads up, Mycah’s dad losing his job, her bullshit punishment, and being even more of a fucking outcast than she already was. For a fact, Arya knew that King’s Landing was going to be worse than Winterfell as far as making friends went.

Her dad thought that moving to King’s Landing would be a good opportunity for her to expand her horizons and meet new people, but he couldn’t be anymore wrong if he tried. Parents only said shit like that to make their kids feel better about moving, but Arya wasn’t naïve. Kids are kids no matter where you move. You either conform or they attack and ridicule you. The different were shunned and the conformists were embraced.

“Promise to call,” Mycah gave her a small smile and Arya nodded.

After settling into their new home at King’s Landing, Ned and Catelyn planned a family day to go tour the city. The city was nice, but Arya found it hard to be excited about the move or the new city. She didn’t want to go out and meet new people. She didn’t want a fresh start or a new chapter. Arya wanted her old life back. Things may have not changed all that much now, but they were going to and she knew it was going to be hell.
Once the sight seeing was over, Arya didn’t leave her room except to eat meals with her family.

Arya started to read more books and joined sites that suggested books and online forums to discuss them as well. The books ranged from atrocious to phenomenal. Although she was an exceptional reader and could read levels about her grade, some of them were difficult for her, which was why she joined the forums. There were other books that were downright terrible and shouldn’t have been published, let alone written in the first place.

“Do they even have a criteria anymore in order to get published,” Arya mumbled to herself.

Without fail, she called Mycah everyday and they played online games and discussed music. Mycah was really into music and listened to everything. He would suggest a lot of unknown artists, songs, and records because he knew she would like it. Over time, Arya knew not to doubt him. Even if she didn’t initially like the song, she eventually found herself enjoying it.

Other times, he did recommend well known artist and they would have discussions about what were the merits of a great song or artist. Arya may have not been as fanatical as Mycah, but she was no slouch when it came to music. Her music collection was broad even without Mycah’s help and she knew her shit as well.

There were days she was completely engrossed with her online games and did nothing else.

Her parents had had enough of Arya shutting herself off to the world.

“Why do I have to go to this stupid dinner party,” Arya complained.

“Because being in your room all of the time is unhealthy.” Catelyn rinsed the plate as she spoke to her daughter. The older woman supposed that she was so critical of Arya because she saw some of herself in her. Arya was stubborn, rash, and opinionated—like Catelyn was when she was a girl. Of course, she was not as wild as Arya, but there were days that Catelyn saw who she used to be in her youngest girl.

Before she had met Brandon.

“But, I am on punishment, remember, mom?” Arya put on her best poker face. “I shouldn’t be allowed to enjoy myself—even a little bit,”

Catelyn grinned at her daughter. “Yes, I know you are on punishment, but you have been in your room for far room long and there is more to life than those four walls.”

“That stupid ass dinner party isn’t one of them.” Her mother gasped in offense before mock glaring at Arya. She was trying to get in trouble in order to escape the party.

“Well, since you are all about having adequate punishment, you’re going to the party.” Arya made a noise in disapproval.

“But, mom,” she whined.

“But, mom, what?” Catelyn dared her to speak. “Your punishment is hardly a punishment. You can’t complain about it, and then use it against your father and I for your benefit. How is staying in your room when you don’t want to go outside in the first place and doing whatever you want considered a punishment?” An eyebrow was raised to indicate checkmate for Catelyn. “You don’t want to go to the party because it would make you miserable like a punishment would, which is why you are going to this party.”
Arya made a face in disgust. “But, isn’t that a bad idea? You want me to meet new people and make friends. Since I will already dread being there, I will be poor company to keep.”

A few dishes were put away before Catelyn turned around to face her daughter, and then put her hands on her hips. You could give Arya a map with the easiest directions to a location and she will find the most difficult way to get there. She just had to learn things her own way or no way at all.

“Then make sure you are excellent company to keep this weekend,” Catelyn warned. “I don’t understand why it is so hard for you to at least try and get along with other people.”

“Because other people are idiots.” Catelyn didn’t say anything as she thought of what to say next. Briefly, she rubbed her temples, and then looked at her daughter. “I worry about, Arya, that is all. Is it wrong of your father and I to want you to have a life outside of videogames, music, and the Internet? Is it wrong of us to want you to have more than one friend?” Arya opened her mouth to defend herself when Catelyn raised a hand to silence her. “I know I may never understand you, but I can see that you are lonely and no parent wants their child to feel lonely or alone. I just want you to be happy.”

The sincerity in her mother’s voice was palpable. Just like Sansa, her mother tried relating, but they didn’t know how to connect to her. And if Arya was honest with herself, she didn’t know how to relate to them either. The difference between her and Sansa and her mother was that they actually tried. But, she didn’t.

“I am happy…. sometimes,” she admitted. Catelyn slowly walked over to her daughter and hugged her. “But, it feels like I’m always the odd person out--like I’m trying to make myself fit where I don’t belong. That makes me feel more alone than being cooped up in my room all day.”

It was the most honest thing Arya ever said to her mother and they both knew it.

Catelyn went into the cabinet where they stored the wine glasses, pulled two of them out, and sat one in front of Arya. For a moment, she disappeared into the walk-in pantry and strolled back to the table with red wine. She filled one-fourth of Arya’s glass, and then poured herself a glass.

Usually, her mother and father allowed their kids have wine on holidays and certain dinner parties they threw. This deviation from the norm was quite odd.

“We’re going to have a drink together,” Catelyn obviously stated. “And you are going to tell me about yourself. I mean really tell me.” Arya looked at her wine before looking at her mother. “Go on. I wouldn’t pour you a cup if I didn’t intend for you to drink it.”

Arya hesitantly sipped her drink. “What do you want me to tell you?”

“Anything,” her mother shrugged. “Tell me anything you want. I would love to hear it.”

An hour later, the two Stark women giggled as Arya recounted one of her many stories. Interest colored Catelyn’s face as she heard the vivid details of the adventures. There was cackling swirling in the air and tears falling down their eyes. Out of the blue, Arya asked:

“Do you ever wonder what life would have been like if Uncle Brandon lived?” A contemplative look set upon her mother’s face and she grabbed her talking companion’s glass and refilled it to the one-fourth mark again.

The question didn’t seem to catch Catelyn off guard, but she wasn’t expecting it either. It seemed as if the woman was gauging if she should talk about the subject or not.
“I did the first few years,” she admitted.

“So, was dad like second best or something,” Arya made direct eye contact as she spoke.

“No.” Her smile was a musing one as she took a sip of her wine. “I wasn’t interested in your dad at all. I thought he was far too serious and distant. He was cold and unapologetically direct. There was nothing inviting about him.” A short pause, then, “But I couldn’t have been more wrong.”

Arya seemed hurt that Catelyn was not initially interested in her father, despite her mother admitting being wrong about him. Catelyn sensed her daughter’s emotional response to her confession.

“Arya,” she began. “How you see your father and how he behaves around us is completely different from how strangers see him and how he behaves around them.” She sat her glass down and scooted closer to Arya. “Your father is a very deliberate man and the way I interpreted him is the way he wanted me to. And the same goes for you. He’s this great, loving dad because he wants to be one. People don’t act the same way around everyone; their behavior changes to fit that person or group. Ned’s the same way. I only got to know his softer side because he eventually let me in.”

“So what if Uncle Brandon had lived,” Arya pushed. Catelyn then understood some of Arya’s antagonistic behavior towards her in the last year. Her daughter believed that if her uncle had lived, she wouldn’t be here, which is true. She wanted to believe that her parents chose each other out of love not circumstance. It surprised Cat, but she surmised that Arya wanted her existence to be more concrete than her mother’s fiancé dying and her father being there.

Catelyn chose her words carefully. “The answer wouldn’t bring you peace either way,” she answered. “You question if you would have existed if Brandon had lived and we both know the answer, but life is a series of hypotheticals.” Catelyn wanted her daughter to see the bigger picture. “You want to believe that you were meant to be here and you were, Arya, you were because if not, then you wouldn’t be. What if my mother had never died? What if I dated my childhood friend Petyr when he asked me out? What if I went with my first choice of college instead of my second? What if my parents never met? Regardless of how you feel about these answers, that’s all they are: hypotheticals. It doesn’t change the fact that I love your father and we are still together 20 years later.”

Slowly, she older woman picked up her glass and took a sip and Arya did the same.

“Hypotheticals will drive you insane,” she sighed. “It drove me insane for a while. Gods knows it did.” A longer sip was taken, and then she contemplated the hypothetical. “If he had lived, it would have been great at first. When he died, we were still in that honeymoon phase of our relationship and I overlooked important attributes that made long sustaining relationships. It would have fizzled and I would have been unhappy and stuck in a marriage that I had rushed into. And tragically in love with your father.” Arya stared at her in disbelief. “I know people think I loved your father because I had to, which is partially true, but I fell in love with your father because of who he was. Like I said earlier, he’s warm and kind with family and I think we would have gotten to know each other and that I would have realized my mistake. But, it would have been too late by then. Either way I would have done my duty.”

Arya let out a small chuckle. “Duty,” she repeated. “I guess Sansa is a younger you then,” she remarked. “She’s always going about how it is our duty to do this or that. No one wonder why two get each other so much.” Catelyn could read the subtext: Arya was saying that Sansa was her favorite.

“Yes, I get Sansa, but you were more of a younger me than she is,” Arya gave a disagreeing look. “Who do you think you get your stubbornness from or your opinionated nature? Not your father,
that’s for sure. We may not share certain in things in common, but you are more like me than you realize, Arya,” she pointed at her daughter and smirked. “Contrary to what you think, I don’t play favorites or have any either. It’s just easier for me understand Sansa than it is you. I love all of my children equally. And I have favorite characteristics I enjoy in each of you.”

Catelyn swallowed the rest of her drink and washed the glasses. After she was done, she dried them off and put them back in the cabinet.

“I enjoyed talking to you, Arya,” her mother smiled warmly before placing a kiss on her forehead. “Our conversation has helped me get to understand you a little bit better. Thank you for talking to me.”

With that, she exited the kitchen and left Arya to her thoughts.

Although her mother rescinded her dinner party punishment, Arya still went anyways. Catelyn said she didn’t have to go since it had nothing to do with the family or business, but Arya wanted to give making new friends another go.

The Dayne family was hosting the dinner party. They seemed to be nice enough people Arya thought as her parents introduced her to them. Her father asked about King’s Landing as far as the community and schools went, but the Dayne’s didn’t know much. They explained that they just owned a summerhouse and said that the crime was relatively low.

Arya smiled and laughed at the right jokes for a while before venturing away.

Despite her efforts, Arya quickly found out that the kids in King’s Landing was worst than the kids in Winterfell. They took class and nobility very seriously as well as adhering to traditional gender roles. Also, they were incredibly snobby. The predictably of her peers no longer astounded Arya. She saw Sansa get along famously with everyone and Bran and Rickon were making great impressions as well.

Somehow she found herself outside trying to escape from the party. Simultaneously, she was overwhelmed by the people, but underwhelmed by their predictability. Perhaps she was the issue—she was a glitch in high society. Everyone got along and understood one another except for her. Mycah was the only one who she could relate and he didn’t judge her and, despite their closeness, there was an empty void inside of her.

“Do you mind if I join you,” Arya jumped slightly and turned to face the voice.

“Have you got any manners?” She asked incredulous as she looked at her guest Edric Dayne. “Besides, why are you asking? This is your house.”

Edric bowed his head.

“Yes, but I wouldn’t want to intrude upon your privacy,” he said as way of explanation. “You seem to want to be alone.”

“Really?” Arya proclaimed sarcastically. “Then why are you asking to join me?”

“Sorry, my lady.” Edric uttered apologetically. “I will excuse myself.” Edric turned to walk towards the mansion.

“Edric, wait.” Arya said and the boy stopped in his tracks. “You can join me if only you don’t call me my lady.”
“That I can do,” he agreed as he sat next to her. The Stark girl examined her new companion. He had light blonde hair and dark blue eyes. “You can call me Ned.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “My father’s nickname is Ned.”

“I know.”

They didn’t speak to each as Arya stargazed. She had found several constellations when Ned spoke.

“My birthday was last week,” he said nonchalantly.

“Oh really,” her tone was detached.

“Yeah, I turned 15.”

“That’s nice.” Arya didn’t care too much for her own birthday; she just wanted her presents.

“How old are you? That’s if you mind me asking.”

“Thirteen.”

“Thirteen,” he repeated.

“Yeah, my birthday is in December.” Arya didn’t know why she told him. It just seemed like something to say.

Ned skipped a couple rocks and Arya joined him. Whatever game they were playing, she was winning. A few rules had been added, which only made it harder for Ned. He was good at games and sports, but not naturally. He wasn’t someone who just got the hang of something; he needed to practice.

“Do you want to go to my tree house?” Arya looked at the extravagantly crafted structure and nodded yes. They walked to the tree house in silence and Ned gestured to the rope ladder for Arya to go first. “Ladies first.”

Arya rolled her eyes and she took off her flats and handed it to Ned. “No, you go first.”

“It would be rude and impolite for me to go first,” Ned pushed the ladder toward her.

“And it would be unladylike for me to go.” She gestured towards her dress and Ned blushed. Arya hated to use the term unladylike, but it was the only way Ned would understand.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he stammered as he covered his eyes. “Uh…I promise not to look.”

“Just go, Ned,” Arya groaned, and then pushed him to go up the ladder. Grudgingly, the older boy complied and Arya followed after him.

The inside of the tree house looked like an office combined with a game room. It even had working electricity. There was a big screen TV mounted on the wall with a shelf beneath it that had a DVD player and movies. Arya whistled as she examined the place.

“And you only stay here for the summer,” she asked without looking at him. “Do you have one back Starfall like this?”

“Yeah, it’s bigger than this one,” Ned replied.
“Cool beans,” she said absentmindedly.

Ned turned on the TV as Arya continued to search his room. Unsurprisingly, he had cable and Internet in his tree house as well. It seemed as if they had similar interest in music, movies, and sports. She picked up a CD and showed it to Ned.

“You listen to ‘Explosions in the Sky’?” The song Slow Dance filled the room as she turned the volume to a moderate level. Ned had approved of her choice in song.

“Yeah,” he sat on his beanbag chair and watched her as she continued to look around.

“Cool beans,” she smiled at him.

Arya opened a cabinet and gasped.

“Ned, you bad boy, you,” she said excitedly and, instantly, Ned knew what she was looking at.

“Arya, don’t touch that,” he went over to shut the cabinet doors. Arya stopped him.

“Why not?” She threw him a displeased glance before pulling out the items.

“Because you are too young for it,” he explained as Arya throatily laughed.

“And you aren’t?” Ned was quiet. “I thought so. Why do you have alcohol and cigarettes anyways? You seem like you’re a stickler for the rules.”

Ned’s faced turned bright red.

“Aww…you were trying to rebel,” they walked to the beanbags and sat down together. “You couldn’t go through with it, could you?”

“How could you tell?” Arya held up the unopened package of cigarettes.

“Besides being unopened, it has been collecting dust.”

Arya opened the whiskey bottle and poured her and Ned a glass, but not too much. She then opened the cigarettes and handed Ned one.

“I’ve never smoked before,” he stated the obvious.

“Me neither,” she shrugged, and then lit both of their cigarettes.

In an anxious manner, Ned puffed his cigarette, but didn’t inhale and Arya glared at him.

“Are you serious?” She then cautiously inhaled her cigarette, and then coughed. Ned followed her lead and went into a coughing fit. “Quiet down,” she shushed.

“I can’t—” his coughing fit began again and Arya handed him his glass a whiskey. As the boy tried to contain his coughing, tears welled in his eyes. After Ned somewhat composed himself, he gulped down his drink and Arya quickly refilled his cup.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He shook his head up and down as he took another drag. The coughing wasn’t a bad the second time. “So, why are you…you know?” He gestured to the cigarettes and whiskey.
“Every girl needs a rebellious side,” she said as way of explanation.

“You look very pretty tonight,” he said shyly. Arya had on a deep gray A-Line dress and her hair was done in a traditional Winterfell hairstyle with some loose curls. Arya side-eyed him before mumbling:

“Thanks.” She didn’t believe him, but she didn’t want to continue the conversation either. Better to accept the compliment than talking about it any more than she wanted to.

They watched TV as they smoked, but really it was channel surfing. Arya had no interest in anything that was on and Ned was being a gracious host by letting her choose. He suggested shows and movies to watch, but Arya was dismissive of his suggestions.

“You don’t seem like your thirteen.” Arya raised her eyebrow. “I don’t know…you seem older than that. You act older than me.”

“That’s because I can see how stupid everything and everyone are,” Arya said as if it was common knowledge.

“Do you think I am stupid,” he asked.

“Yeah, but I think everyone is stupid, so it doesn’t matter.” She finished her glass of whiskey and stopped Ned as he tried to pour her another cup. “I don’t hang out with kids around my age, except my best friend Mycah and he lives in another city. So, I spend a lot of time around my older brothers. I watch a lot of TV and movies, read a lot of books—books for older kids, listen to kick ass music, and my parents treat me like a young adult rather than some stupid kid. So, it was a combination of things really. I observe people as well,” she said offhandedly.

“I like it,” Ned complimented.

“Thanks.” The cigarette was deposited in her cup since she didn’t wanted to be rude and leave it on his floor. As she was about to say something to Ned, he tried to lean in and kiss her, but she stopped him before he could. “What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry,” he stammered. “I just wanted to kiss you.”

“God, you’re such an idiot,” she exclaimed as she picked up her shoes from the floor. He called after her as she descended the ladder, and then followed her.

“I’m so sorry, Arya. I didn’t mean to offend you,” he apologized profusely once he got to the ground. “It’s just that…I like you and I thought that you liked me.”

Arya laughed. “You thought that I liked you? I was just being nice. You were the one who came over and asked to sit next to me.”

A pained expression fell upon Ned’s face. Internally, she groaned.

“Look, Ned, I’m sorry for laughing and saying what I did. You are a nice guy, but I don’t like you like that,” she apologized. “And we just met each other like 40 minutes ago.”

Ned scratched his head, and then nodded in agreement. It looked as if he was too embarrassed to talk about it. He changed the subject. “Let’s find a way to get this smell off of us before you leave.”

“Great idea.”
There was a spare toothbrush that Ned gave to Arya and they brushed their teeth and tongues very thoroughly—in separate bathrooms, of course. Ned then gave Arya some dryer sheets to rub on her body before giving her perfume to spray on herself that his Aunt Ashara left at the house.

“If that doesn’t work, then I don’t know what else will other than washing and drying my clothes,” Arya said as they walked into the kitchen. The teens ate some ice cream as they waited for the dinner party to end. The Stark girl still had no idea what Ned was thinking when he tried to kiss her. She didn’t like boys or thought that they were icky, but she definitely was NOT interested in dating, kissing, or anything else.

“I know I tried to kiss you, but we can still be friends, right?” He took a scoop of ice cream and put it in his mouth as he stared expectantly at Arya.

“Of course, but please don’t try to kiss me again.”

“Okay.” They shook hands on it.

Later on, as she buckled her seatbelt, her mom smiled at her.

“I see you made a friend.” Arya could tell that her mother was excited.

“Yes, A friend.” She emphasized. “The rest were terrible and he lives in Dorne, so I guess we are going to be pen pals.”

“Still, two friends are better than one.” Her daughter shrugged.

“And one is better than none.”

Her father paid for Mycah to come down and visit her and Arya introduced him to Ned. The three of them were inseparable while Mycah was in town. After he left, their calls continued, but she spent more time with Ned. Besides the whole kiss fiasco, he proved to be a good friend. And he seemed to be happy to be invited into Arya’s triangle of friends.

When school started, she didn’t expect it to be any different than her time in Winterfell and it wasn’t. Sansa got all of the attention as usual and she was ignored…as usual, which was fine. As she ate lunch by herself, she read books and did schoolwork, so she wouldn’t have much to do when she got home. Everything was fine until Joffrey started trying to bully her. Keyword: trying. Arya refused to be bullied by anyone whether or not she had a shot in winning, which she always believed she did.

As the school year progressed, Joffrey’s attempts increasingly worse and worse, as did her relationship with Sansa. The two had started to date before the summer ended and her sister defended everything Joffrey all while acting as if Arya was the instigator. Her perfect prince would never do such a thing. Arya had such a “hateful” heart and just wanted to make her life miserable by messing with her boyfriend.

The Baratheon’s ran King’s Landing and either people turned a blind eye or didn’t believe Joffrey to be the shit Arya knew him to be. It was all too much to bear. Staying in her room wasn’t an option because he only bothered her at school. Also, her parents wouldn’t let her transfer schools or get homeschooled.

All hell broke loose in April.

Joffrey was eating lunch during the wrong period. It made Arya feel uncomfortable to be in the same room as Joffrey. Nothing good ever came when they were in the same room together whether or not other people were around them. Arya quickly finished her lunch and when she looked up, Joffrey
was gone. She cursed herself for taking her eyes off of Joffrey. After she threw her trash away, she began to walk towards the exit when someone and their whole tray of food collided with her.

“My bad,” the guy pretended ignorance. “I didn’t see you right there.” He slightly rubbed the food on Arya’s shirt, and then walked away. Arya was furious. She saw red as she heard a few of her peers giggle. Suddenly, a cold drink was poured on her head.

By now, she was absolutely fuming.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” She turned to the guy who poured the cold beverage on her. This had to be Joffrey’s doing. Her fist was balled to her side and Arya was prepared to punch him, but she was also on the verge of crying. It was all too much. A new city, new school, Jon was still gone, and everything was shit. Could her life get any worse? She didn’t want her classmates to see her cry.

She turned around and starting walking when, suddenly she was tripped and fell.

“Watch where you’re going, horse face!” She heard Joffrey yell. Laughter erupted in the lunchroom.

Arya turned too see Joffrey get up from his place at the table and stand above her. Suddenly, she jumped up and pushed her tormentor. Joffrey staggered a bit and after he re-gained his balance, he angrily walked towards her as Arya got into a fighting stance. As if he could fight, Joffrey tried to punch Arya, but she dodged all of his attempts before landing some well placed hits herself.

Joffrey was doubled over and saw his friends to attack Arya and waved them off. Arya knew that if they had been alone, Joffrey would have let them, but they were in front of other people and he didn’t want to seem weak.

Again, the Baratheon boy tried to hit her, but Arya gracefully maneuvered away from any intended hits. Joffrey threw himself at her and she responded by holding him tight and kneeing him in the gut.

In pain, Joffrey writhed on the floor as he squinched his eyes shut.

“Why are you guys just standing there?” He whined after he opened his eyes. “Fuck the bitch up!”

As both of the boys made their way towards her, she decided to attack one of them first before being attacked herself. Luckily for her, the guys had the same scrawny stature like Joffrey.

In quick succession, Arya gave a few sucker punches to one of the guys in the gut. The boys began to gasp as he fell to the floor. The other one wrapped his arms around her tightly and she responded by using all of her might to step on his foot, and then leaning forward to flip him over when the kid let his guard down.

Before she could gather herself, she felt some grabbed a huge chunk of her hair. Rather than struggle against this method of attack, Arya pushed her weight against her attacker and let them fall forward. As she got on her hands and knees, she saw that it was Joffrey. He tried to crawl away, but Arya grabbed him, turned him over, and crawled on top of him to immobilize him. She then began to land punches on his face.

“What where you are going, shit face!” She shouted at her sister’s boyfriend. Blood curdling cries filled the cafeteria room as Arya released a year’s worth of pent of anger. Joffrey stopped struggling and went limp. Only his head moved to signal that he was still conscious.

Arya got up and numbly stared at Joffrey. Blood dripped from her hand as she then looked around in the cafeteria. Everyone stared at her in shock and horror. She didn’t care what they thought. What
did they do when three boys tried to attack her? They stared and yell ‘fight, fight’. Where were the teachers who were supposed to prevent it from escalating this far?

There was no resistance from her when the security guards apprehended her.

She waited for her parents in the principal’s office.

As they spoke to the principal, she remained silent unless spoken to. It was explained that she would be suspended until all of the details were sorted as to what really happened.

The silence while in principal’s office carried over from the car ride to the hospital. Arya’s hand was experiencing excruciating pain and was swollen. Without speaking, it seemed to be agreed that her hand was broken. The x-ray confirmed it. Arya left the hospital with a cast and some papers on how to properly care for her hand.

“Arya, your father and I will talk to you about this when I come back,” Catelyn said in a tight voice as she and her father exited the car. Ned was busy talking to Robert as he made his way to the front door. Her mother had to pick up Rickon from school.

“I know,” Arya groaned.

“You know?” Catelyn said incredulously. “No, you don’t know. You don’t know anything,” she fumed. “Do you realize how big the consequences of your actions are?”

Arya went to her room and locked the door. She didn’t want to do anything or talk to anyone. It didn’t surprise her that everyone thought that she was completely guilty of initiating the fight. She may have thrown the first punch, but she was provoked plain and simple.

Twenty minutes later, she went down stairs to make herself a sandwich and get a bottle of water to take with her medicine. It was too strong to take on an empty stomach. She was halfway finished with her sandwich when Sansa barged into the kitchen.

“You must really hate me, huh!” Sansa dropped her book bag and walked over to Arya.

“Sansa, leave me alone,” Arya warned before drinking her water. “I’m not in a mood to talk.”

“You’re not in a mood to talk,” Sansa said as she invaded her sister’s personal space. “You just beat up my boyfriend in front of the ENTIRE school for no reason at all.”

“Get out of my face.” Arya gave Sansa a dark glare before getting up and putting her dishes in the sink.

“No,” Sansa walked behind Arya and maneuvered her head so that her sister was looking at her. “I’ve been out of your face since school started. I’ve been out of your face so we wouldn’t argue all of the time. But, that hasn’t helped anything—it has only made it worse. Now I am in your face because you can’t just bully and fight people without any consequences.”

Arya balled her good fist and deeply exhaled. “I don’t have time for this,” she dismissed as she attempted to walk away.

“Then you better make time,” her sister demanded as she grabbed Arya’s arm. Arya snatched her arm out of Sansa’s hold and whipped around to face her.

“You better keep your fucking hands off of me before I pound your face in like I did your beloved Joffrey,” she threatened.
“I’m not afraid of you,” she said fearlessly as she walked closer to Arya in order to use her height to intimidate her.

“Then you’re a goddamn fool,” Arya declared. “Your boyfriend and his friends weren’t either and they ended up more bruised than me.”

Fear colored Sansa’s eyes briefly, and then she stood tall again. Arya walked away this time knowing that Sansa wouldn’t grab her again.

“That’s why you are going to end up old, bitter, and lonely.” Sansa yelled behind her. “No one’s going to love you—no one!”

Sansa followed Arya to the front of the house.

“I don’t fucking care!”

“You don’t care because you know it wouldn’t make a difference if you did care.” Sansa shouted back. “Mycah and Ned are only friends with you because they feel sorry for you. Poor Ned for was forced to be your friend by his parents and, well, Mycah wasn’t forced to, but who wouldn’t love being friends with a rich girl when she is desperate for friends and you get free stuff?” Sansa was looking to draw blood. “You think you are hot shit, Arya, but no one likes you. My bad, you already know that which is why you pretend not to care. You act as if you are misunderstood when, really, no one cares to understand. Why would they? You’re angry all of the time and bully people. I really think you are adopted or some bastard like Jon,” she spat. “And it’s not like you are much to look at either…no wonder the boys stay away. At the rate you are going, you are bound to bloom into a full-blown mare soon.”

Arya could feel the tears coming, but her anger smothered the weaker reaction and she faced her sister.

“Well, I rather be a mare than a stupid piece of shit like you,” she lashed out. “God, you’re so fucking stupid, Sansa. You get the grades, but that’s because you remember shit rather than understand it. Even a monkey can do it, but wait—a monkey is smarter than you. And you think you are better than me because you are prettier and because they guys pay attention to you?” Arya laughed in her sister’s face. “They just want to fuck you, dumbass. Do any of them try and get to know you and the things you like? No, no they don’t. They just buy you flowers and whisper sweet things and you melt. It’s because they know if they are persistent enough, you’ll spread your legs like elevator doors. All they have to do is push the right button. Isn’t the only time Joffrey even shows the slightest bit of interest in you is for sex? ‘Come on, Sansa, it’s not that big of a deal’,” she mocked. “Even he knows you are a dumbass. I mean that is the only way to explain why they treat you like shit, except when he trying to convince her to have sex.”

“At least, I can get a boyfriend!” Tears pooled in Sansa’s eyes as she looked at her sister.

“At least, I can get a boyfriend,” Arya mocked. “Shut the fuck up talking to me, stupid ass cunt.”

Her stomach dropped when she heard her mother gasp and father shout, “Arya!”

Loud sobs filled the air as Sansa cried on the couch. Arya groaned in disgust. She believed Sansa had no right to cry with all that shit she just said to her.

Unsurprisingly, her parents only her very last statement. Rich. Rich, indeed. Stoically, Arya listened as her parents yelled while they reprimanded her. They went on at length about how her behavior
wished that all of the things that Arya could take with her were packed, which included her clothes, toiletries, iPod, and a few other miscellaneous items. No phones and no laptops. Her father packed her things into the car before they ate breakfast. Arya hadn’t spoke to Sansa since that day and Sansa didn’t want to speak to her. Truth be told, she didn’t speak to hardly anyone even Mycah and Ned, which may or may have had something to do with Sansa.

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Her mother and father drove her to the airport as Arya gloomily watched the trees pass her by.

“I know you hate us for this,” Ned began. “But, we’re doing what’s best for you.”

“No, you are doing this for Robert,” she pronounced Robert Baratheon’s name in a snide tone.

“It is a solution that benefits both parties.” Arya saw her father look at her through the rearview mirror. His eyes told her to tread lightly.

Catelyn turned around to face her daughter. “I don’t know why you are so mad at us, Arya. If Robert had his way, you would be in a detention center right now. You should be thankful to your father and I for finding a suitable alternative rather than being angry at us.”

Arya said nothing and continued to look at the swirl of trees.

Ned arranged for Arya’s bags to be delivered separately from her when they got to the airport. It would be too much for her to carry all at once. Arya only had to carry two pieces of luggage, which was fine by her.

Before her parents waved her off through the gate, they tried to hug her, but she was unresponsive. As she was about to enter the gate, she stopped and turned around.

“I’m not angry at you all for punishing me.” Arya gnawed at her lip. “I understand why you had to do it. I’m angry because after everything happened, no one ever asked me how I felt and what really happened. No one wanted to listen to me. I am angry because no matter what I have done, you all have ALWAYS listened to me. ALWAYS. And the one time I needed to be heard the most, you two were so busy trying to make Mr. Baratheon happy that you never heard me out.” Tears welled in Arya’s eyes as she spoke, and then she walked away.

“Arya,” her mother called out, but Arya ignored her as she went through the gate.

It baffled Arya that her parents never truly spoke to her. They were obsessed with how their kids were feeling and would hear their side of the story before reacting. Even if the same outcome did happen, at least, they would have heard her out.

She supposed that her parents had been under a lot of stress. The school wanted to permanently
expel her because of the severity of Joffrey’s injuries, Robert wanted to press criminal charges and have her in juvie, and all of the other countless stuff that stemmed from her fighting Joffrey. Her parents were trying to fight the expulsion, but the school did not want Arya back on their premises and neither did Robert.

When everything had went down, she had been so angry with everyone, especially her parents. After Catelyn and Ned were through reprimanding Arya, she went to her room, flopped on her bed, and screamed into her pillow. For hours, she spent her time alternating between being pacing her room and ranting to herself and crying. She had enough of people admonishing her and saying that she wasn’t behaving like a lady. It was all too much. Arya stared herself in her mirror and something within her cracked. Almost as if she was possessed, she grabbed a pair of scissors and frantically cut her hair.

The next day, as Catelyn watched her daughter descend the stairs, she said nothing, but devastation accumulated in her eyes as realized her daughter had cut her long locks.

It made Arya had temporarily happy. She figured it was the last time she was going to be happy for a long time.

As the airplane ascended above the clouds, Arya dreaded how each second brought her closer to the prison called Wholistic Core.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and feedback are appreciated. :-D Tell me what you think.
“It is my pleasure to humbly welcome you all to Wholistic Core and, hopefully, I get to know some of you all better for whatever your duration here will be. And one last note: if you looked at your itinerary, you would have seen that there is an awesome teamwork exercise next.”

In wonderment, Arya stared at the lush wilderness that surrounded her. Winterfell had trees and vegetation, but it didn’t compare to the vibrancy of the green forest she walked through. After she had arrived to Wholistic Core, the employees had immediately checked her in and showed her to her room. They said she had an hour to herself before she had to go a mandatory meeting.

As she waited for her luggage, she found a packet on her bed that was addressed to her. It said: Arry Stark of Winterfell. She figured it was a typo, but she wouldn’t correct them on it. It was their mistake, not hers. It gave her an idea as well. Arya was tired of being the fuck up and disappointment of the family. Perhaps, just for a little while, she could be someone else. Someone who didn’t have all those expectations imposed upon them and she wouldn’t be judged harshly. Perhaps, she could be who she really wanted to be without being criticized. Without a second thought, Arya put on the nametag.

After walking for a few more minutes with a small group, rows and rows of chairs came into view. It seemed as if the meeting was being held outside. Arya took a seat in the back as she waited for the rest of the chairs to fill up. In about twenty minutes, every single chair had someone sitting in them and the people around her chattered in lively tones.

It puzzled Arya how some people could just make friends so easily, when she struggled so mightily just to get her family to understand her. She found it even harder to relate to people who didn’t share her blood. Here she was, surrounded by people who most likely didn’t know each other who were talking as if they were old friends and it was the loneliest she ever felt in her life.

She may have decided to become Arry for a while, but she still had the same problems as Arya.

“Ladies and gentlemen, can I have your attention,” an authoritative voice commanded. It was stated as a question, but only out of politeness. Half of the crowd quieted down, but there were still people talking. “Ladies and gentlemen, I asked if I could have you attention,” her voice became slightly louder with a hint of menace. The rest of the crowd ceased chatter. “Hello, my name is Leslie Davis,” Leslie said in a welcoming tone as she smiled and waved at the crowd. “I am the executive director of Wholistic Core. Nice to meet everyone.”

For a brief period of time, she walked back and forth as she examined the crowd. Her eyes quickly scanned the crowd and made on the spot assessments of as many people as she could.

“Now,” she clasped her hands in front of her and held them close to her chest. “That whole repeating myself twice thing—that,” disgust laced her voice as she said that. “Will never happen again. Before we continue, I will like to briefly explain my title. Basically, my job is to oversee the program like the activities, funding, employees, and so forth. I work from inside of the program, so I am here with you all. I see what works and what does not work and I try to improve these things regardless to make
your guys’ stay here. Now, we won’t work one on one or talk much, BUT you will see me around. I always have my eyes open and my ears to the ground.”

Arya tried to get a better look at the woman that was speaking. Leslie was a black woman who seemed of average height and her hair was pulled back into a ballerina bun. Her posture was that of one who was in control and she gave off an air of confidence.

“So, what is Wholistic Core,” she began. “We aren’t like boot camps whose collective purposes is to whip you into shape, so your parents and, society at large, finds your problematic behavior ‘manageable’,” Leslie grinned as she put air quotes around the last word. “No, our goal is much deeper than that. We want to go out reach to be further than that—much more profound than ‘training’ you and ‘correcting’ your behavior. We want to get to the root of it. We want to get to to your core,” passion fell from the program director’s mouth as she spoke about Wholistic Core. “Can someone tell me the definition of the word core?”

Leslie searched the crowd and looked for volunteers. A few people raised their hands.

“Yes,” she called on someone Arya couldn’t see. The person gave their answer as Leslie gave her full attention. She called on two other people and attentively listened to them as well. “Does everyone get the gist of what core means? “The core is your very center—the foundation of who you are. It is the most ESSENTIAL part of ANYTHING,” she emphasized. “Now, I don’t want to my time spent on vocabulary and comprehension, but there are some keywords that I want everyone to understand, so we are all on the same page. Also, our age range here is from thirteen to twenty-two, so everyone’s not on the same page as far as education goes,” Leslie informed. “So, we will talk about some terms, but only for today.”

Again, the woman assessed the crowd.

“To be essential is to be the most important or necessary base of a person, thing, or idea. So, your core is the most important thing that makes you who you are. Are you guys following me?” She took a sip of water. “Holism is the idea that everything is connected and cannot exist without one another. Like all those parts that make up cars, TV’s, and phones. And if their cores are compromised, they malfunction. Some work and others don’t. But, we don’t we you all to have malfunctioning parts.” Leslie smiled warmly at the crowd. “Another part of holism is the idea that we, the whole, are greater than the sum of our parts, which means we can accomplish more working together and using our strengths together in order to achieve our desired outcome.” Pensively, she walked back and forth. In a slow manner, Leslie tapped a finger to her temple before marginally pointing towards the group of people in front of her. “But, the most effective way of accomplishing our goal is to get to the core, so that we can work together in harmony. Wholistic Core does this by striving to help individuals work on betterment by appropriately dealing with these mental and social issues AND learning how to manage them. So, why do we do this? We do we help kids of who labeled as problems kids in society? Because we care and we want to help everyone work on being the best possible person they can be. It may be foolish to some, but that’s because they don’t have a solid core.”

A bearded man with hair just above his shoulders appeared on stage. His hair was brown and he had a stern expression on his face.

“This here is Yoren,” she introduced. “I trust all of my employees, but he is my MOST trusted employees. I hired everyone here and made sure that they are specialized in whatever section that they are in. The reason Yoren is my most trust employee is because he deals with the behavior. He’s our enforcer of the behavioral code, the dean, the warden—all you can think of for a person you keeps a group of people in line, he is that.” Yoren gave Leslie a knowing look, and then stared
at the crowd again. “He’s been with the program since the beginning and only three…” she looked at him for reassurance. “Only three out of thousands have been kicked out while Yoren has been here. He gets results. And he’s a good guy. If you have any problem whatsoever: talk to him. Don’t let your issue escalate. I know that there is a lot of you, but trust me, Yoren can handle it.”

Leslie introduced other important members of the camp who would be more involved with the kids’ day in and day out. Every worker was highly praised and doted upon. They workers seemed to be nice people even Yoren.

Arya didn’t know what to make of the program, but she could tell that they put a lot of thought into it and cared for the kids. She really didn’t consider herself a problem child, but then again, she wouldn’t be here if people didn’t find her problematic. She appreciated that Leslie didn’t try and make it seem as if the kids were the issue just that they had some issues to deal with. Arya needed to work on her anger, but she didn’t think she was as much trouble as people painted her out to be.

“Any questions,” Leslie asked.

Hands flew up and Leslie answered them in a detailed and efficient manner. She smiled and joked with the kids as replied to each inquiry.

Arya wanted to ask a question, but she doubted that Leslie could see her all of the way in the back or that she would even choose her.

“Do you have a question,” a counselor asked Arya. She widened her eyes in surprise.

“Umm, yes,” she replied.

“What’s your name,” he smiled at her.

“Arya.”

He tapped a mic in his hand. “Hey, Leslie,” he called out to get her attention. “A young adult named Arya has a question.”

“Sure,” Leslie responded. “Shoot away.”

“Well,” Arya looked nervously around. “I know it’s summer, but this program doesn’t have an end date and the sheet I reader earlier says it can go through the school year. So, what about real school? Won’t this interfere with some of our academics?”

As many difficulties as Arya has with her peers, she enjoyed school a lot. She didn’t enjoy the droning on of some teachers, but the ones who cared about what they taught; she loved to be in their classes.

“Great question.” Some of the kids looked at Arya. “I take it that you didn’t get a chance to read everything in the packet we gave you?” Arya nodded in agreement. “That’s completely understandable. Wholistic Core is a very unique program in that academics are incorporated into our program and offered to those who are either in high school or chooses to take the classes. The classes that you will take here whether it is for something equivalent to a semester to a full year are transferred into compatible credits to normal high schools and even colleges. So, if you put as much in your work here like you did in your previous school, you should be just fine. We have teachers who are accredited in the secondary level schooling and even advanced placement/honors classes. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes,” Arya handed the mic back and sat down.
Another question asked Leslie how they were able to fund the program and she explained that they were funded from many branches of the government as well as big named corporations. She also noted that seventy percent of the participants had to pay and other, not as financially stable, participants were chosen on a case-by-case basis on a voucher. Leslie said that the lower class participants deserved the same opportunities as the higher-class participants. Someone else asked her why she said young adult so much rather than kids, children, teens and Leslie expounded that she treated the participants like young adults so they could think in a more mature manner. If you call someone a kid, they will act like a kid.

“Yes, sir,” Leslie pointed to another person Arya couldn’t see.

“I don’t mean any offense,” the young man began. “But, what makes you qualified to run the program?”

“No offense taken. What’s your name,” she asked politely.

“Gendry,” he stated in an unsure tone.

“Well, Gendry,” the older woman began. “I’ve been working with people my whole life. I was a camp counselor as a youth, but those were with actual kids—the ages between five and eleven,” she clarified. “I started working with young adults—ages 13 through twenty-two—when I was a high school teacher. I know eighteen is considered an adult, but I go to twenty-two because some young adults stay home longer than others and some college students are still dependent on their parents. But, back to your question, so I was a high school teacher for a while in both upper and lower class schools, I was a social worker for a very short while, but none of those worked for me and I didn’t know why,” she shrugged her shoulders. “Then one day I came to see that I didn’t want to teach students or simply get them out of bad homes, I wanted to help them better themselves. After a series of ups and downs, I came into a work opportunity with Wholistic Core. So, what I believe makes me qualified for my job is that I not only care for you all, but I have experience with working with different behavioral mindsets. Does that answer your question?” It seemed as if the kid was satisfied. “Thank you for your question.”

After a few more questions, Leslie began to wrap up the introduction/meeting section.

“It is my pleasure to humbly welcome you all to Wholistic Core and, hopefully, I get to know some of you all better for whatever your duration here will be. And one last note: if you looked at your itinerary, you would have seen that there is an awesome teamwork exercise next.”

Arya reported to her group last.

“Arry Stark,” the counselor asked.

“Yes,” Arya nodded in agreement.

“Well, Arry,” the guy began. “My name is Camden, but you can call me Cam. I am your immediate group leader, supervisor, or whatever you want to call me. We’re not big on labels here, but we do want you to know who to report to and who the bigger fish are,” he said. “As I was explaining to Gendry and Hot Pie,” he pointed to a tall, muscular guy with thick jet-black hair and piercing blue eyes and an average height, overweight guy with dark blond hair. “One of your fellow group members had an allergic reaction to something and is being taken to the hospital and the other one is experiencing extreme homesickness.”

Hot Pie laughed, “What a pussy.”
“Hey, language,” Camden admonished. “We do not tolerate foul language here and you will support and respect your fellow peers.” Hot Pie rolled his eyes. “And you will respect me.” Camden gave Hot Pie a disapproving look. “Is there any nickname you go by Arry?”

“No, Arry is fine,” she folded her arms and looked around.

“So, that is settled,” he looked at his clipboard, and then pointed at each kid as he called off their names. “You are just Arry, just Gendry, and you want to be called Hot Pie. All good?” He gave two thumbs as he held the clipboard between his forefinger and middle finger against his palm. The young adults nodded in agreement. “Well, now that we have that out of the way. Before we go on are there any questions?”

The three teens gave him a blank look.

“Well, he did say that they didn’t believe in dipping a toe in—we like to jump in.” He grinned widely at his group members. “So, with that being said, you all are going on a treasure hunt in the woods, which also doubles as a getting to know you exercise. So, while you look for your treasure, ask each other questions,” he handed sat a backpack in front of them. “Don’t skip over the getting to know you part either, it will be important later on.”

Camden further explained what they were supposed to do, and then set them on their way.

The group decided to split up the responsibilities. Hot Pie read the map and compass, Gendry carried the backpack, and Arya read the list. As they searched for their first treasure, the young adults sweated profusely. Gendry decided to give everyone their water bottles, so they could stay hydrated.

“I know he said however long it takes, it takes, but this is ridiculous,” Gendry complained before taking a big swig of his water. “It is hot as fuck out here.”

“Well, he did say that they didn’t believe in dipping a toe in,” Arya offered. She wiped her forehead in discomfort. Winterfell had summers, but they weren’t nearly this hot. The summers were mild and the winters were harsh. She could handle winter.

“I wish I could did a toe into some water,” Hot Pie supplied wistfully. “Or better yet: cannonball.”

Arya and Gendry daydreamed with him.

“How much longer do we have to go,” Gendry moved the bag around on his back.

“Much longer,” he chubby kid groaned.

“We should eat,” Gendry suggested. “I don’t know about you all, but it’s been a while since I’ve had something.” His companions agreed as they pulled the prepared food out of the bag. They quiet ate and the momentarily rested from the hike. After they finished, they resumed treasure hunting. Shortly after they began walking, they approached a creek. Excitedly, they splashed themselves in water. Gendry and Hot Pie pulled off their shirts and dipped them completely in the water.

“Thanks Gods,” Gendry moaned as he cooled his skin. He let his shirt absorb water, and then wrung it out on his skin “I was practically baking in the heat.”

“Do you know how much longer we have left,” Arya asked. “This shit is taking too long.”

“You complaining about it isn’t going to make us get there any faster,” Hot Pot admonished as he tried to copy Gendry.
"But, it shouldn’t take this long,” she practically yelled. “If this is the easy part of the program, I wonder what the hard part looks like.” Arya got out of the creek and walked over to Hot Pie, and then snatched the map from him. As she read the map and compared it to the treasure trail directions as well as the compass, her face increasingly got red. Her fury built exponentially as she exploded, “You have to be fucking kidding!” She shoved Hot Pie to the ground and he hit his head on the ground.

“Ow,” he cried.

“Hold up, hold up,” Gendry said in a placating manner as he ran over to the two of them and stood in front of Arya. “What’s the problem?”

“What’s the problem,” Arya sneered. “This dumbass can’t read a fucking map. We’ve ventured an hour and a half off trail.” A strangled noise came from her mouth as Gendry looked gobsmacked.

“That can’t be right,” Gendry said hesitantly as he took the map from here. “I don’t even know why I am reading this, I don’t know how to read a map. Are you sure?”

Arya gave him an unbelieving expression. “Am I sure?” She mirthlessly laughed. “I was practically raised in the woods. My father took my brothers and I camping all of the time.” The omittance of Sansa was intentional.

Gendry threw his hands in the air, and then exhaled loudly. “Okay, perhaps it’s not that bad. We can walk back to the trail, and then finish the treasure hunt from there,” he suggested.

“Not that bad, Gendry,” Arya glared at him. “We have an hour and a half walk to take back to the trail—the beginning of the trail. Then, who knows how long it will take to complete the teambuilding exercise. It’s that bad.” She paced back and forth. “God, you are so stupid—both of you.”

Gendry glared at her and tightened his jaw. “If we’re stupid, you are stupid as well. If you could read a map and compass, then why did you give it to Hot Pie.”

“Because he said he could read a fucking map and COMPASS!” She shouted in his face. They both turned to Hot Pie.

“My bad,” he said apologetically. “I thought that it would be easy to figure out.”

“You thought wrong,” Gendry sniped as he went back to the creek and tried to cool off one more time before they left.

Arya went to the bag and sat the map and compass down. She searched the bag for sunscreen and applied it to her skin.

“If we speed walk, do you think we can get back before dark,” Gendry asked as he put on his shirt.

The older boy could see her think in over in her mind. “Depends on what you mean by dark,” she said vaguely. “If we walk fast enough, we can get back during dusk.” Gendry ran a hand through his hair. “But, that’s if we skip the treasure hunt. We don’t know how long it will take to find each thing.”

“Do we have enough food to last us,” Hot Pie asked.

“Fuck off,” Gendry and Arya shouted simultaneously. Hot Pie grumbled and started to fiddle around next to Arya while she ignored him. They zoned him out and didn’t notice when he ran off into the creek.
“I rather just skip the treasure and get back before it’s too dark,” Gendry agreed. “We can explain to them that we got lost because a certain someone didn’t know what he was doing. Why would they send us into the woods not knowing if we could read a map or not?”

Arya sighed at the heat. “Wholistic core doesn’t do anything half-assed. I mean, they should have handed me the map, but they probably asked our parents or some shit if we knew how to read maps. They probably assumed that people who didn’t know how to read a map or compass wouldn’t pretend that they did know and gave the stuff to the people who did know how to read it in the group instead.”

“I guess,” he mildly agreed. “We should get started since time is of the essence,” he mockingly repeated the well-known phrase.

Arya wiped her forehead and turned around to pick up the map and compass.

“What’s the map?” Gendry could see that Arya was panicked as she searched for the map in the bag and around it. “I sat it on the ground with the compass on top of it, so it wouldn’t blow away.”

Hot Pie turned red.

“What did you do,” Arya screamed at him.

As the blond kid answered her, he stammered, “I just wanted to look at the compass again, so I picked it up,” he said quietly. “After I was done looking at it, I noticed the map was gone. When I looked around, I saw it floating in the creek and went after it.” He pulled a wet piece of paper out of his back pocket. Arya snatched it from him and saw that the paper was completely soaked. The ink was runny and the map was no longer usable.

“Are you fucking serious right now,” she balled up the wet paper and threw it at Hot Pie. He flinched. “Are you FUCKING serious? First you lie and say you can read something you clearly can’t and steer us an hour and a half away from the path, now you let the map get into the water and get soaked to a point where it can’t be read?” Suddenly, she began to hit him. “You’re a fucking genius, that’s what you are.”

Gendry hurried up and pulled her away from the other guy. “Calm down,”

“No,” she ripped her body away from Gendry’s. “Are you really expecting me to be calm right now?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “But, I sure as hell know that anger and beating the shit out of someone doesn’t help even if it does make you feel good.”

“Well, I don’t know what will.” She paced back and forth. “We’ve gone too far from the path, we have no map, we are extremely low on food—something else is bound to go wrong.”

The only sounds that were made were those that came from the woods. “Well, didn’t you say you was practically raised in the woods—we can hunt or catch some fish,” Hot Pie offered.

“Arry can’t catch fish with his fucking hands,” Gendry said incredulously. “Besides, we don’t have any tools to hunt with.”

“There is nothing to hunt anyways,” Arya started putting the items back in the bag. “These people aren’t going to make us go on treasure hunt around dangerous animals. Deer aren’t dangerous, but as Gendry said, we don’t have tools.”
“So, what are we going to do,” Hot Pie looked terrified. Arya wanted to scare him, but she wanted to get out of the woods even more and a panicked person was only a hindrance.

Wordlessly, Arya pointed to the creek. Gendry crinkled his eyebrows, and then raised them in realization.

“How does that help us,” Hot Pie asked as he moved out the way for Gendry to pick up the backpack.

Gendry turned to the boy and looked at him. “It helps us because it is the only creek around here. This creek runs behind our cabin area. If we follow it, it will lead up back to campgrounds.”

“And you guys were worried about us being lost.” Hot Pie smiled, and then erased it when both of him comrades shot him death glares.

Arya and Gendry walked at a faster pace than Hot Pie and refused to walk slower so he could walk beside him. They checked on him every few minutes to make sure he was still there and all right.

“So, why are you here,” Arya asked as she swatted a mosquito away.

“I don’t know,” Gendry shrugged as he stared straight ahead.

“You’re a liar,” she proclaimed.

“No, I’m not,” he denied.

“Yes, you are,” Arya said.

“You’re starting to be a pain in my ass,” Gendry remarked.

“And you’re being stupid.” She sipped her water that she gathered from the creek minutes before as she looked expectantly at Gendry.

“You know you shouldn’t insult those who are bigger that you,” Gendry looked at Arya briefly before looking to the ground as he walked.

Arya looked offended at his words. “Then I wouldn’t get to insult anyone.”

Gendry laughed.

“Honestly, I really don’t know.” He scratched the back of his neck and sighed. “My foster dad just told that I had to come to this program and that there wasn’t any negotiation. I know why he wants me here, but I don’t know why he signed me up in this specific camp. I was never a problem child.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Arya said. “You mean, young adult.”

“You’re right, I was never got into any trouble as a young adult,” he humored Arya.

“So, why does your foster dad want you to be here,” she inquired.

“He claimed that it was a good opportunity for me.” Gendry turned his head to check on Hot Pie. “Some shit about expanding horizons.” Arya slightly laughed.

“My dad said the same thing when we moved last year,” Arya could relate to being told what would be best for us. “I don’t mean to sound intrusive, but why didn’t you grow up with your parents?”
“Well, I don’t know who my dad is.” Gendry and Arya stopped so Hot Pie could catch up. He had fallen somewhat behind. “And my mom died when I was younger. All I remember about her is that she had blond hair and worked at a bar. I was in and out of foster homes before I met my foster father when I was twelve.”

“How old are you now?” They began to walk again when Hot Pit was ten feet behind them.

“Twenty-one.” The sun started setting, which lessen the intensity of the heat. “And you?”

“Fourteen,” she answered.

“So, what about you?” He asked nonchalantly.

“What about me?” Arya took a bit of her granola bar as she looked at him.

“Why are you pretending to be a boy,” he cut straight to the point.

“I’m not pretending to be a boy,” she contradicted. “I am one.”

“No you’re not,” he grinned.

“Yes, I am,” she defended.

“Then whip out your cock and take a piss,” he demanded. “I’m not stupid not like the others, you know.”

“No you’re stupider,” she insulted.

Gendry laughed and held onto the book bag straps tighter. “Come on, I’m waiting.”

Arya glared at him. “Fine, I’m a girl.”

The older boy shook his head at his victory. Upon first glance, Gendry thought that Arya was a boy, until they spent the rest of the day together. She certainly had the look. Her hair was styled like his—unkempt and very short. She wore a regular gray t-shirt, cargo shorts, and boots. He couldn’t determine if her voice was high because Arry hadn’t hit puberty yet or if it was because Arry’s genes were really XX. It was certain mannerisms and further inspection of her physical characteristics that tipped him off.

“Why do you want to be a boy?” Arya rolled her eyes at him question.

“I don’t want to be a boy,” she declared and Gendry looked her up and down before meeting her eyes again to make a point. “Not in that way. I like who I am and what I am, but girls don’t get the same freedoms as guys, you know? Everything we do gets judged, criticized, and torn apart and I’m so fucking tired of it.”

“If it’s any consolation, you’re the most kick ass girl I’ve met so far,” Gendry offered. Arya smiled in response. “Do you want this to be our little secret?”

“I don’t care—it’s not a big deal,” she shrugged.

“So, if you’re name isn’t Arry, then what is it?” Gendry handed Arya the shirt he had took back off earlier to wipe her face. She dipped it in the creek as the spoke and Gendry stopped and waited for her to finish.

As she wrung the shirt out, she spoke, “It’s Arya Stark.” She got up and looked at Gendry as a huge
smile enveloped his face and he laughed.

“You’re the girl that beat the shit out of that Joffrey Baratheon kid,” his eyes widened as he recognized who she was. “Holy shit. You’re my hero—I hate that little shit.”

Arya proudly grinned. “How do you know Joffrey?”

“The question is: who doesn’t know Joffrey,” he was still laughing about Joffrey getting beat up. “Well, at least, anyone who lives in King’s Landing. He was always throwing his weight around because of who his father is. He came to my foster dad’s shop once expecting to get his car fixed for free, and then throwing money at him to prove how ‘superior’ he was after he was told he had to pay.” Gendry looked to be disgusted by the last part.

“He really is a fuckface and that’s being nice,” Arya wiped herself with the shirt again, and then handed it back to Gendry.

“Too nice,” he agreed. “So, you being Arya Stark and going to school with Joffrey means that your dad is Robert Baratheon’s new right hand man Eddard Stark?”

“Yup.” Arya believed that they were getting close to their destination.

“If we were to compare this to ancient Westeros, you would be considered a lady,” Gendry figured. “Should I be calling you my lady?” Arya could tell he was joking, but she didn’t find it funny.

“Shut up,” she pushed Gendry as he laughed.

“As my lady commands,” he bowed and Arya pushed him so hard that he fell over, but it only made Gendry laugh even harder.

An hour later, Gendry and Arya had slowed down enough for Hot Pie to join them and Arya deduced that they were minutes away from the cabins. Arya’s guess proved to be correct as they walked by the cabins to go check in with their group leader. They explained what happened and were exempted from their previous activity and the following one.

Arya ate dinner and went to bed. It may have not been the longest and most stressful day in her life, but she was tired nevertheless.

Weeks had passed and she was getting along with Gendry and Hot Pie just great, but especially Gendry. They developed instant banter with one another and could anticipate the each other’s wants and needs. Mycah was her best friend, but this was different. Arya felt like she was truly herself around him. Everything everyone else judged her for, Gendry embraced. He never made her feel ashamed to be who she was or the things she liked.

When there was a break or their activities for the day was done, they would sit and talk to each other for hours on end. Sometimes they would go exploring and talk to each other. Often, Arya would hang out by the creek or in the rec room. They initially tried to hang out in each other’s rooms, but were told that it was inappropriate.

“We should go swimming,” Arya looked at the lake longing as they carried wood for the bon fire that night.

“I don’t know how to swim,” Gendry mentioned.

“I’ll teach you,” his friend offered. “It’s easy once you get the basics down.”
The following Saturday, Arya took Gendry to the lake and walked him into water that was deep enough to swim around, but shallow enough where he wouldn’t drip. She explained to do with his hands, legs, head, and how to breathe.

“I’m going to stop if you keep laughing at me,” Gendry warned as he splashed water at her.

“Stop being such a baby,” she rolled her eyes and swam backwards as she watched Gendry. “If you didn’t look so stupid as you swam, I wouldn’t be laughing. Stop giving me material and start following my directions.”

Gendry swam out a little further and pulled her under the water.

“Stop it, you big doofus,” she struggled in Gendry’s strong arms, but he wouldn’t let her go.

“Words hurt, you know,” Gendry said as he pulled her close. His expression was mischievous. “Say you’re sorry.”

“I’m not sorry,” Arya stuck her tongue out.

“Okay, you asked for it.” Gendry was about to pull her back down under the water again when she yielded.

“Okay, okay,” she said quickly. “I’m sorry.” Arya gave him a hug. “That you are such a bad swimmer.”

“You know what, you little twerp,” Arya playful screams was muted by the water.

Later on, Hot Pie asked why they didn’t ask him to come.

On Monday, they had to build a tower out of furniture. It had to be a certain height and it had to stand longer than a minute.

As Hot Pie read the directions, he stammered. Gendry went over and snatched the paper from him and began to read. He had trouble as well.

“What,” Arya said as she walked over. “You two can’t read or something?”

After she took the paper and looked down to read it, she noticed Gendry’s silence. Arya looked up at him and noticed he was bright red.

“Gendry…”

“I can read,” he began. “It’s just I have a problem with the big words is all.” Gendry refused to look at Arya out of embarrassment. “I lived in the poorest part of King’s Landing called Flea Bottom,” he said quietly. “You either went to school or you didn’t, but going to school meant you couldn’t help your family make money, which meant that you didn’t eat. I liked going to school, but I liked eating more, so I dropped out in the eighth grade. I had to help my foster dad.”

Arya opened her mouth, but Gendry stopped her.

“Don’t apologize to me,” he said as he stared at his shoes. “I don’t want it.” Arya knew that he wasn’t upset or mad at her, but she felt terrible.

“Gendry,” she began again.

“And don’t stop calling me stupid or idiot and anything else that insults my intelligence.” He finally
looked Arya in the eyes. “I know you don’t say that to me because you mean it—you call everyone stupid, but me more so than others because you like me the most out of everybody.” He thought about what he said for a moment. “Well, you don’t like everyone you insult and call stupid, but I’m pretty sure that you like me. I know you consider me a friend.”

“Gendry, I’m glad that you finally admitted how stupid you are,” Arya gave him a tightlipped smile. She read the directions and told them what to do. After they finished the activity, she, Gendry, and Hot Pie walked to the lake together to swim. Gendry was doing way better than he did on Saturday. “I love books.”

“You do,” Gendry said slowly. He was curious as to why she made her remark.

“Yeah,” she replied. Arya dipped her head in the water, and then brought it back above the surface. “I used to be involved in a lot of online book clubs and now I don’t have anyone else to talk to. I don’t like the people here besides you and Hot Pie. I have all these books in my room and it would be nice to discuss them with people that I like.”

“Sure,” Gendry agreed. He was too choked with emotion to say anything more.

The summer was long and hot and when the end neared, it passed by too soon for Arya. Her activities got cut short for her class time, which wasn’t the usual school setup like going from what class to the other. There were break in between and some were longer than others. She figured it resembled the class schedule of some college kids. The learning was very personalized and one on one since there weren’t that many student. Arya enjoyed the teachers and the method in which they taught.

“Ugh,” Gendry groaned in frustration as he slammed his book shut. Arya looked up and rolled her eyes.

“What is your problem?” She didn’t look at Gendry as she spoke to him.

“That book is too hard,” he declared and rested his hands in his hair.

“So, you aren’t going to finish it, so we can discuss it later on?” Grey eyes met blue eyes.

“Cut the bullshit, Arya,” Gendry said angrily. “I don’t fucking understand this shit—it’s too hard.”

“Yeah, it’s hard,” Arya irritably agreed. “But, you complaining about it will only make it harder. Reading is not just about learning the words; it’s about challenging yourself and expanding your vocabulary. I know you didn’t think you were just going to pick up a book and instantly know the words.”

“I want to be a mechanic—I don’t need to know this shit. I know all of the words I need to know.” His expression softened.

“You really think I’m smart enough to run my own business?” He folded his arms and looked at the table in front of him.

“You don’t have bigger dreams than being just some mechanic?” Arya sat her pencil down. “There’s nothing wrong with that, but you can be a mechanic AND own your own business. You can be your own boss.”

“Of course, stupid,” she picked up her pencil again.

Arya glared at him, until he opened his book and continued to read.
“Finish the chapter, and then go over your vocabulary list,” she instructed. “Hot Pie should be here in ten minutes and we’re going to have a spelling test when he gets here.”

“Do I get a cookie if I get an A,” Gendry smiled.

“Yup, and you get two if you get an A plus.” The younger girl wiggled her eyebrows.

“Oh,” he leaned closer to his friend.

“I know, right,” she mimicked his actions. “I’m such a nice person.” Gendry shook his head in agreement. “Now, get back to work and worry about cookies later.”

Gendry read in silence and wrote down words he didn’t know or understand as Arya taught him when they first began to work together. Arya completed one of her school assignments just as Hot Pie entered the room.

With the motivation of cookies, Gendry aced his test. Hot Pie missed one, but Arya offered to give him both.

“No,” Gendry said as he stared in offense. “You’re supposed to be the hardnosed teacher—all or nothing. He is supposed get one hundred percent for both cookies like I did. And it’s not like he doesn’t have any cookies—he has one.”

“He’s right, Hot Pie,” Arya shrugged. “Better luck next time.” Hot Pie glared at Gendry who happily ate both of his cookies.

Gendry and Hot Pie were taking reading lessons from her because they were too embarrassed to ask the people in the program to enroll them in classes. They were already behind most of the other kids in learning since Gendry dropped out before his eighth grade year and Hot Pie dropped out when he was in sixth grade. Also, they were older as well. In addition to Gendry being 21, Hot Pie was 19. Neither one was expecting a full education, but they wanted to be better readers.

“Arya, what is your dream job,” Gendry asked as he licked his fingers.

“It’s nothing flashy like being a movie star or anything,” Arya bit into her own cookie. “I want to be a cop.”

“Really,” Hot Pie blurted out.

“Yes, really,” she replied. “They put their lives on the line to protect people. I’ve always wanted to be one of them every since I was a little girl.”

“Well, I know that I’ll be safer with you on the streets,” Gendry warmly smiled at her as reached his hand across the table to squeeze her hand. “Officer Arya.”

For the first time in Arya’s life, she blushed.

“Where are you going to go whenever you leave here,” Gendry asked as he walked Arya back to her cabin. “You know, since you’ve been expelled from your last school in all.” The tall boy elbowed her jokingly.

“Braavos,” she answered. “The culture is way more relaxed and the education is great from what my parents tell me. It’ll give me something different from Winterfell and better than King’s Landing.”

“Will you miss being away from your parents that long?” For a moment, the walked in silence before
Arya responded.

“Yeah, but I have to learn to live on my own eventually.” Gendry seemed to give her words some consideration.

Gendry pulled her into a bear hug after they approached her room. “Goodnight, Arya.”

“Goodnight, Gendry.” She waved as he walked backwards and waved back at her.

“My mistake,” he said a little loudly. “I meant, officer Arya.”

Arya didn’t tear her eyes away from Gendry even as his form became smaller and smaller. When he disappeared, she wrapped her arms around her body and walked into her cabin.
It was not with a bang, but rather a whimper that Arya realized she was in love with Gendry. How else could she explain the flutter in her stomach as she watched him ungraciously devoured the cookies while crumbs gathered around his mouth? She thought it was the most amazing thing she had ever seen. Her chest tightened and her throat became dry.

Arya landed on her feet, and then unhooked the ropes from around her body before taking off her helmet. Soon afterwards, she found her bottle of water and gulped the whole thing down in no time as she monitored Gendry descending the rock.

“You have about twenty more feet, Gendry,” she projected to him. To encourage her friend, Arya began to clap and shout for him. “Woo!”

Gendry laughed, and then turned to face her. “Shut up. You’re distracting me.”

The shouting stopped, but Arya continued to clap. When Gendry reached the bottom, she gave him his water. Gendry unhooked himself and took off his helmet as he poured water on his body. Entranced by what she saw, Arya’s eyes followed the water as it sluiced his skin. The water made his chiseled body glisten as it moved across his torso. Gendry began to stretch his muscles as Arya notice how taut and prominent they were. He wore his shorts low on his waist and if they went down any further…Arya swallowed slowly.

Arya pulled her gaze away from Gendry’s body and started putting items into a small backpack.

“Come on,” she said as she put the backpack straps on her shoulder.

Gendry packed his things as well. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“I believe we are in the lead,” Arya announced as she looked around the forest. They were on an obstacle course through the woods and all of the young adults had been paired off. Of course, Arya and Gendry chose to be partners. Gendry looked at the map and turned at Arya.

As he spoke to her, he pointed to the paper, “This is the last place we have to go before we finish,” he leaned over Arya’s shoulder to look at the map as well.

Arya moved away from him ever so slightly, and then discussed strategy with him. “We should run the rest of the way,” she thought aloud. “We’ll get to the boat quicker and we can use that extra time to rest when we row across the lake if need be.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Gendry concurred. “Pine trail will be the best route to take. Mostly everyone will avoid it because of the incline and rough surface.”

The two went about their way as they ran to the lake taking Pine trail. Gendry had longer legs than Arya, but she could keep on with him. They were careful as they ran over the rocky surface and increased their stride when they approached the incline. Within 25 minutes, the lake appeared. Hurriedly, Arya and Gendry got into the boat and didn’t bother to take their bags off as they rowed
away quickly.

When they reached the sand, they jumped out of the boat and ran to the finished line. Excitedly, Arya and Gendry gave each other a high five before tightly hugging one another.

“Why does it surprise me that you two finished first,” said a camp counselor named Francine. “It is almost unfair the way you two dominate these challenges.”

“I know, right,” Camden agreed. “If we didn’t split you two up from time to time, you would always win them.”

Arya and Gendry were notorious for how well they worked together. When they were paired, they always finished first and collected whatever prizes were given. If they were split up, they interchangeably finished one and second and sometimes third, but never any lower than that.

“We do always win the challenges when you guys don’t split us up,” Arya smirked as she stretched out her body. She went to lie down on the ground and Gendry went over to help her. He straddled her right leg while keeping her left straight and slowly pushing it towards her body. “Harder,” she demanded in a soft tone.

“I will once you relax,” Arya groaned when he pushed her leg further back. “Gods, I’m trying to loosen you up because you are so tense.”

“No,” she refuted. “You’re afraid to break me because I’m so small. I can handle you, Gendry. We’ve done this a thousand times.”

“I know,” Gendry chuckled. “It’s easy to forget how flexible you are.” He let Arya’s leg rest on his shoulder for a moment, before laying it on the ground and moving to stretch her other leg.

“Then stop forgetting,” she slapped his on the arm. “You’re the only one who knows how to stretch me out properly when you aren’t taking it easy on me. Just because you are big, doesn’t mean I can’t handle you.”

“I take it easy on you at first, so you can handle me when I stretch your muscles,” Gendry said. “We both know how sore you get every time I am done with you.”

“Have you ever heard me complain?” Gendry nodded no. “Then, stop taking it easy on me.”

Camden started choking on his drink as Francine gave them a weird look.

“What?” Arya looked at Francine and the girl blushed embarrassedly before turning away.

“What?” Arya looked at Francine and the girl blushed embarrassedly before turning away.

“Nothing,” she lied as a looked between her and Camden was exchanged.

After she was done being stretched by Gendry, and then returned the favor, Arya went to go take a shower. The water was steaming hot and she was in heaven. An abundance of soap and shampoo was lathered on her skin and in her hair and she washed all of the grime away.

Blissfully, she lay down on her stomach as she sniffed the fresh laundry after she got out of her shower. The clothes were so warm and smelled so nice. She couldn’t imagine anything better at the moment—well, she could imagine something better. Quickly, the Stark girl threw on some clothes and went to look for Gendry.

He was walking to the cafeteria when Arya decided to sneak up on him and give him a hug. From time to time, Gendry would tell her how stealthy she was and that she moved without making noise.
As Arya got closer and closer to him, a smile broke out on her face and she quickened her pace. When she was directly behind him, she wrapped her arms around Gendry and hugged him from behind.

“Gotcha, Gendry,” she shouted. Gendry jumped in her arms and then tore Arya’s arms from his body before putting space between them.

“Seven Hells, Arya,” Gendry ran a hand through his hair.

“Did I scare you?” She teased as she grinned broadly.

“No,” he answered.

“Yes, I did,” Arya stuck her tongue out. “If I didn’t you wouldn’t have jumped.”

“That’s not why I jumped,” the young man refuted.

“Then why?” She crossed her arms and waited for him answer so she could shoot it down.

“It’s nothing,” he denied as he tried to walk away, but Arya caught his arm. Although he was stronger than his friend, he chose not to pull away.

“It is something,” she contradicted. “Tell me what it is.”

Gendry struggled to find the words. “You’re different,” he provided vaguely.

“You think I’ve changed.” Arya crossed her arms. “That’s why you don’t want me to touch you.”

“Yes, you’ve changed.” Gendry smiled in relief not knowing they were having two different conversations. “That’s why I jumped.”

“I’m confused; you were acting all normal and like we were best friends earlier and now you are telling me that I’ve changed and not to touch you,” Arya shouted angrily. Gendry’s eyes widened at the misunderstanding.

“NO, that not what I meant,” he immediately denied. “You still are my best friend—that hasn’t changed.”

“Then what in the seven hells are you talking about?” Arya held her hands out in front of her in confusion.

“Why do you have to make this so hard!” Gendry paced back and forth.

“You’re making this hard,” she said incredulously.

“Arya,” he called for her attention. Gendry snapped his fingers and pointed two of them to his eyes for Arya to follow. “You’ve changed,” he said quietly as he eyes scanned her and his hand gestured towards her body.

Arya had been at Wholistic Core for a year and she looked different than when she first got there. Rather than her hair being an inch short, it now came to her chin and was styled in a bob. She was slightly taller, but her athletic physique remained and complemented her figure. Arya’s face had filled out some, but not too much. Most importantly, she went from barely having any breast to having a b cup. Her eyes had widened at the implication.
“I love being your friend,” Gendry began. “But, it’s distracting when you touch me, especially when you hug be from behind and your—you know—is on my back.”

Arya didn’t know what to say. “I don’t touch you that much,” she denied.

“Uh, yeah, you do,” he contradicted. “But, usually, I’m prepared for it. And you lay on be a lot when we are alone. I really don’t mind, but it can be a distraction sometimes. I know you don’t try to have that impact on me and I try not to take it that way, but I’m still a guy, so my body is going to respond.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I guess I wouldn’t notice so much if you still wore your old clothes.”

By her fifteenth birthday, Arya had outgrown the clothes she arrived with. When she went shopping, it was clear that her taste had changed as well. Her new items weren’t overly feminine, but they were did accentuate her features in a favorable way. She now wore fitted shirts and tank tops. Her shorts hugged her skinned comfortably and were mid thigh. Her pants no longer hid her figure, but highlighted it.

It was a few days after their conversation that Arya understood why some guys started to treat her different. They would try to flirt with her and find reasons to get her alone. Some guys gave her flowers by asking her in a nonchalant way if she wanted them. Others would give her chocolate and would say that they had extra and she could have it if she wanted it. Then there were those who ‘let’ her win, but everyone knew the truth about the last part. Arya began to realize that some of these guys were trying to woo her.

One even tried to kiss her.

Gendry watched as Arya ranted about the brave boy who dared to steal a kiss from Arya.

“Can you believe the nerve of him,” Arya harshly whispered.

Her friend shook his head no in amusement.

“It’s not funny, Gendry.” It infuriated Arya that someone would try to kiss her without her consent. She wasn’t even interested in dating, kissing, or anything else. If she wanted to kiss someone, she would let him know.

“Yes, it is,” he grinned at her while he sprawled across the loveseat.

Daggers were shot his way from Arya’s eyes. “It’s not like I’m pretty either. The only reason guys would want to kiss an ugly girl is to persuade to have sex.”

“Excuse me?” There was a deep frown on Gendry’s face. “Arya, I don’t know told you that you were ugly, but they are flat out wrong.”

“How about the whole entire city of Winterfell?” She sat on her bed, and then fell back.

“Then the whole entire of city Winterfell is wrong,” he said adamantly.

“Gendry, you don’t have to defend me because you are my friend,” she supplied. “It’s nice that you would say that to make me feel better, but it doesn’t help. I’m ugly and I know it.”

Gendry got up off of the couch and sat next to Arya on her bed. He leaned over her as each arm was placed on a side of her body and said, “I can say with absolute certainty that even without looking at your body, your face is very attractive.”
“Gendry,” she groaned. Arya didn’t want to hear this anymore.

“You remember what you told me about that Ned guy,” he reminded. “That was before you… developed. And he wanted to kiss you.”

“That was because we were drinking—he thought I was drunk,” she retorted.

“You have an answer for everything.” Gendry shook his head as Arya’s grin.

“Okay,” she sighed. “Even if guys find me attractive, that doesn’t give them the right to put their mouths on me.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t,” he agreed. Arya rubbed his arms as she looked up at her best friend. “He was wrong for that.”

“I’ve never thought about my first kiss, but I don’t want it to be with some random guy who I don’t even like.” In thought, Arya licked her lips.

“I agree,” he murmured.

Gendry didn’t like the look in Arya’s eyes when her gaze fell upon him.

“What?” He asked suspiciously.

“Kiss me,” she grinned.

“No.” Gendry tried to get up, but Arya held on tight to him.

“Come on, Gendry, I like you and you like me,” she supplied.

“As friends,” he nearly shouted.

Arya glared at him. “Quiet down,” she mouthed. Gendry wasn’t supposed to be in her room. But, for the last few months, they’ve been sneaking into each other’s rooms at night to hangout. “And who cares if it’s just friends. This is my first kiss—not yours. If I want it to be with a friend, so some guy I don’t even like isn’t the first, then that is my choice. You already had your first kiss with someone you wanted it to be and I want mine to be with you.”

A telltale blush crept upon Gendry’s face.

“No,” Arya said in shock. “You’ve never been kissed.”

“There was never a girl I wanted to kiss,” he said before giving the thought further consideration. “I mean, there were a few, but I didn’t have a chance.”

“So, that means…” Arya raised her eyebrows.

“It means that I never had sex either,” Gendry mumbled as he hung his head in embarrassment.

Arya propped herself up on her elbows. “Gendry,” she grabbed his face and forced him to look at her before running her fingers through his hair. “I’m your best friend; I’m not going to judge you for not having sex at a certain age.” She hugged him, and then made her weight pull Gendry to the bed. She whispered in his ear, “Let me be your first kiss—it’s better than someone you don’t like.”

Gendry turned to face her. “Arya, I’m twenty-two and you are fifteen. I’m seven years older than you. That’s illegal.”
“No, you are six and a half years older than me,” she corrected before arguing, “And who cares if we don’t tell anyone. I’m not being taken advantaged of and it is just a kiss between two friends. Why do you have to be a baby about this?”

A loud exhaled was released into the air as Arya saw defeat in Gendry’s eyes. “Fine.”

In anticipation, Arya’s licked her lips and reached for Gendry. Gendry’s forearm rested above her head as he sat the other one next to Arya’s hip. Arya’s breathing slowed in anticipation.

He placed a quick peck on her mouth.

“That’s not a kiss,” Arya cried in disbelief. “That’s how you would kiss your family.”

Gendry groaned and descended upon her mouth again as Arya grabbed his head with one hand and his hip with another. Without him realizing it, she had maneuvered her leg under his body to cradle his hips. Experimentally, the pair of lips brushed against one another. Arya noticed how Gendry’s goatee slightly tickled her face. He had started to grow it recently to try something new. At first, she didn’t like it, but it grew on her and she liked how it felt against her skin.

The kiss went on longer than expected as they unintentionally and, in a minuscule fashion, began to grind their hips against one another. Arya’s hands slipped under his shirt and caressed his back as Gendry brought her closer to his body. As he did this, Arya could feel his hardened manhood rub against her clothed crouch and moaned in his mouth in response. Arya then slipped her tongue down his throat and Gendry opened his mouth wider to accept the intrusion.

They rolled over so that she was on top. Arya pulled at her shirt and Gendry quickly assisted her of divesting the clothing. For a moment, he played with her bra straps and Arya’s stomach fluttered. Soon afterward, his shirt followed hers to the floor. Their mouths collided in frenzy as Arya pushed Gendry on the bed, and then tore her lips away from his. Once, then twice she gave Gendry a peck before making a trail of kisses down his torso. A hot tongue swirled around his belly button as Arya undid his pants. It was when he lifted his hips to helped her pull down his shorts that Gendry realized that they had gone too far. Abruptly, he sat up and pushed Arya off of him unto the bed, and then stood up.

In shame, Gendry looked at the floor and rubbed his forehead.

“Gendry,” Arya called his name.

“You act so mature,” he began. “It’s hard to believe you’re fifteen sometimes.” Gendry looked at Arya and saw that her lips were swollen and her hair was disheveled. “This is not happening again.”

“I know,” Arya whispered. “It was a one time thing.”

“Yeah, one time thing,” he repeated as he grabbed his shirt before bolting out of her room.

The next day as Hot Pie approached them, Arya said. “Thanks.”

Gendry knew what she was referring. “Don’t mention it.” Arya read the double meaning.

For the longest, Arya tried to ignore it, but there had been a definite shift in her the night she and Gendry had kissed. They didn’t acknowledge what happened between them the day after she thanked him, but everything felt different between them—more heightened. On the outside, they seemed to be the same Arya and Gendry, but on the inside, she was yearning something fierce. What for, exactly? Arya had no clue, but it had been awakened within her when she and Gendry made out. She wondered if that is what made kissing so great. It must have been why people enjoyed kissing so
much she figured.

If she had just been left to her thoughts about their kiss, Arya could have suppressed whatever it was that she was yearning, whatever it was that she was craving, but it wasn’t just the thoughts. She would have these vivid dreams and wake up sweating and her panties had been moist. There was an aching between her legs and she knew her dreams had not been nightmares.

Weeks had passed as she wrecked her brain to remember her dreams. What was it that she dreamed about that had her so aroused? What made her sweat so profusely that her clothes stuck to her skin? Who was she dreaming about that made her involuntarily grind against her bed as she slept in order to release friction?

Suddenly, it came to her as if she should have known all along. Arya was walking by herself back to her cabin when big, strong arms encircled her. “Gotcha, Arya,” Gendry said in her ear.

Arya stilled as if a jolt of lightening struck her body. The sensation Gendry stirred within her from his touch with the same as what she felt when she woke up from her dreams. Like floodgates, all of the dreams she struggled to remember came rushing to her. She became overwhelmed by everything: Gendry touching her, the night that they had kissed, and the vivid, sexual dreams that flowed within her head.

Although she told Gendry everything, she couldn’t talk to him about this.

“What is it you want to talk with me about, Arya,” the camp’s psychologist Gina asked her. Arya was in her mandatory therapy session that every camper had to go to. Arya really liked Gina. It may have been her job, but Gina seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say and was very supportive.

Arya rubbed her hands together. “I’ve been having dreams.”

“Yes, I remember,” she recalled as she pulled out her notepad. “Have you figured out what they are about yet?”

“They’re sex dreams,” Arya blushed embarrassedly. “I never told you this, but after I would wake up, my clothes would be wet and my underwear would be…moist.”

“Oh,” Gina said in intrigue. “If you would have told me these details a little sooner, I would have suggested it then,” she supplied, and then raised her eyebrow. “But, you knew that. You intentionally kept it a secret from me. You are talking to me about this for another reason. So, this is not about the type of dreams you are having, but who you are having them about.”

Gina took a sip of water, and then crossed her legs.

“Is it Gendry?” She implored as she gauged Arya’s body language and reaction.

“How did you know?” Arya asked in shock.

“Well, for starters, you spend a great deal of time around Gendry. Hot Pie is a close second, but you two aren’t nearly as close or inseparable as you are with Gendry,” she said as a way of explanation. “In addition, he has a great body.” Arya stared at her in surprise. “What? Just because I am older and married doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate a nice body,” Gina shrugged. “Besides, I’m not elderly and bedridden, I’m only thirty-seven. It’s hard not to notice Gendry when he walks around shirtless as much as possible. It is easy to see why you may have sexual dreams about him, especially considering you spend so much time with him. It’s natural.”
Arya looked mortified.

“So, what are you saying?” The young adult bit her lip as she stared at her therapist.

“What do you think I am saying,” she genuinely asked.

“I don’t know.” Arya roughly rubbed at her face. “Does this mean that I like him?”

Gina chuckled. “Do you?”

“No,” she said. “But, I keep having these sex dreams about him, so that must mean something.”

“Arya,” Gina got up and sat next to her patient. “Young adults around your age start to develop sexual desires. Some develop at a younger age. But, you spent most of your life trying to be asexual in order to suppress any desires you may possess.” Arya stared at her curiously. “So, you are at this age when you sexual desires have started to manifest and you are around this really HOT guy who takes his shirt off ALL of the time. He pays attention to you and likes being around you. Gendry is not related to you as well. Your sexual attraction to him is normal.”

“What do the dreams mean, then,” Arya inquired.

Slowly, Gina shrugged. “Sometimes they don’t mean anything, they just are,” she mentioned. “Dreams have many functions. Everyone assumes that all dreams have deeper meanings, but truth be told, scientists don’t really know the purpose of dreams. I do believe that some dreams have deeper meaning, but that doesn’t mean that all or most do. There are some who believe we dream as a response to external stimuli. Another theory is that we dream to clean up clutter in our mind. There’s one that say dreams are a form of psychotherapy.” Gina crossed her legs and leaned back into the cushion. “There are hundreds and thousands of theories as to why we dream, BUT in my professional opinion, your subconscious is trying to work through your newly developed sexual desires. You are dreaming about Gendry because one: he’s attractive and two: even in your dreams you trust him with something so personal to you. Your mind finds him a safe option to help you explore these desires.” She chuckled to herself. “One time I had a sex dream about Donald Trump. Gods know that I am not attracted nor do I want to date that man. See what I mean?”

“That makes sense,” Arya agreed.

“Does it?” The therapist faced her patient.

“I think so,” she sounded unsure.

“Do you want my honest opinion?”

“I thought you just gave me your honest opinion?” Gina smiled at her as she tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

“I gave you my honest opinion about the information I was given,” the woman clarified. “But, I want to give you my honest opinion about what you haven’t.”

“Okay,” Arya said as she positioned her body to face the therapist.

“You like Gendry,” she stated simply.

Arya balked. “But, you just said I didn’t.”

“No,” a finger was waved at Arya. “I asked if you had feelings for him, and then explained that just
because you have sex dreams about someone doesn’t mean that you have romantic feelings for them.” Arya rolled her eyes at the technicality, but Gina brushed off the gesture. “It’s hard for you to admit you like him. You think having ‘girly’ feelings by having crushes on guys and wanting them in a sexual way makes you just like Sansa, but it doesn’t. It makes you human. You’re afraid of what it means, so you try to suppress these new, exciting feelings. But, at the same time, it’s Gendry—he understands you in ways that no one ever had. So, you keep trying to make your dreams mean something. In fact, you hope they do. And here comes the inevitable but,” she grabbed Arya’s hand and squeezed it. “He’s too old for you. Perhaps not emotionally, but legally speaking, you two cannot date.”

The young adult stared at her lap before looking at Gina.

For the rest of the session, they uttered not another word about Gendry.

A ball bounced loudly as Hot Pie walked back and forth.

“What’s bothering, Arya?” He shot the ball and it missed the rim terribly. At a sluggish pace, he went to go run after the ball.

“Nothing,” she denied as she sat and watched Hot Pie and his terrible basketball skills. Arya supposed he had an excuse since he never played sports until he got here. At Flea Bottom, he always found a way out of playing sports in school.

“You’re lying,” he stated before attempted another shot that missed the rim again.

“No, I’m not,” Arya yelled. “Hot Pie, aim for the square on the backboard. You’ll never make a shot if you don’t.”

After a few attempts, Hot Pie began to make a couple of baskets per Arya’s suggestion. Excitedly, he continued to throw the ball at the backboard and Arya laughed at her friend’s enthusiasm.

“So, what’s bothering you,” he prodded after he made his last shot and sat next to her.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Hot Pie tossed the basketball in his hands, and then gripped it tightly.

“I know that I’m not as close as you as Gendry,” he began. Arya’s stomach dropped at the mention of Gendry’s name. “But, you can talk to me if something is wrong. You’re a good person, Arya. You do have a temper, but you are nice and I don’t like to see you down.”

“Thanks, Hot Pie,” Arya patted her friend’s shoulder. “I just don’t want to talk about it—not even with Gendry.”

“Okay,” he left it alone, but sat beside her as a way of support.

By dinnertime, Arya had suppressed her therapy session so deep; she could swear it was if she never saw Gina that day.

After they ate, the three of them went to the creek and smoked cigarettes. Well, Arya and Gendry smoked as Hot Pie chilled with them. Arya and Gendry had a donut-blowing contest, which Gendry was winning. She would say that she wasn’t winning because her heart wasn’t in it, but that would be a lie.

Deeply, Arya inhaled her cigarette as she walked along a log as if it were a balance beam. Gendry skipped rocks along the water as if he was in competition with someone. It may have been a symptom of hanging around Arya for too long. Everything was a competition with her.
“I’m leaving next week,” Hot Pie announced. Both Gendry and Arya whipped their heads to look at him simultaneously spoke.


“Why,” Arya asked.

“You know when we visited the ‘Inn of the Kneeling Man’?” He asked and his friends shook their heads. “Well, they were really impressed with my cooking and asked if I could come back with and offered a paid internship. They would teach me everything I need to know and will help me with school too.”

“That’s sounds great,” Gendry sounded really happy for Hot Pie.

“Good for you,” Arya said as she went over to Hot Pie and hugged him. It wasn’t in her nature to hug, but she knew that it meant a lot to her friend.

“Thanks, you guys,” Hot Pie was touched by their support. “I’m going to really miss the both of you.”

“We’ll miss you too, buddy,” Gendry patted the shorter guy on the back, and then pulled him into a hug.

For the next few days, Arya and Gendry spent their time doing whatever Hot Pie wanted to do. It was the best time of his life. They water skied, went on a daytime camping trip, played dodge ball, and they gathered a big group of kids and played hide and go seek at night.

“I know you are going to do well, Hot Pie.” Hot Pie pulled Gendry into a hug and his friend tightened his arms around him. Gendry tightened his grip as well. “I meant it when I said Arya and I will miss you.”

“I know,” as Hot Pie pulled away, he wiped the stray tears that fell from his eyes.

“Yeah, it definitely won’t be the same with you,” Arya commented before he pulled her into a bear hug. Softly, she placed a chaste kiss on his cheek. Hot Pie’s face turned violently red.

Even though Hot Pie had platonic feelings for Arya. It was his first time being kissed by a girl—even if it had been on the cheek.

“Hot Pie, it’s not the big of a deal, it was just a kiss,” Arya playfully shoved his shoulder.

“Yeah, I know,” he stammered.

Caught up in his own thoughts, Hot Pie missed the meaningful look shared between Arya and Gendry.

“Oh,” Hot Pie put his backpack on the ground, and then pulled out something wrapped in aluminum foil. “Duncan let me make this last night—it’s taste the best when it is hot.”

Arya opened the aluminum foil and some a dessert of some sort. It was shaped as some animal.

“It’s supposed to be a direwolf,” he said as way of explanation. “I know that you said you and your family are really into direwolves, so I made it for you. I know it looks weird, but I promise you, it’s really good. I hope it reminds you of Winterhell.”

“Winterfell,” she corrected.
Carefully, Arya broke off a piece of the wolf’s foot and handed it to Gendry, and then broke off the other foot and bit into it.

“Umm,” she gushed. “This is really good, Hot Pie.”

“Thanks,” he blushed.

“Really good,” Gendry repeated. “Why didn’t you make me one?”

“Because I already know that Arya is going to share it with you like she does everything else,” he stated.

Another glance was exchanged. This time Hot Pie caught it.

It immediately felt different when Hot Pie’s car pulled off. Arya and Gendry were sad to see him go. He definitely was valuable company and his presence would be missed. But, as of lately, his presence served another purpose. With Hot Pie around, Gendry and Arya didn’t have a lot of alone time together. Every once and a while they did, but it wasn’t much or long enough for something to happen.

The moon sparkled on the lake as Arya and Gendry swam around. They weren’t loud as they usually were to avoid being caught. Tonight was their weekly late night swim and they haven’t been caught since starting a few months back.

Silently, the two splashed water at each other before wrestling. Gendry choked back a laugh as Arya giggled inaudibly.

“You cheat,” she said in a hushed tone.

“Nope,” he whispered. “You’re just a sore loser.”

Before Gendry could dunk her under the water again, Arya wrapped herself around his body and held tight. She smiled at him, and then burying her face in the crook of his neck. Gendry chuckled at the unfamiliar sensation. For a moment, Arya did nothing and said nothing.

Gendry should have known better to not think anything of it.

At first, he wasn’t aware what she was doing. But, as Arya’s ministrations became more pronounced, he couldn’t ignore the affect she had on him. As if she had done it before, Arya suckled and nibbled on Gendry’s neck. Gendry tried to refrain from moaning, but her hot tongue made his cock twitch in excitement. She then began to suck on his collarbone and Gendry moved his head to the side to allow her better excess.

Gendry relaxed his grip just enough to let Arya slide down his waist before grabbing her again. His hand was then placed on her ass and he pulled her close and rubbed his groin against her center. She gasped in delight. Arya went back to sucking on his collarbone and Gendry moved his head to the side to allow her better excess.

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As Arya was about to kiss Gendry, he pushed her away.

“Gendry,” Arya’s voice almost sounded like she was trying to plead with him.

“We can’t,” Gendry shot at her. “I can’t,” he forced out. Arya stared at him as he stared at the water. “You can go on without me.”
“What?” Arya didn’t understand.

“I need a moment,” Gendry emphasized need in order to get his idea across.

“Oh.” Arya swam back to solid land and waited for Gendry to join her. A moment later, he joined her and walked her back to her cabin without saying anything.

They pretended like it never happened.

“Arya, your hand,” Gendry gasped in desperation. Arya looked down and immediately snatched her hand away from Gendry’s thigh. It had been his mid thigh to be precise.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “I don’t even remember placing my hand on your leg.”

“It’s okay.” Gendry scooted away from her just a bit. He checked his watch, and then got up. “I have to go do something for Francine anyways.”

“Okay,” Arya said, and then watched Gendry leave. For the past three weeks, the camp workers had been asking Gendry to do stuff for them apart from their activities. He would carry heavy items for them, fix any motorized vehicles that were broken, and other miscellaneous things that they needed help with.

“Arya, I need to speak to you in my office now.” Yoren gestured for the young adult to follow him as he walked at a brisk pace. In all of the time that Arya had been at Wholistic Core, she had only been in Yoren’s office for quarterly check-ins. They just met a few weeks ago, so she was puzzled as to why he needed to talk to her.

When they entered his office, Yoren snapped his fingers to get her attention, and then pointed at her then a chair. He roughly pulled his chair back before plopping down in it, and then scooting closer to his desk.

“Leave Gendry alone,” he proclaimed. Yoren pulled out a cigar, and then lit it. “Leave him alone now.”

“What are you talking about?” Arya was perplexed.

“I’m talking about your Lolita act that you have going on,” Yoren spelled out and Arya took slight.

“I don’t have a Lolita ‘act’ going on,” she denied. “And you have no idea what you are talking about,” Arya lied.

Yoren puffed his cigar and exhaled slowly.

“You know what, I’m not going to be called a liar to my face,” he declared. “This will be the first and last time you lie to me.”

Arya stared at him nervously.

“I’m not stupid, Ms. Stark.” Yoren took another drag of his cigar. “We’re not stupid. You think we don’t notice what’s going on.” Arya’s stomach dropped. “We’ve noticed you and Gendry’s behavior for a long, long time, but didn’t do anything about it because we didn’t want to overreact. It seemed innocent.” He looked her in the eyes. “But, I know something has changed. I didn’t have any proof of it, but there is nothing platonic about the feelings you two have for one another.”

“What are you talking about,” she feigned ignorance.
Yoren rolled his eyes at her. “Cut the crap, Arya.” He leaned back in his chair. “I may not have my psychology degree, but I’m no dumbass either. Besides, my suspicions about you two were confirmed when I saw you and Gendry together before I called you over,” he explained. “All that touching crap is going to stop.”

“It was an accident,” she blurted out.

“I don’t give a damn,” he dismissed. “I don’t care if you slipped and fell and your hand landed there—stop touching him. We may have looked the other way with the smoking, late night swims, and all of that other shit, but this we aren’t going to turn a blind eye to.” Arya was startled at the revelation. “Yeah, yeah, we know about that,” he grinned. “Smoking underage may be illegal, but that is your life you are ruining. But, having sex with Gendry ruins his life. Gendry is too good of a kid to get in that kind of trouble.”

“Young adult,” Arya automatically corrected.

“Fine, young adult,” he conceded. “It’s becoming increasingly obvious that you two want to fuck each other’s brains out and that we can’t allow.”

It occurred to Arya that Yoren had been out of town that night she and Gendry almost had sex. If he had been here, they would have had this talk much sooner and, most likely, she and Gendry would have been permanently separated. She wondered how she got away with the lake incident.

“Why are you just talking to me?” The young girl crossed her arms.

“I’ve dealt with Gendry,” Yoren flicked his cigar. “Why do you think he had been busy lately?” Her eyes widen in realization. They were keeping Gendry away from her. “But, you are the initiator here. You are the one touching him and invading his personal space. You’ve chipped away at his resolve so much that he will crumble at any time.”

“I’m not doing it on purpose,” she defended weakly.

“For the last time, I don’t give a damn,” Yoren licked his lips and smoked his cigar. “Do you think the police or your parents are going to care that YOU were the initiator and he was trying to fight YOUR advances. It doesn’t matter how mature you are, you’re fifteen and he is twenty-two. In the eyes of the law, that is statutory rape. Gendry is an adult and no one, outside of the camp, is going to believe he didn’t take advantage of you.”

“But, it is my decision.” Arya said adamantly as she shot up out of her chair. “If I had sex with Gendry, it would have been because I wanted to and not because I was taken advantage of.”

“Sit your ass down, young adult,” he mocked. “You think your parents, the police, or the courts will care or even try to see it that way,” Yoren incredulously stared at her. “If he’s lucky, he would get charged and tried here and serve three to seven years, but I doubt your parents would be okay with that. So, let’s see what the charges are for statutory rape in Winterfell,” he speculated aloud as he typed on his computer. “Hmm…five to ten years because he is over 21.” Yoren slapped him hands on the table and Arya jumped. “You really want your cherry popped by Gendry SO bad that you are willing to let him go to jail?”

Arya bit back tears. “Can I leave now?”

“Promise me you won’t touch him,” he demanded.

“You may go.”

Arya waited for Yoren to go out of town again before she snuck into Gendry’s room again. She climbed out on the air conditioning unit, and then opened his window and quickly jumped in.

Her stomach dropped when she heard Gendry groaned.

In shocked, she stared as Gendry stroked his cock in his firm grip. The noises from his mouth made her tingle in between her legs. As she watched him touch himself, she could feel her panties become soaking wet. Gendry’s eyes were closed as he pleasured himself. He seemed to be lost in his own touch.

A huge grunt was let out, and then cum shot up onto Gendry’s stomach. His hand changed positions and stroked from the top of his cock rather than the bottom of it. Some more cum squirted out. He softly gasped, and then opened his eyes.

“Arya!” Immediately, he covered himself. “What are you doing in here? HOW long have you been in here?”

“Umm…” she was at a loss for words. “I was coming to visit you and…”

“How much did you see?” Arya thought to herself, ‘Not enough.’

“I should go,” she put one leg out the window and was ducking down to move the rest of he body out, when Gendry grabbed her and pulled her back into the room.

There was an unforgiving pulse between her legs. Arya felt as if she was about to explode when Gendry grabbed her.

“Gendry,” she warned and she looked at his cum stained stomach before looking up. He looked into her eyes and saw that her pupils were dilated. His hands released her and let her escape out his window.

As much as she tried, Arya couldn’t fall asleep. She washed her hair, cleaned her room, re-organized her books, and attempted to style her hair when she fell to her bed in defeat. For the life of her, Arya couldn’t get Gendry’s cock out of her mind or his expression and the faces he made as he masturbated.

To occupy her time, she began to read a book that she hadn’t gotten the time to finished. Without fail, she always lost herself in books. They had a way in engrossing her that she couldn’t explore. Perhaps it could be due to the escapism?

She flew through the chapters and was almost finished when she heard her window open and Gendry climbed through it.

“Gendry?” Arya put her book down and jumped out of her bed. “What are you doing here?”

Gendry ignored her and pulled her into a passionate kiss. Momentarily, Arya responded before pushing him away.

“What are you doing,” she said in shock. “You could get in trouble for this. You could go to jail for this.”
The young man looked confused by her words. “Why now?” He questioned. “You didn’t care any other time when you would try to touch me.”

“I wasn’t thinking,” Arya explained. “But, I don’t want you to go to jail for having sex with me.”

“But, no one has to know,” he retorted. “I’m not going to tell anyone. Are you?”

“No, but that’s not the poi—“ Gendry abruptly kissed her and she moaned into his mouth.

“Then let’s not think about it,” he said as he backed up her to her bed.

“Gendry…” His mouth quieted Arya again as Gendry began to pull up her tank top.

“Just this once,” he pleaded. Arya slowly shook her head up and down in agreement as she watched Gendry take off his shirt and let it fall to the floor. Tenderly, she kissed his stomach as her hands went to undo his shorts. When her hands went to his sides to pull them down, Gendry helped her.

A semi-erect penis was in front of Arya face and she grabbed it and stroked it the way she saw Gendry do earlier. Above her, she heard him groan. She continued to stroke him when she decided to try something else out. Inexperienced lips touched the head of Gendry’s cock as he slightly jumped in surprise.

“Don’t worry, I won’t use my teeth,” she then placed a kiss on the head of his cock before she licked his length. Appreciative noises filled the air. Arya’s head bobbed up and down as she tried to pleasure Gendry with her mouth.

In a reluctant manner, she let Gendry’s cock fall from her mouth and began to wiggle out of her shorts. Without hesitation, Gendry grabbed her waistband with both hands and swiftly pulled off the shorts for. While Gendry divested her of her shorts and panties, Arya took off her bra.

Arya gently tugged on Gendry to sit down on her bed. She made him face away from her as she placed her hands on his shoulders and planted kisses on his neck, and then his back. An overwhelming desire to hug him consumed Arya and she pulled him into her arms. Her breasts rubbed against Gendry’s back. She loved him so much. Love? ‘Where did that come from,’ Arya wondered.

Slowly, she pulled Gendry towards her to lie on his back and moved out of the way, so he wouldn’t land on her. In amazement, she drank on the magnificence of his body and her hands caressed his skin in shared opinion.

Lovingly, she kissed his forehead as she impaled herself on him. A strangled groan was caught in Gendry’s throat, but Arya moaned loudly. She had been waiting for this so long. In support, Gendry raised his hands for Arya to use them to balance herself. In appreciation, she grabbed them as she rolled her hips and took him deeper.

It occurred to her, that she did not hurt when she took Gendry inside of her. Arya supposed it was because of how aroused she had been for him—of how much she wanted him.

Gendry rose up and placed his hands on her hips to the keep the rhythm. His loving words encouraged Arya to give him all of herself. The need to be close to him in the worse way possible struck her. Her arms were placed around his shoulders and Arya could feel the sweat on his skin.

Suddenly, Gendry flipped them over. He rocked into her without a care in the world and lost himself in her depths. Arya protested when he pulled out of her, but was silenced as he inserted fingers into her wetness. Her skin felt like it was on fire every time he kissed her skin as he made his way down
to her vagina.

A sharp cry broke free of her and Arya grabbed Gendry’s head as he desperately licked her nether regions. When she couldn’t take it anymore, she pushed her hips forward and after a few firm licks, she climaxed. Arya looked down at the covers and saw his head rise. The face she saw wasn’t Gendry’s, but Hot Pie’s.

Arya woke up in a cold sweat and abruptly sat up. Her breathing was loud and her panties were soaked. The window was closed.

“What the fuck,” she said to herself. The book she was reading fell to the floor.

How quickly fantasies turned into nightmares.

“Fucking Hot Pie,” she swore as she slipped her fingers between her legs so finish herself of. Arya willed Gendry’s face into her head, and then muffled a cry into the pillows when she finished.

“It’s nice to have you home,” Catelyn said as she sat on her daughter’s bed.

Arya would be home for a week before school started again at Wholistic Core.

The girl gave her mother a tight smile as she rubbed Nymeria.

“It’s nice to be home,” she replied. It was a half-truth. As much as she loved being back at Winterfell, she missed Gendry.

Catelyn gently touched her daughters face. “Gods, you look so much older than when I last saw you, but haven’t grown anymore since then.” Arya’s first visit had been in December. When Catelyn noticed how much her daughter had outgrown her current wardrobe, she took her shopping for a new wardrobe. Usually, Catelyn would tell Arya what she should get, but not this time. She stood back and let her daughter go shopping for herself.

“Arya, I’m sorry for not taking the time out to listen to you back in April,” her mother apologized. “And for not hearing your side every opportunity I had after that before you left.” Catelyn seemed genuinely troubled about overlooking Arya’s feelings during that whole ordeal.

“It’s fine, mom,” Arya reassured. “Yeah, I was hurt, but I understand. You guys had so much on your plate and was trying to decrease the fallout out as much as possible.”

“There’s no excuse,” she squeezed her daughter’s hand lovingly and in remorse. “I should have thought of you and how you felt.”

“You’re right, it isn’t an excuse,” she agreed. “But, you and dad are human. It would be hypocritical of me to crucify you all for making a mistake with all of the shit I pull on a regular basis.”

Catelyn gave her daughter a look. “Arya, that’s very mature of you, but you are going to stop cursing around your father and I so casually AND to get reactions out of us.”

“Sorry,” she said. Catelyn placed a kiss on her forehead.

“That’s all right,” Catelyn pulled Arya closer. “Just don’t do it again.”

Her father apologized later on that night.

“Sweetheart, I failed you a few months back,” his tone was distraught and his eyes looked to be in deep despair. Despite Arya’s anger and lingering resentment about not being heard out, she thought
fail to be a strong word. “I can’t apologize enough for not paying enough attention to you.”

Ned was in front of Arya bent on one knee as Arya sat on the edge of the couch. He had gently gripped her forearms in his hands as he spoke to her.

“Dad, you didn’t fail me,” Arya disagreed.

“No, I did,” he replied. “You were right: your mother and I did not hear your side of the story and that was unacceptable.”

“I mean, I agree,” she said. “You all should have heard me out, but neither you or mom failed me. Sending me to Wholistic Core was a good idea. I feel that it has really benefitted me.”

Ned got off of his knee and sat next to Arya on the couch. “That’s good. That’s what your mother and I had in mind when we researched for places for you to stay.”

“I thought as much,” she shrugged. “I just...I understand why you guys were angry and disappointed, but I wished that you and mom had heard every side of the story rather than everyone’s except mine. I know I come off strong-headed and that I’m quick to fight, but you guys know me.”

Arya stared at her lap. “You guys know that I don’t just fight people for no reason at all.”

Arya leaned on her father’s shoulder. “Do you want to tell us your side of the story, now,” he asked. “I’m a open ear.”

“No, I don’t want to talk about it,” she hugged her father, and then stood up. “But, I do want to talk about it one day.”

She and Sansa didn’t utter a word to one another during her stay home in December. At first, Arya assumed that Sansa was still mad at her about Joffrey. Then she realized that her sister was ashamed of what happened back in April and didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t until she set off for the airport at the end of her stay, that she realized this. As Arya hugged Robb, Jon, Bran, and Rickon Sansa stared with a look of want in her eyes. It was not envy, but rather longing. Sansa longed to have the easiness with Arya that she had with their brothers. But, they were like oil and water most of the time.

Arya may have forgiven her brothers, but she had a harder time forgiving her sister, regardless of the circumstances.

When she visited over the summer, Arya spent the first three days with her family, and then the last four hanging out with Ned and Mycah. It dawned on her as she hung out with the two of them that they were her good friends, her close friends, but not her best friends. Gendry was her best friend. He was the person that understood her better than anyone else. He was the one who she connected to better than anyone else.

When Arya first got her period, she remembered in vivid detail how they were in the middle of a team building exercise and her tan shorts had been stained. She didn’t know what to do. Almost as if he could sense her distress, Gendry asked her what was wrong and Arya looked between her legs. Thinking quick on his feet, he snuck Arya away from the exercise not bringing any attention to her or himself and brought her back to her room. He told Arya to clean herself up as he found her a new outfit to wear, and then disappeared from her room before reappearing with some tampons. She didn’t ask him how he found it, she was just grateful that he did.

Ned could drive now and he took them to the mall and to the movies. He had grown a little bit taller, but not as tall as Gendry. Mycah was also taller as well.
Before she left to return to Wholistic Core, Arya had her mom make various types of cookies.

“You know I’m only making these because I won’t see you again, until Thanksgiving,” Catelyn informed.

“I know, mom,” Arya replied.

Last Thanksgiving, Arya didn’t get to come home because there was a massive snowstorm in Winterfell. It had lasted for days. It delayed her plane before it became useless to even go home, which was why her visit for postponed until December.

“Did you bring any of your mom’s cookies back,” Gendry asked her as he helped carry her bags back to her room.

“Gendry,” Arya said in mock offense. “I just got here and rather than ask how my trip was and how I have been, you ask about my mom’s cookies.”

Gendry looked as if he didn’t see a problem with that. “Yeah,” he shrugged as a grin played on his lips. Arya hit Gendry softly and sat her bags down. She went to her book bag, and pulled out a big Tupperware of cookies.

“You’re so awesome, you know that,” Gendry scarfed four cookies before he breathed again. “I know you already know that, but it doesn’t hurt to say it again.”

It was not with a bang, but rather a whimper that Arya realized she was in love with Gendry. How else could she explain the flutter in her stomach as she watched him ungraciously devoured the cookies while crumbs gathered around his mouth? She thought it was the most amazing thing she had ever seen. Her chest tightened and her throat became dry.

“Are you going to save me any,” she croaked out. Gendry tossed her a cookie and Arya threw it back at him. He guffawed loudly as Arya could swear her heart was beating, and then patted the bed for her to sit next to him.

‘In my dreams, we made love on this bed,’ she thought.

Arya sat on the bed and Gendry picked up a cookie and positioned it in front of her mouth. She wouldn’t open her mouth.

“Come on,” he coaxed as he pressed the cookie against her lips as he laughed.

Looking him directly in the eyes, Arya sat a hand on his hand that held the cookie and opened her mouth before slowly taking a bit of it. Every last bit of the cookie was thoroughly chewed, as Arya never broke contact. She gulped down the treat, and then licked her lips. She opened her mouth to feed the rest of the cookie.

Gendry cleared his throat and stood up.

“Uh,” he handed her the rest of the cookie. “I have to go help Yoren with something.”

She stared at the door long after he left.

All hell broke loose in April.

“What do you mean you are leaving in two day,” Arya yelled. “The program doesn’t end until June,”
Gendry tried to put his hands on Arya’s shoulders, but she shook him off.

“Don’t touch me!”

“Arya, I just found out about this,” he tried to explain. “Leslie said that I would make a great group leader and that I could go to the training seminar if I was interested.”

“So,” Arya glared. “Why can’t you go next year?”

“I could go next year, but either way after June, I won’t be here anymore.” Arya stopped and looked at him. “You can be in this program up until you are twenty-two—I’m twenty-three. Leslie only let me stay another year because I was twenty-two when the next cycle started.”

“I don’t even know you were interested in being a group leader,” she said in a leveled tone.

“I wasn’t,” he admitted. “But, these people here—they treat one another like family. They love one another like family. I never had a family.”

“I can be your family,” she declared passionately.

Gendry lowered his head. “You wouldn’t be my family,” he announced. Before Arya’s heart could break, he then said, “You’d be my lady.”

The people here felt like brothers and sisters and the feelings he had for Arya was not what a brother had for his sister. Gendry needed her to understand that the offer she provided was not one she could fulfill, as he wanted more from her. To pretend as if they could deny reality would do neither of them any good. He was leaving to be apart of a family. He was leaving in order to prevent himself from crossing that line.

Arya heard him loud and clear. The words translated easily enough. If he stayed, she would become his woman in every sense of the word. It was only a matter a time. It would also land him in jail. Most importantly, he wanted to finally have a family. He wanted a family like the one she had back at home.

For the next two days, she avoided him like the plague. Arya understood why he was leaving, but it still hurt nevertheless. An hour before he was set to leave, she hugged him as she nestled her head against his chest. Tentatively, he placed a kiss on her forehead and that sat like that until he car pulled up.

Two months later, she sat at her last meeting and listened to Leslie talk. The last big meeting included family members as well.

“Okay, now we are down to our last award,” she said excitedly. “This person has shown model behavior, completed every assignment exceedingly well, and has gone above and beyond for her fellow peers. This person has taught other campers new skills or has helped them practice it. Even went as far as teaching two of her fellow peers reading comprehension,” Arya’s head snapped up. “I present the award for Most Outstanding Citizen to Arya Stark.”

A round of applause was made for Arya as she accepted the award.

“Do you have anything you would like to say?” Leslie warmly hugged Arya.

Arya was choked with emotion and bit her lip in order to contain her emotions. “I didn’t think anyone noticed,” she replied to the executive director.
“We’ve noticed,” she assured.

“Umm,” Arya looked at the award. “Honestly, I was just having fun and enjoyed helping out people when they needed help. I never thought I would get an award for it.”

Out of habit, she looked for Gendry in the crowd, but he wasn’t there.

Her eyes came across a girl named Jenny Barenbaum. A couple of days after Arya and Gendry first kissed, she saw Jenny flirting with Gendry. Only now did she realize that it was jealously. She had been jealous.

After the award ceremony was over, she got into a car with her family and half way listened to them as they congratulated her on her award.

As the airplane descended above the clouds, Arya wondered if she would ever see Gendry again.
‘That’s love,’ Arya thought as she finished her fourth slice of pizza, and the washed it down with beer. It’s messy and ends in heartbreak. If her love life had been a Hollywood movie, it would have ended on the highest notes. With Ned, it would have ended with them going on a date for the first time to show that the guy got the girl after all of this time. With Jaqen, they would write it so the two lovers would fall in love and couldn’t be parted from each other. And with Aegon, Arya would have changed her mind and ran back to him because she really was scared, but wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

But, where would it have ended with Gendry?

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you,” Arya recited as she pushed the suspect up against the wall, and then yanked his arms behind his back so she could handcuff him.

“I didn’t do anything, you stupid bitch,” the man spat as he struggled against her.

“Of course you didn’t; I’m just taking you to the police station to reward you for being an outstanding citizen,” she quipped, and then tightened the cuffs even more. Grabbing his arm, Arya guided the suspect to her police vehicle. “Come on, Prince Charming, we have a ball to get to.”

Firmly, Arya pushed the suspect’s head down so he wouldn’t hit his head, and then closed the door behind him once he was all of the way in the car. The detainee uttered profanity filled slurs as Arya drove him to the station, but it didn’t bother her. Even before she applied to become an officer, she knew that she would have to develop a thick skin in order to handle the criminals…and co-workers.

“Take these cuffs off of me and I’ll show you what I can do, twat,” he threatened as he legs kicked the divider.

Arya made eye contact with him in the rear view mirror. “Like you did earlier?” The delivery was monotone and her face was blank. Criminals were hardly original with their threats or name-calling. After being called every derogatory name in the book, she had become desensitized to those antics by now. “If it is going to be a repeat of before, I would rather you not. It was embarrassing enough the first time.”

A scream filled the car and he kicked the divider again.

“I will say this,” she commented as she took a glance back before focusing on the road again. “You throw a better tantrum than my five year old niece and, boy, let me tell you, she can throw a tantrum.”

The car became immediately silent.

Ten minutes later, Arya arrived at the police station and went straight to booking. She wasted no time
in completing her report and had a fellow officer proofread it as she went to grab a doughnut and cup of coffee from the break room.

“Everything looks good.” The report was handed back to her when she arrived back at his desk.

“Thanks, Mitch,” she threw two fingers up in a slight wave as she made her way to her desk.

“No problem,” he muttered.

Arya filed her report, and then tied up loose ends before leaving work for the day.

“Marco!” Arya yelled as she raised her hands in the air.

“Arya!” Marco copied her actions. They laughed at each other. “What can I get for you today, Officer Stark.”

Arya seemed to give it some thought. “Ehh…I don’t know,” she shrugged. “Should I get the meat lover’s pizza with green peppers or the chicken and bacon ranch?”

Out of habit, she put a cigarette into her mouth and was about to light it when Marco pointed to a sign.

“Seriously,” her eyes pleaded with him. “Just this one time.”

“No,” he laughed. “Last time you said the same thing and the time before last. We are trying to class this place up and we can’t with your cigarette smoke filling the place.”

“You mean classy with a ‘K’?” Marco mock glared at her as Arya began to walk to the door. “I’m going to be outside with my unclassy behavior. I’ll take the meat lover’s pizza.”

“Just hold on a second,” he called. “I already have it ready.”

Marco pulled a pizza out of the warmer and walked over to her.

“How did you know I would order this,” Arya asked as she opened the pizza box.

“I anticipated your needs.” Marco wiped his hands on his apron, and then cut off the neon sign that said ‘open’.

“I’ve been known to anticipate some needs myself,” she said suggestively as she waggled her eyebrows, and then took a bite of her pizza.

The pizza man laughed, and then crossed his arms over his chest. “You couldn’t handle me, Arya.”

“Meet me in the back out my car after I finish my slice and I’ll make a believer out of you.” Arya took the pizza and led Marco to her car. As she pulled her keys out of her pocket, she sat the pizza on the hood of the car. After she put her pizza in the passenger seat, she pulled her wallet from her pocket to pay Marco.

“It’s on the house,” he said as he waved he shoved her hands away in offense. “You’re one of our best customers—it’s on us today.”

“Thanks,” Arya smiled at him. “So, are we going to do this or what?”

There was a shared grin between the two before Marco enveloped Arya in a hug.
“Enjoy your pizza.” He shook his head and walked away.

“Your loss,” she yelled, and then chuckled to herself.

Arya and Marco would joke around about being sexually interested in one another, but they really weren’t. They were both single, but there wasn’t any romantic or sexual attraction between them. Now, Marco was incredibly attractive—that much was true. But, he was too good of a friend or, worker of a restaurant she frequented and joked around with regularly, to think of him beyond his current status.

Besides the term attractive, Arya didn’t know if she had a type per se. The guys she had interest in had nothing alike besides being appealing to look at.

To be honest, Arya wasn’t even sure what she wanted. And every time someone would ask her what exactly did she want, she would say, “Not this.” Even she didn’t have the faintest clue what the hell that meant. Perhaps, it had to do with the fact that Arya felt that people were trying to force her into a lifetime commitment when she wasn’t sure if that was a commitment she could make. Maybe she wasn’t meant to settle down. Or, she was still too young to tie herself to someone for the rest of her life.

Arya was only twenty-five. She still had time to figure out what it was that she wanted.

At first, she thought that her second thoughts about her impending marriage were jitters or, at least, that was what she tried to convince herself. But, in her heart, Arya had been unsure about getting married even when she said yes. She accepted the proposal because she was afraid of letting her parents down as well as everyone else who had supported her relationship, she didn’t want to hurt her boyfriend by saying no, and she was unsure as to what she wanted so didn’t want to end the relationship.

With the TV on mute, she watched some cliche love story with a happy ending. As she ate her pizza, a piece of sausage fell on her chest. She picked up the runaway meat and threw it in her mouth.

‘Hollywood love stories are bullshit,’ Arya thought as she sipped her beer. Why couldn’t they show something realistic for once? But then again, people liked to be fed bullshit. They knew that these moves were fantasies. People watched movies all of the time as an escapism mechanism.

These fictional couples always had to overcome insurmountable odds, incompatibility, or both and end up together in some unrealistic fashion. Why couldn’t the movie play on? Why couldn’t the viewers be shown the regret and animosity the two felt for one another because of their dumbass decisions?

Arya flopped onto her back and looked at the ceiling.

Only Hollywood would have you believe that true love conquered all in the end. Life taught you otherwise.

She loved Gendry and he left. He didn’t come back for her and proclaim his love—damned the consequences. But, Arya supposed that was a dangerous and foolish love. It was one that could have ruined his life.

Most importantly, they never spoke about love or being in love. Arya doubted that Gendry would have said either. He always tried to draw lines that Arya routinely muddled. And every time, he would re-draw it as if he expected Arya to listen the next time, but she never did.

Or it could have been lust.
He was young and inexperienced and she had been throwing herself at him. Yoren was right; Arya did want Gendry to pop her cherry that bad.

Either way, Gendry was a good person. Even to this day, Arya still held to the opinion that if anything had happened, it was because she wanted it to happen. Whether or not she was being taken advantaged of (which she wasn’t), it was her lust that did most of her talking. The other part, the one she could barely admit, was that she did want to make love to him. It was the only thing she had dreamt about the whole summer after she left Wholistic Core:

Her dreams were passion filled and sweaty and Arya would wake up with a devastating ache between her legs. Without a second thought, she would finish herself off after she woke up.

Arya went downstairs and saw an abundance of food on the table. This was how the Stark family meals looked when the servants cooked. Fancy, foreign foods would be prepared and there would be a variety of fruits, breads, and beverages sitting on the table for their disposal. Only when her mother decided that she wanted to cook for the family or they had their days off was when the table wasn’t completely covered with food.

The young woman fixed herself a plate, grabbed an apple, and poured herself some water. Hungrily, she bit into her croissant and moaned at the deliciousness of it.

“Hey,” Arya heard Sansa say.

In a suspicious manner, Arya glanced at her sister, “Hey yourself.”

“Why do you hate me,” Sansa asked in a quiet tone.

Arya sat down her piece of bacon and looked at Sansa. There were a thousand things she wanted to say to her and nothing at all at the same time. How could she adequately explain how she was feeling without strangling her older sister?

“I don’t hate you,” she offered plainly.

“Yes, you do,” Sansa looked hurt as she denied Arya’s answer. “I’ve tried for years to be a good sister and the one time I mess up, you hold it against me and hardly speak to me because of it.”

A loud exhale was released from Arya’s mouth. “Sansa, I DON’T hate you. I’m just so fucking tired of this whole victim act—of everything being about you. What about the things you have done to ME?”

“I have never done anything to you,” Sansa quickly contradicted. “And everything is not about me nor do I put on a victim act,” she cried.

“Then you are one hell of a revisionist historian because you seem to believe your own reality, which are filled with lies.” Sansa stared in shock at her sister.

“Oh really, what have I done,” she inquired. “How do I paint myself as a victim?”

Tension radiated off of Arya as she ate her food before she decided to speak.

“I wasn’t upset at you for taking Joffrey’s side two years ago,” Arya began. "It’s something that you would do—automatically assume I was in the wrong without even asking me. But, it was when you accused me of hating you so much that I would try to hurt you that upset me. You made a fight that had absolutely NOTHING to do with you all about me supposedly hating you. It was about you, you, you!” She took a deep breath. “You seem to think that everything I do is in reaction to you and
it isn’t—it never was. You used to say that I was always bothering you, but I was a kid, Sansa. I was just having fun and doing stupid shit to irritate you, I never did anything to hurt you.” Arya took another bite of her food. “You may have not started Arya horseface or Arya underfoot, but you sure as hell went along with it…you didn’t try to defend me. You even told Joffrey about it. And for a very long time, I thought that I was ugly and I accepted that. I mean, even pretty Sansa agreed.”

“Arya, I was just—“

“AGAIN! It’s about you,” she cried. “Will you ever stop? Arguably the worst day if my life and you had to make everything about you.” Tears streamed down Arya’s face as she spoke. “You said everything in your power to try to hurt me, and then when I said something, you began to cry as if you didn’t just get through saying crude shit to me. And you just let me take all of the blame for it because you were too afraid to get in trouble yourself. And I took the blame because I can’t force you to have a backbone and accept the negative consequences. You have to learn that on your own. I’ve never hated you—I’ve just hate the weakness that lives in you.”

Sansa looked as if she had been slapped in the face. With that, Arya left her sister to her own thoughts.

A week later, Arya left with her parents to go visit Braavos. They took a tour of the city before scouting out schools and determining which would be the best one for her to attend. After careful deliberation, Braavos Preparatory Academy was chosen. The registration was quick and painless and the Stark trio checked out a model room and the campus one more time before getting a bite to eat.

Arya excitedly spoke about her new school when she noticed that her mother wasn’t really into the conversation.

“What’s wrong, mom?” Arya was worried. Catelyn looked to be unusually sad and was staring into her cup of coffee.

A tight smiled appeared on Catelyn’s sad face and she grabbed her cup with both hands. “Nothing.” She took a glance at her daughter, and then stared back to her cup.

“Mom,” Arya extended her arm across the table and clasped her mother’s hand.

Tears started to fall down her face and, quickly, Catelyn grabbed a napkin and dapped at them. “It’s just…you just moved back home a month ago after being away for two years and now you are going move out again in a few weeks,” she sniffed. “I feel as if I barely had any time to spend with you.”

Ned wrapped his arms around his wife and whispered into her ear. It seemed to make Catelyn cry more.

“I’m going to miss her so much.” Her head burrowed further into Ned’s shoulders and he wrapped his arms tighter around her.

“It’ll be all right sweetheart.” Ned kissed her on the forehead, and then gently rested his chin on her head. “Everything will be fine.”

“Mom,” Arya began as she got up and sat next to her mother. “We still have the summer and I’ll be able to visit you more.”

Catelyn looked at her daughter, and then pulled Arya into her arms.

“Thank you.” Catelyn decorated her daughter’s face with kisses as the young woman “ewwed” and playfully tried to escape.
After she came back from her visit to Braavos, Arya spent a great deal of time with her mother. Arya helped her mother with gardening and, in turn, was taught the fundamentals of gardening. Her mother had all kinds of gardens that ranged from flowers to vegetables to fruits. They would toil in the sun together and Arya would tell her mother about her adventures at Wholistic Core. Catelyn responded by telling her daughter what she did as a youth.

Other times, Arya would volunteer her time in her mother’s clubs like the community service, mentoring, and even the sewing club, despite being terrible with needle and thread. Catelyn seemed to cherish the extra time Arya had decided to spend with her.

“When are you going to forgive, Sansa,” Catelyn seemed focused on the flowers ahead of her as she spoke.

“What do you mean,” Arya wiped the back of her hand against her forehead to wipe some off.

Catelyn raised an eyebrow before taking off her gardening gloves. “Sansa isn’t you, Arya. She doesn’t see things the way you do or react the same way. She tries to see the good in everyone, where as you see them for how they are. You have to let who her be who she is and forgive her for who she is not? Accept that you two are wired differently,” she said in a nurturing tone. “Your opinion of her is just a toned down version of how you claim others think about you.”

“Mom,” Arya sighed. “Sansa just…she’s irksome. Everything is always about her and she always sees herself as some sort of victim that things just happen to.”

“That’s not fair, Arya.” The sun continued to bore down on them unrelentlessly. “Something occurred to me the other day…I apologized for not listening to you about the fight, but I never apologized to you about Sansa. What happened there?”

Arya stilled for a second. “You heard what happened?”

“No, I heard the tail-end of a presumably much larger argument,” Arya helped her mother off of the ground.

“We both said some things we shouldn’t have said,” she began. “But, I was the only one who was caught.” Arya wondered what was the use in continuing to make her sister suffer for something she was over. “I’ll go talk to her.”

“Thank you,” Catelyn hugged her daughter.

As a peace offering, Arya went up to Sansa’s room with a plate of lemon cakes. Gently, she knocked the door before opening it.

“But you mind if I come in,” Arya showed her the plate of cookies and Sansa gestured for her to enter.

“Sure. What’s up,” Sansa said in a tone that had a hint of uneasiness. Arya sat the cookies on the bed as the both of them took one off the plate.

“I’m sorry,” Sansa looked at Arya in surprise.

“For what?” There was a genuine look of confusion on Sansa’s face.

“For the things I’ve said to you and how I treated you back then,” Arya explained.
“No, I’m supposed to be apologizing,” Sansa corrected. “I shouldn’t have said those things to you. You were right: that fight wasn’t even about me. Also, I shouldn’t have approached you the way I did. It was uncalled for.”

Arya shook her head. “Sansa, you don’t understand.” Arya exhaled, and then looked at her hands. “Yeah, you shouldn’t have approached me that way, but for years you made an effort to at least try to get to know me. I have never done that. All I ever did was bother you and look down upon you for being like the rest of them: for liking boys and going shopping. I was being self-centered—not trying to understand other people and only thinking about myself as well as how I believed that no one understood me. I can see why you thought I hated you. But, I don’t and I never have. I’ve always loved you, always.” As an afterthought, she added, “And you aren’t weak.”

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“Still,” Sansa whispered. “I shouldn’t have said those things to you. I didn’t understand how much my opinion matter to you or how much my words had an impact on you until Ned and Mycah asked why you weren’t talking to them as much.” She shook her head. “I guess I was jealous because you may not have as many friends as me, but you did have real friends. I like my friends, but we aren’t nearly as close as you are with Ned and Mycah.

“I shouldn’t have called you stupid,” Arya admitted. “Or that guys only liked you to get into your pants—that was mean-spirited.”

“But, it was true, right.” Her sister shrugged. “Not the stupid part, but why guys are so nice to me. I mean, some really do like me, but the rest are just trying to have sex with me. I was as equally mean-spirited myself.”

The two girls lay on the bed together as they ate cookies and tried to start their relationship anew.

Before Arya knew it, she had moved to Braavos and school had started. The remainder of her weeks was spent with Mycah and Ned visited a few times, but not too much. Arya figured it was because he was going to college in Braavos and they would be down the street from each other. Her transition was easy enough and she loved her new school. The kids were awesome and the teachers were great. It was a laid back atmosphere that took school seriously, but in a fun way.

Ned would visit her a few times a week or she would visit his dorm room. Sometimes, they went out to eat or would do things together. If Arya needed him to, Ned would help Arya with her homework and let her bounce ideas off of him to help her. Eventually, they had become inseparable.

People thought that Arya had a college boyfriend and she would insist that they were just friends. But, Ned didn’t look at her the way a friend should. He was clearly love struck and had been for a while. Arya wondered if she led him on or if he feelings were based on their friendship like hers had developed with Gendry. Some days she didn’t think about the raven haired, blue eyed boy and other days he was all she thought about.

At some point, she learned to suppress her thoughts of him. Some days, it felt like he didn’t exist. How could he? No one who complimented her personality that well would just enter her life only to leave it on his own violation.

Over time, she started to see Ned in a new way—in a more than friendly way. Often, she found herself just looking at Ned for no reason at all or smiling just because. Arya may have teased Ned a lot—in a friendly way, of course—but he really was a sweet guy. He was funny and treated her really well. They couldn’t talk about almost anything, but he would listen to her and would incredibly understand her. He tried to be the shoulder that she leaned on and was there whenever she needed him.
They were listening to Death Cab for Cutie with the volume on low as Ned rambled on about something when Arya suddenly said:

“Ned, you talk too much.” Arya looked at him curiously as she ran her fingers through his hair.

“Sorry,” he blushed at her touch.

“Don’t be,” she muttered. Ned’s eyes had widened in shock when he saw her lean in for a kiss. He was about to say something, when Arya said, “Don’t ruin the mood, Ned.”

Arya pulled Ned in closer to her to deepen the kiss as Ned wrapped his arms around her.

The next few days, they spent their time making out when they were alone, which was a lot. Ned was as eager as she expected him to be and he was half bad either. But, what would Arya know, she had only kissed one guy before him and that was once.

“We should go out on a date,” Ned suggested after they broke apart. “A real date where I bring you flowers and take you to dinner.”

“Ned,” Arya began. “I’m just fine staying in. We don’t have to go out.”

“But, I want to,” he explained. “I want to take you to nice places because that is what people do when they like each other—they go out and have a good time.”

Ned placed a kiss on her nose before kissing Arya on the corner of her mouth, and then her lips.

“Okay, fine,” she relented before they went back to making out.

When March rolled around, Arya spent her spring break at home.

As she and her dad watched movies, they shared cookie dough ice cream out of the carton. Catelyn walked in and stared in disgust of not eating out of a bowl.

“Don’t worry, mom, we’re going to finish it,” Arya promised.

“That’s not my only worry,” she said, and then placed a kiss on Arya’s forehead and one on Ned’s mouth. Catelyn’s lips lingered against Ned’s for a moment just before Ned began to tickle her. “Stop, Ned,” she giggled. “Stop,” she whispered again as he tried to grab her. Arya felt vaguely uncomfortable at the sight. She knew this meant that they were having sex later on tonight. “I don’t want your appetite’s to be spoiled for dinner.”

“We’ll be fine, Cat,” Ned said as he unexpectedly grabbed his wife and she fell into his lap. “You can NEVER spoil a Stark’s appetite; you should know that by now.”

Her parents began to peck at each other’s lips.

“Am I not right here,” Arya said as she stared at the TV. “This could give me a whole new set of issues to deal with.”

Catelyn hit Arya, and then disentangled herself from Ned.

“Dinner will be ready in twenty,” she announced. Catelyn walked into the kitchen, and then peaked around the door frame, “That reminds me: can you help me with something, Ned.”

Arya looked back and forth between her parents.
A sly smile materialized on Ned’s face.

“No problem,” he said as he got up.

“Eww, gross,” Arya laughed.

“What?” Catelyn put her hands on her hips.

Arya cackled into the couch cushions. “You know what.”

“Arya, your father and I aren’t about to go have sex,” Catelyn stated in a matter-of-fact tone. “Besides, sex is not gross—it’s what made you and your siblings.”

No,” Arya said as she looked at her parents. “I’m pretty sure it’s gross when you know your parents are about to fool around.”

Catelyn waved her off, and then grabbed Ned’s hand as they left out of the room.

During dinner, it was hard to miss that her parents were smiling from ear to ear. Arya waggled her eyebrows, which her mother ignored. Ned tried to hide his smile as he ate his food.

“I just can’t believe that you aren’t going to prom,” Sansa said as she picked at her food. Her older sister was back in town for the weekend. She heard that Arya was on spring break and wanted to visit. “It’s not like you had any other chance to go since you were at that camp for two years.”

Arya cut up her steak as she listened to Sansa. “I decided to go after all.”

“Really?” Bran said in a perplexed tone as her family looked at her.

“Yeah, really,” she played down. “I can’t change my mind anymore?”

“It’s not that,” Bran began. “You were just so set on not going, is all.”

“Well, Sansa has convinced me of the error of my ways,” she supplied, but Sansa didn’t look confident in her younger sister’s words.

“That’s great news,” Ned offered. “Are you going to go with anyone? It’s a little late to be looking for a date, you know? I mean, if you are going with anyone, that is.”

Sansa and Catelyn started to rattle off potential dates as Arya held her hands up in front of her.

“Hold you horses, you two,” Arya laughed as she looked at her mother and sister. “I don’t need you to find me a date.”

“So, you’re going by yourself,” Sansa asked. Curiosity colored her face as she waited for an answer.

“No,” she stated.

“So, who is your date?” Catelyn glanced at her daughter as she gestured for Ned to pass her some food.

“Ned,” Arya supplied.

As Sansa was about to speak, Robb walked in.

“Sorry, I am late, everyone,” he apologized as he quickly made himself a plate and sat down. “So,
what did I interrupt?"

“Arya just said that she is going to prom with Ned,” Rickon provided.

Robb laughed. “You’re going with Ned Dayne?”

“What’s so funny about that?” Arya stared at her older brother as he grinned to himself.

“Nothing,” he dismissed. “It’s just that Ned has had a thing for you for years. Kid has got it bad.” Robb smiled to himself as he ate. “He would KILL for a chance to be boyfriend.”

“Well, he doesn’t have to.” Before Arya stuffed her mouth with food, she muttered, “Because he is.” Sansa started choking.

“Wait? What?” Ned looked at Arya expecting an answer, as did everyone else at the table. “I’m going to need you to repeat that for me.”

“Ned and I are dating,” Arya gave a smile as if to say ‘surprise’.

“For how long?” Sansa asked in shock.

“Since December.”

“What?” Sansa gasped unbelievingly. “You’ve been dating Ned since December—four for months and didn’t say anything. How did it happen? I mean, like, how did he ask you out? Where did he take you? How was the date? What was your first kiss like? Did you like it?” Her sister asked a series of questions in a rapid-fire manner.

Arya stared wide-eyed at Sansa as she tried to formulate answers in her head.

“Umm…” She looked around the table at her family. “It just did,” she answered weakly.

“Your first kiss doesn’t kind of just happen,” Sansa said in an exaggerated voice. “I guess it was only a few months.” Arya didn’t want to correct her sister and tell her that she was two years too late for her first kiss. That would lead to a discussion she never wanted to have…ever.

“Well, mine did just happen,” Arya tried to downplay.

“I can’t believe you kept this a secret from us for four months,” Catelyn was in pure disbelief. It boggled her mind that Arya could be this secretive—for no reason.

“I didn’t see it as a huge deal,” she explained.

“How can you not see it as a huge deal,” Sansa exclaimed. “This is your first boyfriend.”

“Oh God,” Catelyn groaned. “You and Ned will be attending the same university in a few months.”

“Mom!” Arya gave Catelyn a dirty look.

“What?” Catelyn leaned back in her chair. “I am just being realistic. Ned is a nineteen-year-old guy and you two will be going to school together—you’ll have a lot of alone time. He might want to…”

“MOM!” The girl stared at her mother in shock. “Seriously?”

“Honestly,” Robb began. “I wouldn’t be concerned about Ned trying to make a move on Arya—if
anything were to happen, it would be she who would initiate it.”

Did Robb just throw her under the bus? Her older brother read her expression.

“Arya, I’m just saying he waited how many years to make a move?” Robb drank his beer. “It’s more likely that you made the move that resulted in you two dating. Ned just doesn’t have it in him. Not saying that there is anything wrong with that.”

“The only reason Ned didn’t make a move is because I shot him down the first and only time he tried to kiss me when I was thirteen,” Arya informed before realizing what she said.

“Ned tried to kiss you when you were thirteen,” her father repeated.

“Dad, it was forever ago—lets move on.”

“Arya,” Catelyn said to get her attention.

“What?” Arya leaned forward in her chair. “Ned tried to kiss me and I pushed him away and nothing happened after that, I promise.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because there was nothing to tell,” Arya bit a piece of her steak. “He tried to kiss me at his parents party, but I refused him. I didn’t tell you all about it because I didn’t see it as a big deal and you were so happy that I made a friend that night.”

Catelyn did the mental math for a moment. “Hold on, Ned tried to kiss you the first night you two met?”

Arya groaned and rested her head in the table.

When Prom rolled around. Arya actually enjoyed herself. She wore a simply white dress with a black lace belt and black heels. Sansa put a few curls in her hair and she wore earrings that dangled. As a finishing touch, Sansa put some body glitter on her. Her parents had given her the sex talk days in advance, but Arya didn’t plan on having sex with Ned that night. It was so cliché and she wasn’t looking for romance, but she wasn’t trying to have sex by a deadline either.

Once they actually arrived at the place Prom was being held, Arya and Ned went to talk to some of Arya friends, they took pictures, and danced for a bit. The after Prom that the school held was enjoyable as well, and then they went with some friends to go midnight bowling and to eat before she and Ned went back to her room.

It was six when they arrived to her room. After the both of them took off of their shoes, they fell asleep in Arya’s bed.

When the school year ended, Arya went back to her parent’s house and Ned visited as much as possible. Her family didn’t give Ned too much grief because they liked him and they knew he was a good guy. Mycah wasn’t too surprised by the development between Ned and Arya when he first found out back in January. The dynamics of their friendship wasn’t much too different considering that he and Arya had been friends first and for way longer.

Around September, they had sex. They were at Ned’s place and Arya didn’t want to go back to her dorm. Instead, they cuddled and Arya decided she wanted to have sex instead. Shortly after it begins, it ends. Ned apologizes profusely and Arya finds that she doesn’t care too much that it was over in a jiffy. She finishes herself off, and then waits an hour before she and Ned attempts another try at sex.
It was five minutes tops.

Times flies by and before Arya knows it, a year has gone by.

Jon invites her and Ned to a Halloween party that he is throwing. He had ended his tour two months prior and would be back home for a few more months. The party is custom themed, of course and Ned goes as Ken from Street fighter and Arya goes as Chung Li. Although Ned isn’t as muscular as Ken, he still looks nice in his custom.

Once the party ends, it’s just Jon, Ygritte, Sansa, Willas Tyrell, Ned, Arya, Robb, and Jeyne left.

They all are sitting at a table playing cards, but not really paying attention. Ygritte is sitting on Jon’s lap as she gulps from a Hennessy bottle. She passes to Jeyne, so she could take a sip.

The topic at the moment is first kisses.

Arya drinks out of the Vodka bottle as she listened to the discussion.

“Ugh, my first kiss was horrible,” Ygritte, complained. “His breathe smelled disgusting and he had shoved his tongue down my throat. I almost threw up in my mouth,” she made a face, and then added, “Jon made me promise that I wouldn’t tell you all about our first kiss.”

Jon pinched his girlfriend’s side and she wiggled on his lap in response.

“Everyone knows that that is not true,” Jon made clear. “I had my first kiss when I was fourteen. I was walking this girl named Olive home from school, and then gave her a kiss when I dropped her off at home.”

“Was there tongue, groping, or anything?” Ygritte probed.

“No,” Jon answered. “Just a kiss on the mouth.”


“Mine wasn’t exciting either,” he shrugged. “I got to touch her knee.”

“Bare skinned or clothed,” she asked excitedly.

“Clothed.”

“Next!” The red head looked at Sansa, a fellow red head. “Please, tell me you have something interesting.”

“We kissed under the st—“

“Next!” Jeyne was the next victim.

“Spin the bottle—it was a peck,” Jeyne shrugged.

Arya was in a buzzed state as she laughed at Ygritte. She sipped out of the Vodka bottle once more, and then lay on the floor.

“Ned,” Ygritte called out. “Even though I should know better, I’m expecting for you to surprise me.”

“Just a little tongue,” he admitted.

“Thank God,” she exclaimed in relief. “Man, you guys have no excitement or adventure about you.”
She shook her head at the group.

“Wait,” Arya peaked her head above the table. “Just a little tongue? We almost had sex.”

Robb choked on his beer and Jon whipped his head to look at Ned.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Ygritted jumped up. “Details.”

“No, we didn’t,” Ned denied.

“Yes, we did.” Arya got up and swayed on her feet ever so slightly. “I asked you to kiss me because this random guy tried to kiss me and I preferred my first kiss to have been with a friend than some guy I didn’t like.”


“It did,” she gasped. “I was lying in my bed and you were leaning over me and I asked you to kiss me,” Arya explained. “And we were having some type of disagreement, and then you gave me some bullshit kiss before we started making out—you know, like really going at it.” Ned was silent. “I can believe you don’t remember. Ned, we had taken off each other’s shirts and I was on top of you pulling off your shorts when you put a stop to it. Then you mumbled something about me being fifteen.”

Ned got up and began to walk out the room.

“What is your problem, Ned,” Arya yelled at her boyfriend.

“That wasn’t me,” he yelled back.

“Yes, it was,” she responded in outrage.

“No, it wasn’t”. Ned walked over to Arya and stood in front of her. His eyes were watery. “That couldn’t have been me because when you were fifteen, you were at Wholistic Core.”


“All of this time, I thought that I was your first kiss,” Ned said quietly.

“It’s not that big of a deal, Ned, it was just a kiss,” she dismissed.

Ned looked at her as if he was slapped. “Just a kiss—you almost had sex with the guy for Gods sake.”

“Almost,” she emphasized. “But, I didn’t. I had sex with you first.”

“Only because HE put a stop to it,” Ned yelled. “You would have had sex with him if he didn’t.”

Arya didn’t deny it.

“Ned, I don’t see why you are upset; this happened before we even started dating,” she explained.

“You don’t see why,” he repeated. “I thought that I was your first kiss. The first guy you were ever interested in and it turns out that there was another guy you never mentioned.”

“Ned, he was just a friend,” she weakly explained. “It was just a kiss that got out of hand.”
“Please, Arya,” Ned began. “If you weren’t the least bit interested in that guy, you wouldn’t have asked him to kiss you whether or not you realize it.”

That’s not true,” she immediately contradicted.

“Okay, if it had been me or Mycah, would you have asked,” Ned questioned.

Arya became flustered. “No, it was different.”

“How so,” he perched his lips.

“He was my best friend,” she muttered.

“I thought Mycah and I were you best friends,” Ned corrected.

“The both of you are, but—“ Ned finished Arya’s statement.

“It’s different.” Her boyfriend couldn’t look at her.


“Look Arya, I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Okay.”

They left the topic alone and by late December, Arya wasn’t sure if she still wanted to be with Ned. She cared deeply for him, but it seemed as if she was holding on to a relationship that had already ran its course. Everything she did with him was out of habit and being with him was comfortable, safe, and predictable, but not challenging. He seemed like a friend.

By mid January, they had broke up.

Arya began to frequent the House of Black and White to escape Ned. She saw him everywhere. Ned wouldn’t show up at this particular coffee shop because he said that it was too artsy for him after they visited a few times.

“Where’s your boyfriend,” a handsome blond waiter asked. Arya had seen him in the coffee shop before and found him attractive, but they never spoke. She had been with Ned and wasn’t interested in him. “I haven’t seen him these past few weeks.

“We broke up,” she volunteered.

“What a shame,” he shook his head. His blue piercing eyes bore into her. “A man does not let go of a woman like you.”

“A man did not let me go,” Arya mocked. “I let him go.”

The waiter grinned at her before giving Arya a once over. He slowly licked his lips. “A man does not let go of a woman like you.”

After a few more visits, she finally learned his name.

“Jaqen H’ghar,” he sat down two cups of coffee, and then reached a hand out for Arya to shake.

Arya looked at his hand for a moment before shaking it. “Arya Stark.”
Jaqen firmly held her hand before placing a kiss of the back of it. Arya’s stomach fluttered. His blue eyes bore into her again as Arya examined the waiter. In addition to his hypnotizing eyes, his hair was less than an inch long with full lips and some facial hair.

“Nice to meet you,” he said after letting her hand go.

“Nice to meet you to,” she smiled faintly.

During every visit, Jaqen would show Arya either a painting of his or read her one of the poems he wrote. After a while, Jaqen decided that it was time for him to teach Arya get in touch with her inner artist. They spent their time painting, writing poetry, and molding clay.

On this particular day, they were painting, but it wasn’t your usual brushing a paintbrush against a canvas type thing. Jaqen had filled balloons with paint and attached them to the wall. He and Arya were throwing darts at them.

“And how is this art,” Arya asked as she burst a balloon.

“It’s about liberating yourself, lovely girl,” he spoke softly. “We lived in such a caged society that we need to break out every once in a while.”

“Oh kay,” she rolled her eyes as she continued to throw darts at the balloons.

After they were finished, Arya wet a face cloth, so she could wipe the paint from her face. As she wiped, Jaqen walked over and took the towel out of her hand and slowly, but thoroughly cleaned her face. The air became sexually charged and Arya didn’t know that wiping paint from someone’s face could be so erotic.

It was no surprise when Jaqen’s lips touched her face. Sensually, he placed kisses all of her face and neck, but never touched her mouth. Kisses were placed on each eyelid, her ears, under her ears, her chin, her nose, across her forehead, and then he moved to her collarbone.

With ease, he slid her pants and underwear off, and then taught Arya the true meaning of eating out.

The cold counter cooled Arya’s back as she spread her legs wider and encourage Jaqen to continue to pleasure her with his mouth. A series of unintelligible moans exited her mouth as she tried to contain her pleasure.

After Arya came down from her high, Jaqen helped her off of the table, and then placed a kiss on her mouth.

“Pretty woman, “ he began before kissing her hand. “Would you allow me the honor to make love to you?”

“Make love,” Arya asked taken aback.

“Yes,” he repeated to assure she did not hear him wrong. “I believe that every woman you lie with you should make love to. Love is an art. And art is must be enjoyed at its highest pleasure. Sex is for amateurs. Love is for artists.”

“I don’t know,” Arya said in an unsure tone.

Jaqen gently grabbed her from behind and let a hand slide down her thigh. His fingers stroke her expertly as Arya knees buckled. She tried to fuck herself on his hand to which Jaqen laughed at.
“I’m going to teach you how to make love like an artist,” he whispered in her ear. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she repeated as Jaqen bent her over the counter. He left for a moment before she heard the noise of a condom wrapper opening, and then he entered into heart a painstakingly slow pace. After Arya got used to him, Jaqen began to pick up pace and it was in that moment she could not ask for a better teacher.

In May, Arya watched as Jaqen walked around his room butt naked as he spoke on the phone. He was making arrangements for a showing of his work. Arya took a cigarette off of the nightstand and lit it as she watched him.

They had been lovers since the end of February and Arya found that she very much enjoyed this arrangement. There wasn’t any expectation of commitment, so there wasn’t any jealousy. Arya and Jaqen respected each other’s need for independence and never asked for anything more than a little companionship and intense lovemaking.

Arya played with the zippo lighter in her hands as she stared at her lover’s ass. She could still see the bite mark from last night. Jaqen was very firm, but soft and gentle.

Suddenly, Jaqen sat on the bed and pulled a cigarette off of the nightstand. He held it between his fingers as he spoke. “No, Marquis, that will not be satisfactory. I asked for one simple thing. Is that so hard?”

Jaqen placed the cigarette in his mouth and Arya lit it for him. She rested her hand on his thigh as he spoke.

“I don’t ask for too much,” he said into the receiver. “I just ask of one thing and I expect you to make it happen.”

After finishing his cigarette, Jaqen crushed it in the ashtray and began to place kisses beneath Arya’s breast and down to her navel.

Without a second thought, he hung up on the person, and then abruptly pulled Arya on her back. Out of habit, she opened her legs to him.

A quick peck was placed on her mouth.

“I’ve had many lovers, but the passion inside you is unparalleled,” he remarked.

For the next nine months, Jaqen indulged in every facet of Arya’s sexual curiosity. He would push her to the edges of her sexual pleasure until she hanging on for mercy. Coital bliss was endless and Arya’s sexual education was enriched.

“My parents would flip if they knew that I had a lover—an older one at that,” Arya said into the pillow.

“Why is that,” Jaqen rested a hand on her hip to get her attention.

“You’re 35 and I am 20,” she laughed. “They would think you were taking advantage of me.”

Jaqen shook his head. “A man does not advantage of Arya Stark—she takes advantage of him.”

Arya gave him a cheeky, lazy grin. “A man should tell my parents that.”

In late February, they mutually decided to stop being lovers. They had learned all they needed to
learn from one another.

Arya had no intentions on getting into another relationship of any sort when she found herself on an accidental date with Aegon Targaryen.

To get away from Braavos for a while, Arya had visited Dragonstone for a change of scenery for the weekend. She had decided to eat at a popular restaurant called ‘The Mad King’ when a breathtakingly good-looking man sat next to her. He had silver hair and violet eyes.

As she was about to order, he spoke.

“You should get the dragon stake, it’s to die for,” he suggested.

“And why is that?” Arya raised an eyebrow.

"It’s the best thing in here,” he stated. “Everything is delicious, but the Dragon stake…is a huge slab of meat with all kinds of spices and it is so tender and hot. You should try it with Dragon’s Blood.”

“Let me guess,” Arya said. “Is that red wine?”

The man widely grinned at her and nodded his head to indicate that she was correct.

“So, do you just go around making menu suggestions or is there a reason you are sitting next to me,” Arya asked.

A faint blush appeared on the man’s cheeks. “Apparently I have been stood up,” he said. “So, I came to the bar to order a meal, and then leave.”

Instead, they ended up talking until closing hours. The silver haired man introduced himself as Aegon Targaryen and they exchanged numbers so they could meet up again. Arya learned that twenty-seven and that he came from old money just like her in addition to being a practicing lawyer.

They would meet up a couple times every few months before Aegon suggested that they made their relationship official. Arya’s family took an immediate liking to Aegon. He was a charming man who was well read and vastly intelligent. Aegon spoke multiple languages and was well cultured. As much as the Starks like Ned, Aegon was several leagues above him.

Aegon was hilarious and adored Arya like hell. Every need he fulfilled and every desire he explored. His woman would never be found wanting.

When she was twenty-three, he proposed.

As fulfilling as the relationship was, Arya wasn’t sure if she was ready for marriage. Their relationship was fine as it was, right? Aegon wanted to get married and said that they could wait a few years before having kids, but Arya wasn’t sure what she wanted. She said yes, but she wasn’t sure if all her second-guessing about her impending nuptials was a good or bad thing. Their families and friends congratulated them, but Arya found it hard to be happy about her engagement. Was something wrong with her?

While Arya tried on wedding dresses, she panicked and wouldn’t let herself out of the dressing room.

Arya explained to Aegon that she was overwhelmed and needed some time to herself. It was all too much and happening too fast. She said that they needed to slow down and get in touch with who they used to be. It wasn’t about finding themselves, but making sure that they weren’t rushing into
marriage. So, they went on a break.

Three o’clock in the morning, Arya found herself sneaking out of the apartment of a man whose name she didn’t even know.

She never felt freer in her life.

When Arya explained that she couldn’t marry him—that they needed to go their own separate ways, Aegon didn’t look at her. A few days later as Arya packed her things out of their apartment, Aegon fought for her. He said that they were meant to be and that she was just scared. But, Arya shook her head and said no. She didn’t know what she was looking for, but this—whatever it was, wasn’t it. Heartbreak was scattered all of his face as she walked out of their apartment.

Arya moved back in with her parents. They let her stay in the guesthouse so she wouldn’t feel like she was living with them.

‘That’s love,’ Arya thought as she finished her fourth slice of pizza, and the washed it down with beer. It’s messy and ends in heartbreak. If her love life had been a Hollywood movie, it would have ended on the highest notes. With Ned, it would have ended with them going on a date for the first time to show that the guy got the girl after all of this time. With Jaqen, they would write it so the two lovers would fall in love and couldn’t be parted from each other. And with Aegon, Arya would have changed her mind and ran back to him because she really was scared, but wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

But, where would it have ended with Gendry?

It would have been a long, emotional hug with him getting in his taxi and Arya sitting in the same position upset. Later on that night, Gendry would have come back and said something cheesy like ‘their love could conquer all odds’ or some shit.

But, life is not a Hollywood love stories with movie script endings.

“Hey, Arya,” a male voice called to her.

“Yeah, Captain Lucas,” she answer as she walked over to him.

Captain Lucas handed file with a sheet of paper on the outside.

“Can you follow up with this witness?” He asked.

“Sure, no problem,” she responded, and then walked away and grabbed her jacket.

Arya arrived to the place in a timely manner and waited at the front desk for someone to come help her. She tapped on the bell a few times before calling out:

“What?”

“Can I help you, officer?” A Latino man walked through a door that was behind the desk and appeared in front of her.

“Hello,” Arya greeted. “I’m Officer Stark.” Quickly, she pointed to her badge. “I just have a few questions to ask Justin Franklin.”

The man seemed to think for a moment. “Honestly, I don’t know where he is, but I can ask someone for you,” he offered. “You can follow me if you like—it’ll be quicker that way.”
Arya followed the man through the garage and Arya’s jaw dropped at the man before her. It couldn’t be. Could it? Arya wondered how long had he lived in Winterfell.

Before her guide could tip his co-worker off to her presence, Arya reacted. She pulled the handcuffs out of its strap and stealthily approached her subject as he faced away from her.

Without hesitation, she pushed him against the wall, rapidly cuffed him, and said, “Gendry Waters, you are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you,” Arya recited as she held Gendry roughly against the wall.

Arya began to pat him down as Gendry tried to turn away from the wall.

“Hey!” She yelled. “Who told you to stop looking at the wall?”

“Officer,” Gendry said. “You must be mistaken. I’ve never broke a law in my life,” he explained. “There had to be some way we can sort this out.”

“Didn’t I tell you that you have the right to remain silent?” She said as she pushed him against the wall.

“Yes, but—“

“But, nothing,” she interrupted as she continued to pat him up and down, and then squeezed his ass.

“Are you sexually harassing me,” he questioned in disbelief. “Can I have your name, officer?”

“Why? So, you can report me,” she asked. “They aren’t going to believe you anyways. Name is Officer Stark—Officer Arya Stark.”

Gendry turned around. “You gotta be shitting me,” he laughed. “Let me out of these cuffs, you little twerp.”

“Hey, now, “ Arya teasingly warned. “You are talking to an officer of the law.”

She uncuffed Gendry and he picked her up and his arms and gave her a huge bear hug.

“Gendry,” she laughed. “You are going to break me in half if you don’t loosen your grip.”

“My bad,” he said as he smiled at his old friend. “It’s just—it’s been so long.”

“I know,” she agreed as she slightly pushed him.

“And you’re a cop like you said you would be. That’s great,” he congratulated.

“Thank you.” Arya looked at Gendry and saw that he was covered in grease. “And you became the mechanic you always wanted to be.”

“Well, that wasn’t hard.” He shrugged. “I was already working on cars when I got to Wholistic Core. I just needed to be licensed, was all.” Gendry looked at her uniform again. “So, what was it that you stopped by for?”

Arya stared at him blankly for a second. “Oh…I needed to ask Justin Franklin some questions is all. I can come back another time,” she waved off.

“Okay, I'll let him know,” Gendry said.
Arya reached into her pocket and pulled out a card. “You should give me a call sometime, so we can catch up,” she said as she smiled at him. “My cell number is on here—you can reach me anytime.”

“Anytime?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Anytime,” she repeated before leaving.

Her smile didn’t leave her face for a whole week.

Arya and Gendry met up a few days later for beer.

“You’re fifteen minutes late, Gendry,” Arya said as she tapped her watch.

“I’m sorry about that,” he apologized as he reached down to give her a hug. “But, I didn’t think you would mind too much.”

“Oh, why is that,” Arya leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs.

Gendry gestured for someone to come over and Arya turned her head and saw Hot Pie walking towards their table.

“Hot Pie,” Arya said as she hugged her old friend.

“Hey, Arya,” Hot Pie smiled at her.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way,” she began. “But, what are you doing here?”

“I live here,” he stated. “Gendry and I are roommates and when he told me that he ran into you, we’d thought we would surprise you.”

“This was a good surprise,” Arya looped one arm onto both of the men’s arms and walked back to their table.

Gendry explained that he had only stayed at Wholistic Core for two years before leaving. He enjoyed his time there, but that it was time to move on. He did all of the necessary things he needed to get his license and worked at King’s Landing for a few years before deciding he to move. It had gotten too expensive to live in King’s Landing. As he was doing his search, he found that Winterfell had a better standard of living and cost was way cheaper in comparison.

He and Hot Pie had ran into each other by accident and had started talking when Hot Pie mentioned that he was thinking of moving and needed a roommate. They had been living in Winterfell for two and a half years.

The next time they met up, it was just her and Gendry. They were watching crappy B movies and getting drunk on cheap liquor. Sometime during the night, they went from watching the movie to having an intense mak out on the couch as the stripped one another of their clothes.

Arya fell asleep on him.

They didn’t remember what happened the next day

Gendry lay across the width of his bed as he looked at the ceiling. Arya had been to his place a thousand times by now. She lay next to him, but her eyes were closed instead.

“Are you off tonight,” he asked. “Like you aren’t on stand by or anything?”
“No,” she mumbled.

“Good,” he replied. Gendry started rambling on about philosophical ideas as Arya got off of the bed. She walked around to the other side and looked into the mirror, and then Gendry. She wanted him—much more than she did when she was fifteen and just discovering her sexual desires.

Arya unhooked her holster and radio and sat it on Gendry’s dresser. She then took off her shoes before unbuttoning her shirt. Lastly, she let her pants slide down her legs. Arya just wore her hat, shirt, bra, and panties.

Gendry was still rambling. He hadn’t noticed her state of undress.

Unhurriedly, she crawled on the bed near Gendry’s head and it took him a moment to notice that she was wearing fewer clothes than before.

“Arya—” Arya cut off Gendry as she swung one of her legs over his body, so she could straddle him.

“Nine years, Gendry, nine years,” she said before kissing him passionately. Gendry responded to her kiss and put his hands on her waist. “I’m tired of waiting.”

Gendry slipped Arya’s police shirt off her shoulders and left moist kisses her collarbone. Arya moaned at his touch. Gently, she pushed him away as she reached for the bottom of his shirt and Gendry helped her take it off. Arya’s hat fell off her head and onto the floor as she planted kisses all over Gendry’s torso.

Their mouths met in frenzy while Arya undid his pants with one hand.

She pulled his pants to his knees, and then asked him where his condoms were. Gendry reached and got it for her and let her roll the condom onto his dick. In haste, Arya pulled off her panties and sank onto his cock with unrestrained fervency.

Their moans filled the air as Arya began to rock her hips.

Gendry’s eyes closed in intense pleasure as he felt repeatedly felt Arya’s warmth sheath him cock. She was in control—as always.

They looked at each other.

Finally.
Chapter Summary

“Umm…I don’t know,” Bran opened the passenger seat of her car. “The laughing, smiling, running your fingers through your hair shtick you had going on there. If I had to guess, it seems like you’re going steady with someone.”

The bathwater was steaming hot as the two sat in the tub and relaxed. Arya lathered a towel with soap and thoroughly scrubbed Gendry’s chest. As Arya washed him, her fingers accidentally grazed against his skin and Gendry chuckled in response, and then settled comfortably against her chest while she bathed him. With meticulous precision, Arya then cleaned Gendry’s hands. One by one, each finger was paid special attention before she moved to the next digit. Extreme concentration radiated from Arya’s line of vision as she focused on the task in front of her.

Gendry closed his eyes in relaxation as he let Arya do her work. His head lolled on her chest as he melted into her touch. They were soaking in aromatherapy and his muscles became less and less tense as the seconds passed. He had needed this. For weeks, Gendry’s body ached all over and he needed to decompress.

To get some extra money, Gendry had been helping out a buddy of his pack and move out homes and businesses. The work hadn’t been that hard, or so he thought. Over time, the stress from all of the heavy lifting eventually began to bother him. It wasn’t the lifting that had agitated Gendry per se, but rather the fact that he had been improperly lifting the objects. He had no idea that he was supposed to lift with his knees and not his back.

After Arya was finished with his fingers, she then began to clean his arms. As if it weighed nothing, she lifted one of Gendry’s arms in the air and wiped it down until she was satisfied that it was clean enough to her liking. When she moved to the next arm, she repeated the same actions as before. Her attention was then moved to his back after she finished with his arms. Rather than simply wash it, Arya also massaged his back as well. Gendry groaned in appreciation as Arya concentrated on loosening his muscles. Expert fingers dug into his tender muscles until they had slackened and became supple.

Firm hands pressed up Gendry’s back, and then delicately encircled his neck before Arya’s fingers fell to his shoulders. The pressure of her rub increased and Gendry was caught between pain and pleasure at her ministrations.

Arya kissed him on the forehead, and then on the ear and Gendry leaned into the touch of her lips.

“I had no idea you were this affectionate,” Gendry teased. “Or am I just special.”

Arya rolled her eyes, and then picked up a towel, dipped in the water, and wrung it out over his head.

“No, you’re just stupid,” she said warmly.

“I guess that means really I’m special,” he boasted confidently as the water ran down his face, which earned him a pinch in the side.
Gendry gazed at her, and then settled against her chest again as she leaned back on the wall of the tub. They sat in silence as Arya unnecessarily wiped Gendry’s face with the towel.

The experience was a unique one for Arya. This was not the first time she had shared a tub with a man, but this was her first time actually bathing another person. The act had a certain intimate feel about it as she touched Gendry in a non-sexual manner. They were naked and their skin was touching, but she wasn’t trying to have sex. Arya was content with how they were: touching, but not fucking.

A grin played on her lips as she lathered the towel up again, and then let the cloth gradually descend down Gendry’s body as Arya directed it to its destination: his cock. He moaned and thrust his hips up ever so slightly as Arya cleaned his genitals. Chapped lips grazed her chin and Arya hid a smile while she finished. Gendry pecked his way up to her lips before sliding a tongue in her mouth and pulling her closer. In response, Arya grabbed his shoulder to pull him closer as well, and then sucked on his bottom lip.

“You’re evil,” Gendry commented after he broke away, and then took the towel from her and cleaned his legs.

Arya grinned at his accusation.

“And so what if I am,” she countered. Briefly, she ran her fingers though his hair while he scrubbed his legs. For a moment, Gendry stopped what he was doing and looked at her, and then shook his head before he finished wiping his legs down.

“Come on, Cruella,” Gendry gestured for them to switch positions. Arya obliged and got up to get in front of Gendry as he simultaneously slid behind her, so his back was against the wall.

With strong hands, Gendry massaged her shoulder and Arya purred in approval. She had no idea that her body was so tense until Gendry began to work on her muscles. In tranquil quietness, he massaged Arya and her body started to loosen up for him.

Without looking, Arya reached over the edge of the tub and felt around for her watch. After checking the time, she leaned back onto Gendry’s chest and sighed as he squeezed her breasts.

“When are you leaving?”

“Now,” she replied as she slowly stood up.

Arya stepped out of the tub and picked up a towel from the floor to dry herself. She looked back and saw that Gendry’s head disappear under the water before reappearing again.

“I’ll call you later.” As Arya was leaving the room, Gendry tugged on her towel, and then looked up at her. “What?”

Gendry smirked, and then raised an eyebrow as his arm hung over the tub. Arya was about to reiterate that she needed to leave for work the next day when she realized what he wanted. She leaned down to place a quick kiss on his mouth and Gendry gripped the top of her towel to hold her in place and deepen the kiss.

While Arya drove home her fingers lingered on her lips in a sense of wonder.

The next day, with a smile plastered on her face, Arya walked into the office after her lunch break.

“How was lunch with the boyfriend,” Francisco inquired.
Even though Arya knew he was teasing her, she still reminded him, “Gendry is not my boyfriend.”

“Sure, he isn’t,” he said sarcastically before giving her an exaggerated wink.

Arya’s phone vibrated in her pocket and she took the device out and checked it. Gendry. Quickly, she responded to him, and then put her phone away.

Francisco laughed.

“You know, you have two different facial expressions, “ her co worker began. “One for Gendry and one for everyone else.”

Arya looked down to hide the blush that was slowly creeping upon her face. “No I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.” Francisco rested his elbows on his desk as he hands held his head up. “He clearly makes you happy, so what’s the issue?”

Concerning her relationship status with Gendry or, lack thereof, there wasn’t an issue. A while back, Gendry had stated that he was interested in being with her; it was her reluctance to enter into another relationship that interfered with a potential relationship. When Arya explained her hesitance to get into an exclusive relationship, Gendry didn’t agree, but he understood her reasons and respected her need to remain single. Commitment had never been a problem for her, despite her desire to be single. Arya had dated Ned for two years and was with Aegon for fours before getting engaged.

It was the expectations of others that dissuaded her from entering into something serious again. For the life of her, Arya couldn’t understand why people wanted her to be someone she wasn’t or to have desires that weren’t her own. At the same time, she wasn’t sure what she wanted, but it wasn’t whatever they were trying to force her to be. Their expectations added unnecessary pressure to her relationship and, perhaps, Arya shouldn’t have been so concerned with the opinions of others regarding her dating life, but she often wondered did her boyfriends want what others had voiced? As enjoyable as her relationships had been, neither Ned nor Aegon were guys she could imagine spending the rest of her life with and it was no fault of their own. She had loved the both of them, but she feared that the two of them loved her way more than she ever loved them.

There were couples where one person doesn’t love their partner as much as their partner loves them, but they want to. Sometimes, there is an imbalance of affection or devotion, but it isn’t because the love isn’t there—it just is. With Arya, she believed that the love was there, but not in the same way. She had loved Ned, but she had never been in love with him. He had loved her way before she was interested and long after she left; there was never any long-term future for them like the plans he had in mind. For a fact, Arya knew that she had been in love with Aegon and it was none of that cliché bullshit like bad timing. The timing had been right for them, but she had gotten everything she could out of that relationship. Aegon played his part in her life and it was time for her to move on. Of course, a part of her will always love and care for him, but not enough to want to stay in the relationship or rekindle it.

“Expectations,” Arya offered. “I just want to enjoy something without people expecting anything more out of it than what is advertised. That ruins the fun.”

Francisco looked at Arya as if he were examining her, and then nodded his head after a beat. “Well…while you are having fun, don’t assume that he is having fun as well; sooner or later he may want something more…concrete. Don’t enjoy yourself too much to a point where you let another woman present herself as a viable alternative.”

Arya gave him a hard stare. “You don’t me and you don’t know Gendry, so keep your opinions to
The man smirked at her. “I know enough,” he provided as he shrugged. “I don’t need to know all that complicated shit because it’s all the same when you boil it down. Every relationship is made of the same basic ingredients. It’s how you mix them that determines success or failure.” Francisco leaned back in his chair. “That advice you just gave me you should take for yourself. All other people’s expectations are just their opinions and beliefs on your relationship—it has nothing to do with what happens between you and whomever you choose to date. How can you easily dismiss what I say, but invest in their words because you know them? You aren’t dating them and they don’t clearly don’t know you that well if they expect things of you that you have no interest in.”

“Why do you care so much,” Arya’s expression softened as she crossed her arms.

“I don’t,” he answered. “You’re not in a relationship for me to care for, but you shouldn’t place so much value on others people’s expectations and opinions if want they want is a clear contradiction to who you are as a person. If you want to have fun, then have fun, but don’t let anyone else’s opinion about what you are doing interfere with what you want. At the end of the day, you are the one in that relationship, not them.”

The conversation was still stuck in Arya’s head a week later. As she walked to the hotel room door, she replayed every word that was said. Lightly, she knocked as she waited for someone to answer.

All of Arya’s life, she never cared what others thought of her. Well, a piece of her did, but she never took too much stock in their words because she knew who she was and she wasn’t going to change herself to please others. So, why did she think so highly of others now? Did she want people to approve of her choices? Did she want to be judged for having interests, opinions, and behaviors different from those around her?

“Arya!” Ygritte threw her hands up as if to signal a touchdown when she saw Arya on the other side of the door. Quickly, she took a gulp of her beer, and then dragged her fiancée’s little sister threw the door. “We were wondering when you were going to show up.”

“I’m only twenty minutes late,” Arya took a beer out of the cooler and picked up a bottle opener to pop off the cap.

“If you aren’t early, you’re late,” Ygritte plopped on the couch and patted for Arya to sit next to her. In response, Arya rolled her eyes and sat next to the bride to be.

Jon and Ygritte had been breaking up and making up for years. It was apparent that there were in love with one another, but their different personalities caused them to clash at times and made it hard for them to be together. From the very beginning, it had been obvious that Ygritte was invested in the relationship, but Jon wasn’t sure as to how he should handle a serious commitment. He seemed to be more in a relationship with the army than he was with Ygritte. They would have a good time together every once in a while, but he was never truly committed to her. In a fit of fury, Ygritte had given him the ultimatum: be more involved in their relationship or she was leaving.

She had left.

After their first break up, they never seem to be able to stay together longer than a few months. It was always a new issue. Ygritte was too wild, Jon was too serious, they were too far apart geographically, and so on. The longest they had ever been apart was when Jon got into a serious relationship with another woman, which resulted in an engagement. It took some maturing and deep soul searching for the two to finally find their way back to one another and put an honest effort into their relationship.
The girls consumed copious amounts of alcohol and threw money at the male strippers.

“Woo, take it off,” Ygritte yelled before barking at the stripper. Arya and Sansa made faces at her before breaking out in laughter. The bride to be shrugged, “What? I have to get it out of my system, right?”

A dark haired stripper with ripped abs danced in front of Arya as she tucked a few singles in the band of his underwear. He began to provocatively roll his hips in her direction as Arya watched appreciatively.

In the corner, Sansa innocently danced with the third stripper. She was trying to break loose and have fun, but it felt wrong to be in this type of environment. The only reason Sansa has came was because her sister and friends really wanted her to be there.

After the strippers left, the women played some games and chatted for a few hours. Most of the women had left, besides Ygritte, only Sansa, Arya, Jeyne, and Margaery remained. They went to the downstairs casino because the party wasn’t over, despite the strippers and most of the women leaving.

Sansa wasn’t having any luck and decided to stop, so she wouldn’t lose any more money. Margaery was doing fairly well, but her hand wasn’t as hot as she would have liked. Jeyne stuck to the slots and stopped gambling once her money ran out. She had made a little profit during her time at the machines. Ygritte would win large sums of money, bet it all, lose it, and then wash, rinse, and repeat.

Unlike the rest of the girls, Arya was having better luck. From time to time, she gambled with her co-workers and was great at determining when she should and shouldn’t play her hand. It was all a numbers game. You had to learn when to fold, bet it all, take a step back, and lose a little money in order to really make money. Arya supposed that life was the same. You can’t expect a profit in something you don’t invest in.

“Uh, I hate you,” Ygritte said as she stared at the younger woman’s chip stacks. A chuckle escaped Arya’s mouth as she lit her cigar and inhaled deeply.

“I’m flattered by your jealousy,” Arya said before blowing out smoke rings.

Ygritte pouted. “This isn’t fun anymore; let’s go.”

“It’s your party.” Arya collected her chips and went to go cash them before joining the other girls.

The party of five ended up at a pancake house. Both Arya and Ygritte stuffed their faces as the other girls watched with a mixture of disgust and intrigue. In less than five seconds, Ygritte gulped down her orange juice and ordered another one.

“Can you bring back another cup of coffee as well,” Arya added before chewing on a piece of bacon.

“Honestly, I never thought I would marry Jon,” Ygritte admitted To Arya. “Well, I haven’t yet, but I didn’t think he would propose. You know, Jon and I had been together longer than Robb and Jeyne when they got married, but Jon was never sure or it was always ‘too much was going on’. Then he got engaged to you know who after we broke up for the hundredth time.” The redhead had rolled her eyes as she thought back to Jon’s former fiancée. She stuffed some eggs in her mouth and chewed as she spoke, “When we got back together, I didn’t know what to expect. I mean, I know Jon said he was serious this time around and knew what he wanted, but we had broken up so many times that I just thought I was the familiar route. For a while, I had been jealous of you.”
Arya looked at her soon to be sister in law and laughed. “Why?”

The waitress arrived and gave Ygritte and Arya their drinks.

“Why?” Ygritte stared incredulous at Arya. “You had this hot, insanely intelligent guy who was crazy about you and wanted to marry you. He accept you for who you were—loved it even.” After some thought, she added, “Jon has always loved me for who I was, but he has learned to stop caring what other people thought and let me be who I am without worrying about how people feel. Or what society thinks. Aegon never cared.”

“Well, as you can see, we didn’t get married,” Arya stated nonchalantly. “You should have been jealous of Sansa. Her and Willas actually got married.”

“The simple act of being engaged wasn’t what made me jealous,” she explained. “It was the fact that you were a wild child like me in many ways. You know what it is like to be misunderstood and did whatever you wanted and Aegon loved it all. I thought that if someone could embrace and love your flaws, then surely someone could do the same with me. I knew Jon was the one, but he was just so damn stubborn.” Ygritte began to tear up and wiped her eyes and said exaggeratedly, “Look at me being an overly emotional woman.”

Sansa extended her hand and grabbed Ygritte’s forearm.

“Hey, stop crying,” she said softly with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “This is your last night of being a bachelorette…enjoy it.”

Ygritte smiled back. “I am. Strippers, naughty games, poker, and food—a girl couldn’t ask for more.” The women laughed. “I always thought that my bachelorette party would be raunchier than this. What exactly did I have planned—no clue, but I just wanted it to be unforgettable. But, I had the most AMAZING bachelorette party planned for Arya before she had called off the wedding,” Ygritte shook her head at the lost opportunity.

“I bet you did,” Arya grinned.

“So, why did you call the wedding off?” The other three women groaned at Ygritte’s question. “What?”

Margaery looked at Arya then Ygritte. “Arya doesn’t even know why she called the wedding off. Every time we ask her it’s always some bullshit answer.”

Arya threw a cut up piece of pancake at Margaery. “Hey!”

“You know it’s true, Arya,” Jeyne added. “‘Not this’ is not a good answer as to why you couldn’t marry Aegon.”

Sansa raised her hand in order to silence the women. “Yes, ‘not this’ is a vague answer, but Arya clearly wasn’t ready for marriage. She looked very stressed when they got engaged and, if you ask me, she’s looked happier than she’s ever been since they split.”

Jeyne nodded in agreement. “Yeah, you do have a glow about you that was missing while you were engaged.”

“Was it that same glow that was missing while she was with Ned,” Ygritte proposed with a glint in her eyes before sipping her juice.
Arya glared at Ygritte.

“What?” She laughed, and then leaned her head back against the seat cushion. Her eyes drifted shut as she spoke. “Ned was such a nice guy and he was so sweet. I remember how I used to think that you two had such a solid relationship, and then the night of the Halloween party made me reconsider.”

Margaery raised an eyebrow. “What Halloween party?”

“It was that Halloween you got sick with the stomach virus,” Sansa reminded and the girl made at face at the memory.

“Let’s not go down that road by re-living the memory,” Margaery stared at her food strangely before pushing it away. “So what happened?”

Sansa turned to her friend. “I never told you?”

“No,” Margaery replied. “You never told me about the Halloween party.”

“You are kidding,” Sansa said in disbelief.

“No,” Ygritte said excitedly. “I have to tell this story.” There was a moment of quiet so Ygritte could gather herself. “So, Jon and I threw this INCREDIBLE Halloween party and after it was over, we had a small after party. It was Jon and I, Robb, Jeyne, Sansa, Willas, Arya, and Ned.”

Arya groaned and sat her head in her hands.

“We were playing cards and asking about everyone’s first kiss,” Margaery looked intrigued as she glanced over to Arya to in curiosity. “And everyone was talking about their boring first kisses and Arya was laying on the floor drinking out of a Vodka bottle So, Ned tells us that he and Arya had their first kiss together and it was a little tongue. Now, no one at the time knew that Arya was drunk off her ass.” Arya looked as if she was going to dispute Ygritte’s claim, but thought better of it. Why deny the truth? She had been drunk off her ass. “She gets up and it like ‘Wait! Just a little tongue? We almost had sex.’”

Margaery gasped and looked at Arya. “Arya! You almost had sex during your first kiss,” she aid in a scandalous tone.

“Hold on, it gets better—or worse,” Ygritte grinned. “Ned denies this and they go back and forth. Arya says that almost had sex and Ned says they didn’t. So, Arya says that she asked him to kiss her because they were friends or some bullshit like that and how they were taking each other clothes off and shit and that she was fifteen.”

“But, wasn’t she at that camp?” Margaery looked confused.

Ygritte snapped, and then and pointed at her, “Exactly! Arya’s first kiss was with another guy who she almost had sex with. Arya was SO drunk off her ass that she mixed up the two and Ned got upset.”

Margaery exaggeratedly gasped, “Arya!” She hit the woman on her arm. “You naughty girl.” Arya rolled her eyes and stuffed more food into her mouth.

“Poor kid, when I looked in his eyes, I could see the future he had planned for you two,” Jeyne said as she thought of Ned.
“I think everyone could,” Sansa responded.

“Who was the guy?” Ygritte asked as the other ladies stared at Arya expectantly.

“Just some guy at camp,” Arya said in a neutral tone.

A boisterous laugh filled the air as tears streamed from Ygritte’s face. She was partially drunk, tired, and had a caffeine buzz going on as well.

“Just some guy,” she repeated. “For just some guy, you are awfully secretive about him. And you almost had sex with him. Just some guy my ass.”

“We got carried away,” Arya shrugged, and then sipped her coffee. “Nothing happened after that,” she lied.

There was a sea of contradicting emotions Arya felt about that night and Gendry in general. Without a doubt, Arya adored Gendry—he was her favorite person in the world, but his presence in her life was problematic. If they had been just friends rather pretending what they felt back then was purely platonic, Arya wouldn’t have any issues talking about him. But, the line had been crossed way back when and his age had posed a huge problem. Yes, she was older now and legal to do whatever the hell she wanted to, but opening that can of worms started a conversation she didn’t want to have. It wouldn’t have matter what she said or how she explained it, no one would have believed that Gendry didn’t take advantage of her, except Yoren and those at the camp.

Despite the way things had ended when Gendry had left, every other memory Arya had had of him were filled with warm feelings. Her family would taint that. They would make it seem as if Gendry had been a predator and she had been his prey. They would take his one major slip up as him being an untrustworthy guy. Arya cared too much for Gendry to put him in that position.

Arya trusted Ygritte, but not when it came to Jon. She would tell her soon to be husband and the family would find out. Sansa wouldn’t understand and would be judgmental, but it would eventually get back to her parents by some unfortunate accident. Jeyne would tell Robb and Margaery would tell Sansa, so Arya told no one. A secret is the safest when only a few people knew it, which were only she and Gendry. Well, the identity was a secret, not the act itself.

Ygritte looked at Arya in suspicion.

“You don’t just get carried away,” Ygritte contradicted in disbelief. “I mean, if he was ‘just’ your friend. Now, if you had a thing for him, it’s entirely possible.”

“Well, he was hot,” Arya conceded. “Rugged looks and smoking body—always walked around shirtless. Hell, even the camp therapist had admired his…physique.”

Fascinated, Margaery raised an eyebrow. “So, did you ever sleep with this smoking hot guy?”

“I told you—“ Margaery cut her off.

“No, I’m not talking about at the camp, but after you left,” she explained. “Did you two ever run into each or something and resolve the unfinished business.”

Momentarily, Arya contemplated how much information she should give. The ladies didn’t know anymore than her and Gendry almost having sex and her vague description of him. She thought ‘what the hell’ and answered the question.

“Yes,” she grinned.

“NO!”

“So, it must have been recently, like, after you broke up with Aegon,” Sansa pieced together.

“That’s not necessarily true,” Arya denied, and then tried to pick off of Ygritte’s plate before having her hand slapped away.

“Yes, it is,” Sansa countered. “You were home all summer when you got back and, when you weren’t with us, you were with Ned and Mycah. Then you went away to school and spent all of your time with Ned who you dated for two years. After you broke up with him, you went through that period where you didn’t want to be bothered with guys. When you got over that, you were with Aegon for four years. Unless, you cheated on Ned or Aegon, I don’t see how you could have slept with the mystery guy somewhere in that timeline.”

Arya raised her eyebrows, and then grinned. “No, I said that I didn’t want to date, not that I didn’t want to be bothered with guys,” she clarified.

Sansa raised widened her eyes in shock.

“So…” her older sister trailed off.

“So, I had sex with guys that I wasn’t in a relationship with,” Arya answered. Sansa didn’t mind pre-marital sex, but she believed that people should only have sex when they are in a relationship with one another.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” The oldest Stark daughter looked to be interested in this new revelation.

“Because you can’t hold water,” Arya retorted. “I didn’t want mom and dad to know that I was having no strings attached sex.”

The waitress came by and picked up their plates before being instructed to keep the coffee coming.

“I can keep secrets.” Arya laughed at her sister.

“No, you can’t,” she shot back. “But, I’m being misleading. You’re right: I slept with the mystery guy after I broke up with Aegon. I only slept with one person after Ned and before Aegon, but we were lovers for a year.”

Ygritte coughed on her food. “No fucking way,” she exclaimed, and then raised her hand to high five Arya. “This is what I mean when I say that we are alike. A girl should be able to get a good fuck without always having to be in a relationship. And sometimes stranger sex is the best sex.”

Arya slowly moved her head side to side as she weighed Ygritte’s statement. “Yeah, sometimes. I had this one night stand after I called off the engagement it and it was the worst sex I ever had in my life,” she provided. “The idea of it was freeing because I had felt trapped with Aegon, despite not knowing why, but the sex was atrocious. Even if the guy did want to see me again, I would have not been a repeat customer—hell, I wished I could have gotten a refund. That’s how back the fuck was.”

“It’s really hit or miss,” Ygritte laughed.

“It is,” Arya sipped her coffee, and then pulled out a pack of cigarettes. She pulled out two and handed Margaery and Ygritte one each before pulling out her own. The flame from the zippo lighter burned brightly as she lit each cigarette.
Briefly, Margaery examined the cigarette in approval before exhaling, and then looking at Arya. “So, what was M like without the nitty gritty details?”

A while ago, Arya had figured out that Sansa and co lived vicariously through her. Well, not Ygritte because they were birds of the same feather, so she lived through herself. But, Sansa, Jeyne, and Margaery were traditional women who played their roles well. Although Margaery did some ‘living’ of her own, it was in secrecy. Her family would kill her if they thought she partook in the ways of fast women. Not only that, she was married as well. In a span of 12 years, Margaery had been married three times and divorced twice—all to Baratheon men.

As frustrated as Arya got with her parents, she thanked the Gods that her father never saw her as a business asset to move around as he pleased.

In thought, Arya brought her cigarette to her mouth and inhaled slowly. She tried to bite back a grin as the remembered Gendry’s skills in bed. Her grin began to widen at the memories of the pleasure Gendry cultivated within her. As she exhaled, she answered, “Worth the wait.” The girls didn’t miss the twinkle in her eyes as she spoke.

After they left the pancake house, the women went back to the hotel room and went to sleep. Arya and Sansa shared a bed as well as Ygritte and Margaery and Jeyne slept on the couch.

Over the next few days, Arya schedule had been booked. There had been Jon’s wedding and she was the maid of honor, which surprised her when Ygritte first told her. Then, she had to gather notes and write reports to give to a detective for an ongoing trail. This was in addition to working out an open case for a series of thefts in Winterfell. Luckily, she had caught a break in the case and they had arrested the suspect.

Arya just wanted to rest. She wanted to go to Gendry’s place and fall asleep in his bed, preferably with him in the bed and going to sleep with her.

Firmly, she knocked on his door and waited for Gendry to answer.

“Hey,” Gendry welcomed as he opened his door. Briefly, he took in Arya’s appearance. “You look beat.”

“Thanks, for noticing,” she said exhaustedly, and then gave him a deep kiss. Gendry responded with the same amount of intensity before breaking away and placing a kiss on her lips one more time.

“No problem.” He grinned at her, and then kissed her nose as his thumbs gently rubbed her temples. “If you aren’t too tired, Hot Pie is making dinner and you know that there is more than enough for you.”

Arya didn’t need to be told twice.

Hungrily, she dug into her plate as Gendry and Hot Pie spoke about cars. If it was any other day, Arya would’ve joined them, but she was bone tired and just wanted to fill her belly, and then sleep like the dead. Tomorrow was her day off, so she could sleep in for as long as she wanted. And she would.

Almost as if she was having an orgasm in her mouth, Arya groan at the deliciousness of the food. Hot Pie had cooked baked chicken, mashed potatoes, fresh corn on the cob, and cornbread. To drink with the meal, there was some expensive wine and for dessert, there was blue berry pie.

Randomly, Hot Pie asked, “How long have you two been fucking?”
Gendry choked on his wine. Frantically, he tried to clear his pipes and went to go get a drink of water. In no time, he gulped down his glass of water and Arya continued to eat her food as if Hot Pie said nothing.

“We’re not having sex,” he denied, and then filled his cup with more water.

“So, you’re dating?” Hot Pie sipped his wine and looked at Gendry expectantly.

“No,” he denied adamantly.

“Seven months,” Arya answered without looking away from her plate. “We’ve been fucking for seven months.”

“Arya!” Gendry gave his lover an unbelieving look.

“What,” she shrugged. “He clearly knows. It doesn’t take a genius to piece together that something has been going on between us,” she explained. “We always smell like each other; I either smell like your cologne or musk or you smell like my perfume. OR we smell like the same soap. I’m in your room a little too much and often spend a night in there. Hell, sometimes I even wear your clothes. He was bound to figure it out sooner or later.”

Hot Pie burst out laughing as tears began to stream down his face. For a minute straight, he wouldn’t stop laughing as Gendry stared at his friend like he two heads. Arya stole a piece of Gendry’s chicken and finished it before cutting herself a slice of pie.

“What’s so funny?” Gendry asked incredulously.

“I was just fucking with you when I asked about you and Arya,” Hot Pie admitted as he cackled. Gendry turned stoplight red.

He looked at Arya. “Hot Pie didn’t even know about us and you spilled the beans.”

“No,” Hot Pie inserted. “You spilled the beans. Arya confirmed it without a shadow of a doubt, but your overreaction pretty much said it all.”

Arya turned to Gendry and stuck out her tongue.

“So, you didn’t suspect anything before then?” Gendry crossed his arms and leaned against the kitchen sink.

“Well, sorta,” the cook admitted. “I mean, but you two have always been closer than me and you or me and Arya. I figured you two may have fucked once or twice, but not for seven months. Seven Hells,” Hot Pie laughed again. “I don’t understand the secrecy though since you guys are just fucking.”

A loud belch filled the room as Arya fork clanged against the plate and she got up to sit her dishes in the sink. As she walked away from the sink she grabbed Gendry. Over her shoulder she said, “Because we didn’t want you to read too much into it and feel like a third wheel.”

“Well, thanks for your consideration,” he playfully mocked.

As the closed the door behind them, there was a click. Arya stripped down to her bra and underwear, and then helped Gendry out of his clothes. Tenderly, she peppered kisses against his skin as she unbuckled his pants. Gendry tilted her head up and captured her lips with his own. Passionately, she pulled his closer, and then smiled against his mouth. A while ago, Gendry joked that they could fuse
together and he would still never be close enough to her liking. Of course, she called him a stupid bull, but now she surmised that he was right.

Even the times when he was inside her and she didn’t know where he ended and she began, Arya desired to have him closer.

They fell into bed together as a mess of tangled limbs. Their lips never broke apart while they settled comfortably in the bed. From experience, Gendry knew that this wasn’t going to lead to sex. Arya just wanted to be touched before she fell asleep. She just wanted to have him close.

A few minutes later, Arya fell asleep cradled in Gendry’s arms. His arms were wrapped tightly around her and he held her from behind. Contently, Arya snuggled further into her and a light snore fell from her lips.

In the morning, through all of the tossing and turning at night, Arya woke up with her head nestled on Gendry’s chest and an arm and leg splayed over his body. Gendry’s chin rested on her head and his hand was on her waist as if to keep her in place, which was most likely the case. He had such a small bed that she only reason she fit was because she was small herself.

With affectionate fingers, Arya traced invisible patterns on Gendry’s stomach.

“That tickles,” Gendry murmured into her hair.

“Does it,” Arya matched his tone as she continued her ministrations.

“Yeah,” he said as he kissed the top of her head.

As if Gendry didn’t say anything, Arya continued to draw patterns on his stomach. She liked this: just her and Gendry lying in the bed on a Saturday morning.

Arya lifted her head off of Gendry’s chest and pressed a kiss near his nipple, and then bit hard enough to elicit a hiss, but not enough to harm. Another kiss was pressed near his other nipple before Arya kissed her way up to Gendry’s mouth. She then placed a wet smooch on his ear and Gendry grinned against her arm to hold back his laughter. This time, their lips met lazily as Arya’s stomach fluttered for an unknown reason.

Their kiss had been tender and languid.

When they broke apart, Arya looked at him and asked, “Who was your first time?”

“Where did that come from?” Gendry chuckled, and then placed a kiss on her forehead. “And it’s not like you know her anyways.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “I’m curious. It doesn’t matter if I know her or not. I just want to know—and I told you about Ned.”

“I didn’t ask about him though.” Arya bit down hard on Gendry’s lip and he snorted. “Okay, okay,” he relented. “Her name was Danica and she was a quiet girl. We had spent a lot of time together and I liked her—she was smart and funny. And she was cute,” he added as an afterthought. “When we had sex, it was clumsy and over it a matter of seconds. It had been a one time thing and neither one of us had looked too much into it. We both knew that our relationship would never amount to anything besides what it already was. It couldn’t be.”

“Why is that?” Arya’s thumb caressed his hairline as she looked at him affectionately.
“Because she was fifteen,” Gendry snorted trying to bite back his laughter. In response, Arya muffed him on his forehead.

“You’re an ass, you know that,” she said as she tried to get up, but Gendry grabbed her and held on tightly. “Gendry!”

Gendry guffawed as he tried to keep Arya in place. “I’m sorry; that was wrong of me.” Arya still struggled. “I’m promise I will tell you the real story if you sit still.”

For a few moments afterwards, Arya struggled until she tired herself out, and then relaxed in Gendry’s arms.

“So,” Gendry said loudly as he rubbed Arya’s knee. “I had had moved back to King’s Landing and had been there for a few months when a couple buddies and I decided to go to this bar called The Red Woman.” Gently, he grabbed Arya’s hand and held it between his hands. “I was 24 at the time and was just trying to have fun with the guys. As the guys and I are fucking around and getting shit faced, we see this gorgeous woman. Everything about her stood out from all of the other girls. She had bright red hair, was a few years older, a well portioned body—her dress was red too. But, the thing that stood out about her the most was her confidence. She walked as if she owned the place—later, I found out that she did. This woman just looked as if she could have whatever she wanted and you would give it to her just to make her happy.”

In intrigue, Arya raised an eyebrow.

“In my mind, I had no chance with her. She was just too beautiful and I didn’t have any experience with women besides kissing. Even then I had never really been the initiator,” Gendry explained. “I mean, the furthest I had ever got to the point with any girl was with you.”

“Really,” Arya snuggled closer to Gendry.

“Yeah, really,” he confirmed. “I have never been good at talking to girls even as friends.” Gendry shrugged. “So, as we are talking, the woman walks over to us:

The five guys behaved rambunctiously as the redheaded woman stood in front of the table. They don’t notice her at first.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” she said in a soft tone as she mysteriously grinned at the group.

“Hello, beautiful,” a blond man responded as he reached for her hand and kissed it. The woman firmly pulled her hand from his grip, and then looked around the table before her eyes settled on Gendry.

“Hi,” she retorted back to the man as her green eyes connected to blue eyes.

“Hey,” the blond man said to get her attention. The redheaded woman kept staring at Gendry. “My name is Xavier, but my friends call me Hawk.”

“Nice to meet you, Hawk.” Again her eyes never broke contact from Gendry’s. She smirked, and then pursed her lips at the dark-haired man. “And what is your name?”

Gendry gulped, and then stuttered, “G-Gendry.”

“Gendry,” she tried out the name as it rolled off of her tongue. “Hi Gendry, I’m Melisandre, but friends call me Mel.”
Mel extended a hand for Gendry to shake and he stared at her hand blankly. The woman let her hand fall to her side and seemed to be flattered by Gendry’s response to her.

“Your name sounds pretty,” he choked out.

“Why, thank you,” Mel looked Gendry up and down, and then reached down and grabbed his hand. “Join me for a drink.”

“Okay,” Gendry replied as Mel dragged him away.

Gendry and Mel had a few drinks in silence as Mel looked at her male companion as if he was dinner. When she got up, she took a hold of Gendry’s shirt and made him follow her. Mel led him to an office, and then pulled keys out of her pocket before opening the door.

“You work here?” Gendry asked after Mel gradually pushed him on the couch. She straddled him soon afterwards before placing a moist kiss on his lips.

“You could say that,” she lightly chuckled. “I own the bar.”

“Oh, so you’re the Red—“ Mel’s lips crushing against his cut off Gendry.

Mel pulled back abruptly and looked into his eyes. “Stop talking,” she warned, and then bit his lip. Gendry complied with orders and he ended up on his back as she took off his shirt and had removed his pants.

When Mel sat on his cock, Gendry gasped.

“You like that?” Mel asked as she moved her hips and Gendry moaned in response.

Later on, as Mel got dress, she asked, “That was your first time, wasn’t it?”

Gendry shook his head yes in response. His face was bright red as he looked everywhere except Mel.

A finger softly traced along Gendry’s jawline before two fingers were placed under his chin, and then titled his head up to look at her. Mel’s eyes had not a trace of mocking or disappointment.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” she declared as she palmed his face and her thumbed caressed the skin just below the hairline. “You may not possess the skill of an experienced man, but your eagerness to please me made it very enjoyable.”

Mel sat on Gendry’s lap and kissed the younger man deeply as he timidly wrapped his arms around her. They broke away to catch their breaths and Mel looked into his eyes and her lips rubbed against Gendry’s as she spoke.

“I want to see you again.” Another moist kiss was placed on his lips. “Do you want to see me again?”

“Yeah,” Gendry nodded as if he was in a trance.

“Good.” Mel grinned as she got up, and then went over to her desk and wrote on a piece of paper. After she was finished, she handed it to Gendry. “I look forward to seeing you soon.”

“So, did you call her back,” Arya lips moved against Gendry’s as she spoke.

“Yeah,” he answered plainly. Arya raised her eyebrows as an indication to be more detailed. Gendry
softly exhaled as he played in her hair. “We just had sex…I thought I would see her one more time and should would be done with me, but we ended up having sexual relations for four years.”

“Did you like her,” she inquired.

“Yeah, but not in that way.” Gendry seemed to be lost in thought. “Mel was a very…interesting person and she was always so sure of herself. And she was very experienced. It was a real confidence booster that she chose me as her lover.”

“Do you think she was interested in you romantically?”

Gendry laughed. “Mel? No,” he denied. “Mel had higher aspirations than being in a relationship with a bastard mechanic.”

“She owned a bar,” Arya stated. “Not to shit on her aspirations, but unless she was trying to open up a chain of bars or something, I don’t think she had any right to look down on you.”

“Mel didn’t look down on,” he defended. “And she never made me feel bad about myself—she actually supported me. She owned the bar as a hobby. I mean, she ran the thing pretty damn well, but she was involved in big business. She was the advisor of Stannis Baratheon.”

“Really?” Arya rolled over onto her back as she looked at Gendry.

“And his mistress as well,” he grinned. “He was the one who gave her money to open the bar. It was her who resurrected Stannis’ company from the dead.”

“Now, this story has gotten infinitely more interesting,” Arya, remarked as Gendry played with her panty line. “You were fucking the mistress of Stannis Baratheon—wow, Gendry, what else haven’t you told me?”

Gendry rolled his eyes.

Hours later, Arya left Hot Pie’s and Gendry’s apartment and went home. Rather than go to the guesthouse, she went to the main house to visit her father.

“Hey, dad.” Arya kissed his bearded face before pulling a chair up to sit next to him.

“Hey yourself,” Ned said as he sign his name on a document, and then put it in a manila folder before depositing the folder in his desk.

In silence, Arya watched her father work as she sat next to him. Arya cherished the moments where she could be near her father and didn’t have to say or do anything, she could just be. Over the years, she was reaching that type of relationship with her mother, but Ned always had a better understanding of his daughter than Catelyn did. One minute Arya would talk to you and the next, she just wanted to be near you.

Ned typed up a few documents, made a couple of calls, and wrote some notes before calling it quits for the day. Arya helped him put some folders away as Ned made sure everything was in order.

“Are you bringing someone to the barbeque next week,” Ned asked causally as he turned his swivel chair to face his daughter.

“Uh, yeah,” she misunderstood. “I invited Ned and Mycah, but I could ask a few other people if they want to come.”
Ned smiled to himself. “No, I mean like a special someone,” he clarified. “Your mother has reached the conclusion that you have a secret boyfriend and I can’t say that I blame her.”

“Well, sorry to disappoint, but there is no ‘secret boyfriend’,” the young woman made air quotes as she dismissed his inquiry. “I’ve introduced the family to the two WHOLE boyfriends that I have had. Why would I start keeping them a secret now?”

“I don’t know,” he supplied. “But, you have a very secretive nature, so it’s not like you can fault us. You dated Ned for about four months before casually telling us that you were in a relationship. And after saying that you were dating round, you bring Aegon over for dinner and announce that you two had been dating for five months.”

Arya popped some candy in her mouth and stared at her father in rebellious disbelief. “I was just trying to see how the relationship worked out. I don’t want to introduce to you every guy I date, and then we break up three days later.”

“Is that what you are doing now?” Ned raised an eyebrow and grinned at his daughter.

“No,” she shot down. “I’m not dating anyone.”

Ned gave his daughter one last look before dropping the subject.

Later on that night, Arya and her siblings decided to go to midnight bowling in downtown Winterfell.

Robb was in the lead, but Arya was a close second while Sansa, Bran, and Rickon moved in and out of third interchangeably. Jon would have been with them, but he was still on his honeymoon.

After Arya bowled a strike, she looked at Robb and shot an invisible arrow at him before sipping her beer. Robb staggered back as if he was shot, and then laughed at his little sister’s competitive nature. He knew that the next time they played, that Arya would beat him and it wouldn’t be because he let her.

As she watched Bran bowl, Arya pulled out a cigarette and lit it. She recalled her conversation with her father form earlier.

Aloud she asked, “Am I secretive?”

Her siblings said without hesitation, “Yes.”

“How?” Arya asked loudly as she looked at her youngest brother.

“How are you now,” Rickon laughed as he picked up his ball.

“Is there anything wrong with holding my cards close to my chest,” she rhetorically asked, and then puffed on her cigarette again.

“Also known as being secretive,” Robb smirked. Arya rolled her eyes, and then glared at her eldest brother.

“Just because I don’t broadcast everything about my life does not mean I am secretive. You guys don’t need to know my every action,” she defended.

Sansa sipped her drink, and then offered her input, “No, you are very secretive, Arya. Gods, you told me a week ago that you had a lover for a year only to prove that I didn’t know everything about your
“Whoa,” Bran said as he looked at Arya. “You had a lover!”

Arya took another puff, and then exhaled before focusing her eyes on Sansa. “Like I told last week: you can’t hold water.”

Out of embarrassment, Sansa blushed, and then looked away from Arya as she drank her beer.

“Yes,” Arya confirmed. “But, it was years ago. I don’t see why the family needs to know that. I don’t ask about you guys sex lives and I don’t want to know for that matter.”

“I guess,” Robb conceded. “With you, though, it’s like pulling teeth to get you to open up about your love life. We only find out stuff about you if you are trying to prove a point or if you slip up—like that whole first kiss fiasco with Ned.”

“What kiss fiasco,” Rickon asked in intrigue. Robb was about to tell his brother when Arya loudly groaned.

“Seriously?” She put out her cigarette and got up. “You guys don’t talk about that thing for YEARS and all of the sudden, it is a hot topic.”

Bran laughed at her. “What’s your problem?”

“We asked her about it last week at Ygritte’s bachelorette party,” Sansa informed, and then caught them up to date with what happened. As she wrapped up her story, she added, “Turns out she slept with him some time after she broke up with Aegon.”

“Arya, you know what your problem is.” Bran dipped his nacho chip in some cheese and meat, and then ate it.

“No, please enlighten me,” she mocked.

“You have control issues,” her brother informed. “You always have. That’s why you are so secretive. You don’t want us to know anything unless everything is in order or if you can control whatever situation or people involved. You want things you how you want them and to hell with everything else.”

Arya pouted. “That’s not true.”

“But, it is,” he refuted. “We only find out about your failures after you have an achievement to boast about. You don’t tell us about relationships or break ups right away because you want to make sure you’re not emotionally vulnerable—can’t be too happy or too sad. You like neutrality, so you won’t appear weak. And whenever your sense of control is threatened, you are upset and respond negatively. There isn’t any real reason to get mad about a kiss that happened years ago, or how you accidentally told Ned about it, but you are. It’s because you no longer have control over your personal information.”

The other reason, Arya thought, was crisis prevention.

“Whatever.” Arya replied, and then went to order herself two hotdogs. While she was there, she got
another beer and some cookies.

‘I do not have control issues.’ She thought to herself. People didn’t have to know all of your business. They just messed up things and Arya would prefer to have things mess up on her own terms. Or people who were intrusive and gave unnecessary advice. If she wanted them to know and give advice, she would tell them and ask for their opinion.

By the second game, Arya had calmed down and channeled her frustration into kicking her siblings asses. Robb was right, Arya did beat them the next time they played, but it was the following game and rather than the next time they visited the bowling alley. Out of ten frames, she bowled eight strikes and picked up both of her spares. Robb bowled seven strikes, picked up two spares, and split one.

“See you next week?” Robb hugged Arya tightly and she smiled.

“Of course,” she responded. “When have I ever passed up food? And I live in the backyard, genius.”

Robb smiled. “Oh, yeah.” He kissed his little sister on her head, and then proceeded to pack up his gear. Arya had already packed her ball and put her shoes away, so she zipped up the bag and went to the car to wait for Bran and Rickon. As she was on the way to her car, Arya pulled her phone of her pocket and called Gendry.

“What’s up,” he said groggily.

“You were asleep,” Arya asked softly.

Gendry cleared his throat. “Yeah, but I’m awake now. What’s up?”

“I know this is last minute,” Arya began. “But, my family is having a barbeque this upcoming Friday and I was wondering if you and Hot Pie wanted to come.”

“That sounds great,” he said enthusiastically. “Why did you wait until now to invite us?”

“I guess it slipped my mind,” she admitted. “Does that mean that you two will come? No conflicts or anything?”

“Naw, I’m as free as a bird.” Arya rolled her eyes at his cheesiness. “Don’t you roll your eyes at me,” he playfully chastised.

“I’m not rolling my eyes,” she denied. Gendry scoffed. “I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” he contradicted. “But, anyways, I would love to come to your family’s barbeque. I know for a fact that Hot Pie is free, so don’t worry about him.”

“That’s good to know,” she remarked. Mischievously, she licked her lips, and then ran a hand through her hair. “So, what are you wearing?”

A deep, throaty laugh filled her ear and Arya’s stomach jumped at the pleasant sound. “My birthday suit.”

“Oh, so you are waiting for me?”

“Of course,” he agreed. “My cock has been asking about you all day. He’s homesick.”

“Is he?” Arya stupidly grinned into the phone. “Well, tell Jr. that I missed him too.”
As Gendry spoke to his cock, Arya laughed, and then bit her lip.

“Gendry, I’m about to face time you, so I can talk to Jr.” Arya looked at the screen and push the icon and Gendry immediately answered. The first thing she saw was his erect cock. “How are you doing, J?”

Gendry put his hand to the base of his cock and began to move it, and then changed his voice to sound like Elmo as he spoke. “I’m feeling a lonely now that you are gone.”

A loud bellow erupted from Arya at the absurdity of the conversation.

“I’m so sorry El—J,” Arya tried to bite back more laughter unsuccessfully as she chuckled.

“Sorry, isn’t going to cut it, sweet tits,” he admonished. “You have to make it up to me.”

“Whatever you want, Jr.” She promised.

“Hmm,” Gendry made his Elmo voice sound even more ridiculous. “Whatever I want.”

“Anything.” Gendry began to stroke himself.

“Come over,” he demanded.

“I can’t.”

“You said whatever I wanted!” Gendry wiggled his cock frantically to indicate that Jr. was mad. Arya laughed into her hand as tears fan down her face.

“Except that,” she amended. “Not tonight, but soon.”

“Have you no honor?” It was all too much; the Elmo’s voice, Gendry wiggling his cock, and the ridiculous conversation. Arya’s belly started to ache from all of the laughing and her cheeks hurt from grinning so much.

Arya wiped her face profusely as she tried to contain her laughter.

“I have to go, J.” Arya shook her head at the current situation.

“Fine,” he said. “BYEEEE!”

Of course, he would sign off as Elmo. Arya disconnected the call and her gaze lingered on the phone for a bit before she raised her head to see if her brothers were on their way. From twenty-five feet away, Arya’s siblings stood in the street and stared at her. Arya’s stomach dropped. She wondered how long they had been watching her. They began to walk as Sansa gave her Arya a questioning look before hiding her smile.

Robb opened his back door on the driver’s side and looked over the ceiling of his car.

“Is there something we should know?”

“Like what?” Arya feigned ignorance.

“Umm…I don’t know,” Bran opened the passenger seat of her car. “The laughing, smiling, running your fingers through your hair shtick you had going on there. If I had to guess, it seems like you’re going steady with someone.”
“What? I can’t have friends anymore?” Arya pushed the unlock button on her car, so Rickon could open the back door.

“No, you can.” Robb closed the back door, and then opened the driver’s door. “But, I’ve never seen you smile like that for any of your other friends. Hell, I’ve never seen you smile like that in any of your relationships.”

“You’re not around me all of the time to know that,” she remarked. Her phone began to vibrate and Arya looked at it to see she had a text. Quickly, she read the text before grinning and responding.

She looked up to see Robb smirking at her.

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.” Her older brother held his hand up in innocence. “Still didn’t answer my question.”

Arya sat in the sat driver’s seat, and then turned on the car and rolled out the window. She popped a piece gum in her mouth and chewed for a while before seeing if Bran and Rickon were buckled up. As she pulled off she said, “Because there isn’t anything to know.”

But, there was and Arya wasn’t ready to admit it yet.
“Fuck!” Arya looked at her spaghetti stained shirt. Immediately, she got a towel and began to dab at
the stain. After a few minutes, she found that her efforts were for nothing and groaned.

“Just change your shirt.” Catelyn suggested as she searched through the cabinets.

“But, that would require me going to the guesthouse.” Arya leaned against the counter. “Maybe I
could ask Sansa if I could borrow one of her shirts.”

Catelyn looked at her daughter with an unbelieving expression. “Are you really that lazy that you
can’t walk to the guesthouse to change into a clean shirt?”

Her daughter shrugged shamelessly.

“Besides,” the older Stark woman said without looking at Arya. “Have you forgotten that you still
have clothes in your room upstairs?”

“Oh yeah.” It was clear that Arya had forgotten about her room upstairs. “Thanks, mom.” She gave
her mother a kiss on the check, and then went upstairs to her childhood room.

Once she got into her room, Arya began to look for a dingy shirt to put on. It was useless to put on a
clean dressy shirt when something could ruin it again before the barbeque even started. After a few
minutes of searching, she found a shirt and grinned as she put it on. The shirt said Wholistic Core
across the front of it and memories of her time there came rushing back to her. As she thought about
her adventures at the camp, she looked for a stylish, but casual shirt, and then laid it on the bed once
she found an acceptable replacement.

Even though Arya had no reason to be nervous, she was. Gendry was going to meet her parents
tonight—he was going to meet her family! It wasn’t as if he was her boyfriend, but still…she was
having sex with him and her family could misconstrue what that meant. Arya had no idea how they
would ever find that out because she wasn’t going to say anything she definitely knew that Gendry
wasn’t. Hot Pie wouldn’t dare bring it up, so she figured she was in the clear. But, the Stark clan
could be very perceptive though.

Deep in thought, Arya walked out of her room and, not paying attention, bumped into Sansa.

“Sorry,” she offered quickly before taking in Sansa’s appearance: puffy red eyes, wet cheeks, and a
runny nose. “What’s wrong?”

Sansa bit her lip and wiped under her eyes. Arya grabbed her sister and pulled her into the bathroom.
She pulled down the toilet seat and made Sansa sit on it as she grabbed a few pieces of tissue. After
she handed Sansa the tissue, she sat on the edge of the tub and gave Sansa an inquiring look.
Although Arya had no idea as to what to do in these situations, Sansa looked truly distraught and
Arya was choosing to overcome her awkwardness in comforting people than to walk away and
knowing that her sister was deeply upset.

In an attempt to control her emotions, Sansa looked at the tissue as she fiddled with it while tightly
squeezing her lips together to prevent tears from coming. Arya reached a hand out and grabbed
Sansa’s hand and lovingly squeezed it.

“What’s wrong,” she whispered.
That was all it took. Sansa began to bawl and the younger Stark wrapped her arms around the upset woman. Heart wrenching sobs escaped Sansa’s mouth as she held her sister close.

“It’s not fair.” Sansa shook her head.

“What’s not fair?” Arya removed hair from in front of Sansa’s face as she spoke soothingly to her.

“It’s not fair,” she repeated as she rubbed her stomach tenderly before mournfully gazing at it.

“Oh, Sansa…” Arya’s heart broke for her sister. Sansa and Willas had been trying to have a baby for a while and it deeply bothered Sansa that she was having trouble conceiving. The doctors said there was nothing wrong with either of them, but they still struggle to have a child.

“I don’t even know I was pregnant,” Sansa choked out before frantically wiping the tears away.

“Do you think it was because…” Arya trailed off, but she could see that Sansa got her drift.

Vigorously, Sansa shook her head no. “I—I hadn’t had a drink in months. Even at the bachelorette party,” she explained. “I didn’t want to risk it. Besides, the doctors says that sometimes pregnancies result in miscarriages even if you do everything right.”

“When did you find out?”

“Two days ago.” Sansa slowly shook her head. “I was having severe abdominal pain and was bleeding, so Willas took me to the hospital and that was when we…found out.”

Arya hugged her sister, and then rested her chin on Sansa’s shoulders as she rubbed her back. A quiet sobs traveled to her eats as she tried to calm her sister.

“It’ll be okay,” Arya whispered.

“No it won’t,” Sansa denied.

“No, it will,” she promised as she held Sansa’s face in her hands and looked at the older woman. “It will.”

An indeterminate amount of time had passed and Arya eventually took Sansa to her room and asked if Sansa wanted their mother to comfort her, which she agreed to. Arya offered to finish up the miscellaneous tasks that were left, so her mother could tend to her sister. As she checked on some of the food, Arya began to think of how bad of a cook Gendry was. It surprised her that after all that time of living with Hot Pie, Gendry never learned to cook, or that Hot Pie never offered.

To be honest, she only learned how to cook because of Mycah. If it weren’t for him, she would be in the same boat as Gendry.

When the doorbell rang, Arya wiped off her hands and went to go answer the door.

“Ned! Mycah!” Arya cheerfully hugged both of her friends. Mycah gave her a quick bear hug. Ned held his arms out and engulfed Arya in them before squeezing her tightly and placing a kiss on her forehead. He held her for a few seconds before letting go. Arya wrapped her arms around herself after Ned let her go. “Did you two come over together?”

“Yeah,” Mycah answered. “My tire had a flat, so I called Ned up to see how close he was.”

“Well, it’s great seeing the both of you again.” Arya clapped her hands together, and then rubbed them as if she had conjured up an evil plan. “But, I need you guys’ help. Some unexpected issue has
come up and now I need all of the help I can get.”

The men complied and they got to work tying up the loose ends before the barbeque was to begin. Mycah helped out with the cooking and Ned carried or rearranged anything she needed to be done.

“What is everyone else doing?” Mycah asked as he stirred the pot.

“Bran and Rickon are with Robb. They are stuck on the expressway because of some huge accident,” she explained. “You guys saw my dad out there grilling, so you know what he is doing. And my mom and Sansa are both tending to an important matter.”

“Oh,” Ned stood beside Mycah and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “That box you asked me to carry early is too heavy.” He then turned his head towards Mycah. “Do you mind helping me?”

“Sure, no problem.” Mycah left to go help Ned with the box as Arya put food into the pans. She filled up a few before the guys returned.

“Did you move it?” Arya put aluminum foil over a pan before moving to the next one and doing the same thing. She didn’t look at either of her friends as she spoke.

“No,” Mycah shook his head, despite Arya not looking his way. “It’s too heavy.”

“Okay,” Arya replied. “I’ll get someone else to carry it later on.”

“No, Arya,” Ned interjected. “When we say it is heavy, we mean, it is heavy.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “As I said, I’ll get someone to carry it later on.”

An hour later, everything was in order and Arya went upstairs to check on Sansa. Her mother and Sansa were speaking in hushed tones as Sansa laid her head on Catelyn’s lap. Her sister seemed to be much calmer, but she still looked noticeably upset. Arya had brought Sansa some tea and lemon cookies to soothe her nerves and make her feel better.

When she left Sansa’s room, Arya went to go freshen up and change out of her dingy shirt and into the shirt she sat out earlier. She then put on some sandals before messing with her hair. Arya had a pixie cut—she found short hair easier to manage. Besides putting soft curls in her hair, she didn’t do much to it. Quickly, some lip-gloss was applied and she sprayed some perfume in the air before walking through it.

As she was completing her finishing touches, the doorbell rang. Ned and Mycah were close enough to her family and known by almost everyone she knew, that they were allowed to answer the door, so Arya ignored it. They were almost like brothers, well…not Ned because that could be a little bit weird.

After she finished, Arya double checked herself in the mirror, and then exited the room. She heard some talking as she descended the stairs.

Brightly, Arya smiled as she saw Hot Pie and Gendry, but mainly Gendry.

“Hey,” she waved as she walked down the last step. Arya gave Hot Pie a quick hug and squeezed his forearm. As close as they were, it felt awkward for them to touch, even if it was in a non-sexual way.

Gendry leaned down and pulled Arya close to envelope her in his arms. Arya wrapped her arms around his neck and they embraced momentarily before Arya cupped his face and kissed his cheek.
In approval, Gendry grinned before letting her go.

“Thanks for inviting us,” Gendry gratefully expressed.

“Gendry, stop being stupid,” Arya dismissed. “You and Hot Pie are my friends, why wouldn’t I invite either of you.” Gendry rolled his eyes, and then shook his head. “Did you all introduce yourselves to one another?”

“Uh, no,” Ned answered as he looked at Arya strangely. “We were just telling them that they were the first ones to arrive.”

“Well, Ned and Mycah, this is Gendry and Hot Pie,” Arya said she pointed to each male when she said their name. “And Gendry and Hot Pie, this is Ned and Mycah.”

The guys shook hands.

“Why do they call you Hot Pie,” Mycah asked as he shook Hot Pie’s hands.

“Because I asked them to,” he answered simply. “I just love hot pie is all.”

Arya slapped her forehead. “I’m such an idiot,” she gasped. “Mycah and Hot Pie, you two have a lot in common or a common interest at least.” She approached the two as she spoke. “Both of you are cooks, chefs, or whatever the fuck you like to be labeled.”

“Oh really?” Mycah looked at Hot Pie and smiled.

“Well, my specialty is desserts, but I do work as a cook,” Hot Pie explained.

“At which restaurant?” Mycah inquired. Arya left the two to converse about their love of food or whatever and walked over to Gendry.

“I have something for you to do,” Arya took a handful of Gendry’s shirt and pulled him, so he could follow her.

“What happened to asking first?” Arya made a face of amusement and continued to pull on him. “Hey, I am a guest! You shouldn’t be putting me to work.”

“But, you’re my friend dofus,” she remarked. “You’re supposed to help out of the kindness of your heart when I need a favor.”

With an exaggerated sigh he said, “Fine.”

“Are you trying to get him to carry that box?” Ned followed the two of them.

“What box?” Gendry removed Arya’s hand from his shirt and gave a small push to which she rewarded him with a glare. He beamed at her response.

“I just need you to move a box from point A to point B.”

Ned shook his head. “That box is heavy, man. I tried to lift, and then Mycah tried to help me. I don’t think you’ll be able to lift it either.”

Arya waved off Ned’s concerns as she led Gendry to the destination of the box. With ease, the dark haired man picked up the box and followed Arya to the shed to put the box away. He looked unfazed as he carried the heavy object.
“It wasn’t that heavy,” he remarked after he put the box in the shed. “Perhaps Ned and Mycah were
lifting from the back and not their knees.”

The two exchanged knowing grins, and then Arya asked Ned and Gendry to help her move some
other things while they were in a helping mood. Ned looked at some of the things she was trying to
get them to move, and then looked at his outfit. He took off his shirt and sat it in a safe place. Gendry
gave him a questioning glance.

“So, my shirt wouldn’t get dirty.”

“That’s a good idea.” Gendry took off his shit as well. “I’m used to getting dirty, so it’s not usually a
big deal, but I don’t think it would be proper in this setting.”

“Yeah,” Ned agreed as he frowned while looking at Gendry’s body.

As Gendry and Ned moved items around, Arya man watched in admiration of the male specimen.
She may have not had romantic feelings for Ned anymore, but he was an attractive looking man.
And, well, Gendry was Gendry. A part of her had always admired his features even if she didn’t
want to admit it. Gendry was muscular, but not like the guys who went to the gym everyday.
Occasionally, he lifted, but the definition in his muscles came from everyday work. There was this
ruggedness about him that Arya found undeniably attractive.

At that particular moment, Arya just wanted to lick Gendry from his navel all of the way to his
collarbone. She wanted to taste his salty sweat on her taste buds while he groaned in pleasure. Gods,
at this moment she just wanted to fuck Gendry’s brains out. Inwardly, the woman groaned, she really
should have taken him up on his offer a week ago.

The guys finished and Ned went to the downstairs bathroom to freshen up. Arya showed Gendry to
the bathroom upstairs. As he was closing the door, she slipped in behind him.

“Arya—“ Arya’s lips crushing against him cut off Gendry. Out of habit, he grabbed her and pulled
her closed. Amused, he smiled at Arya, and then let her go. “I have to wash up.”

“I have to wash up,” Arya mocked, and then bit his lips before pulling him in for another kiss. A hot
tongue slid into her mouth and she opened her mouth wider to accept the intrusion. Reluctantly,
Gendry pulled away and breathed heavily as he rested his head in the crook of her neck.

“Let me get cleaned up first and we can make up as long as you want,” he bargained. In an efficient
manner, Gendry washed the dirt off of his body, and then dried off before putting his shirt back on.
From experience, Gendry knew that Arya was going to make him sit on the toilet, so as he sat down,
he gestured for Arya to come straddle him. In no time, Arya was on his lap and continuing where
they left off.

Firm fingers dug into her back as Gendry gently sucked on her neck before kissing a sensitive spot
beneath her throat. To prevent him from stopping, Arya put a hand on the back of his head and kept
his head in place. He smiled against her throat while his tongue massaged her skin. With unmeasured
passion, Arya turned Gendry’s head so he could face her and roughly kissed him. Slowly, the
grinded against one another as low pants and soft gasps were exchanged.

Gendry secured a hand around Arya’s waist and back as he stood up and, automatically, she
wrapped her legs around his hips. He walked forward until her back touched the wall, and then
pulled her hips against his body and began to rub his crotch against hers determinedly. Arya put one
hand on his shoulder and the other grabbed his forearm as she matched his intensity. Their lips
crushed together as their pleasure built.
A groan of frustration was released and Gendry undid her pants and insert a hand between her legs. Within moments, Arya cries were muffled in his shirt as he triggered her climax. After she composed herself, Gendry let her down and watched as she undid his pants. For a quick second, she browsed through the cabinets, and then pulled out a bottle of lotion. A small amount was squeezed onto her hand, and then she went to get some tissue before going back over to Gendry and to stroke his cock. As she touched him, Arya nibbled on his chin. She was torn between dragging his orgasm out and getting it over with.

For the sake of time, she increased her the intensity of her strokes. In response, Gendry whimpered in her ear and came seconds later. Arya flushed the tissue down the toilet and sprayed air freshener in the bathroom. She and Gendry smiled as they refreshed up in silence. After looking at her neck, Arya discovered some marks that were not in her neck before she entered the bathroom. As she applied make up to her neck, Gendry watched her while they conversed about nothing in particular.

“Arya!” Her mother said loudly as she knocked on the door.

“Yes,” Arya replied as she opened the door, and then was about to continue applying make up on her neck before thinking better of it and switched to her face.

“I was wondering—“ Catelyn stared at Gendry strangely as she stopped speaking. “Who is this and why is he in the bathroom with you? And why were the doors locked?” Her mother looked at her daughter as if she was crazy.

Gendry stood up straight and went over to shake Arya’s mother’s hand. In distrust, Catelyn shook it.

“Mom,” Arya smiled. “This is my friend Gendry and we were in the bathroom with the doors locked because we were having a private conversation.”

“In the bathroom? With the doors locked?” Catelyn gave her a disbelieving look.

Arya raised an eyebrow. “Would it be any better if we were in my bedroom with the door locked?”

“No,” Catelyn immediately responded. “I would prefer if you weren’t in rooms with the door locked.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Stark,” Gendry said shyly.

Catelyn ran a hand through her hair and looked at him then her daughter. “It is a pleasure to meet your too Gendry…”

“Waters,” he supplied.

“Waters,” she repeated. It looked as if the wheels were turning in her head as she processed the name. “It is a pleasure to meet you too and it would be a greater pleasure if Arya had mentioned you before.”

“Mom,” Arya groaned. “You don’t know all of my friends.”

“True,” she conceded. “But, I also haven’t met any of them in the bathroom that was previously locked.”

“We were having a private conversation and I didn’t want to be interrupted,” she lied. “Besides, I’m 25 years old. I’m not a kid.”

“As true as that may be, you are still in my house.”
Arya rolled her eyes, and then closed her make-up case. “What was it that you wanted, mom?”

“Oh… I was just wondering what was taking you so long in the bathroom, but now I know.” She gave Gendry a once over as if she was sizing him up. As she walked out, she turned and looked at him again. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Waters.”

“Nice meeting you too, Mrs. Stark.”

As they walked down the stairs, Arya heard her father speaking. When Gendry and Hot Pie had arrived, Ned had left to run an errand, so she hadn’t gotten a chance to introduce them.

“Dad,” Arya said to get his attention as she walked over to him.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Ned looked at her daughter, and then Gendry. His eyes widened in surprise. “Who is your friend?”

“Dad, this is Gendry,” she gestured to Gendry. “And, Gendry, this is my dad.”

“Hello, sir,” Gendry said nervously. He firmly shook Ned’s hand and forced himself to smile.

“Hi,” Ned said back. “What is your last name if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Waters,” he supplied. Ned nodded his head ever so slightly and was about to say something before someone called his name.

“It was nice meeting you… Gendry?” Gendry nodded that Ned’s guess of his name was correct as Ned gave him a tight smile. “Well, I have to catch up with someone, but we’ll talk later.”

Gendry looked frightened at the thought, but agreed. Arya rolled her eyes at him and they made their way to the backyard. They found Hot Pie and Arya decided to give them a tour of the mansion. The guys stared in awe at the size of her parent’s estate. Nymeria had joined them in the middle of Arya’s tour and the men were scared of the direwolf before Arya explained they had nothing to fear if they didn’t threaten her.

As Arya guided them around, she gave some background on her family and told anecdotes about her family and her most vivid memories in certain areas of the house. They laughed at her stories and encouraged Arya to tell more of her childhood stories. She then led them to the guesthouse, which was near the lake in their backyard as well as the horse stable.

The tour ended when Arya brought them to an area where she practiced her archery.

“Gods,” Hot Pie said as he picked up a bow. “I haven’t shot an arrow in years.”

Arya handed him an arrow and encouraged him to shoot it. Hot Pie tried, but the arrow didn’t reach the target. Arya and Gendry laughed and shook their heads. It wasn’t like Hot Pie had been good at archery to begin with.

Gendry picked up a bow and arrow for himself and after he made sure everything was in order, shot it his arrow hit the target, but it wasn’t as precise as it was at camp Wholistic Core.

“Gendry,” Arya called him attention.

“What?” Gendry lined up another shot.

“Here,” Arya slightly lifted his elbow and straightened his back. “Okay.”
She stepped back as Gendry shot the arrow. It was closer to the center this time, but was still off.

“Stop aiming,” she critiqued.

“But, how am I supposed to know what to hit,” he questioned.

Arya made Gendry line himself up again. She straightened his back, lifted his elbow and whispered, “Your eyes knows where it wants the arrow to go. You are taking too much time trying to aim, it’s counterproductive.”

The arrow hit the dead center of the target. A low whistled came from Gendry’s mouth as he turned and looked at Arya. They grinned at each other before someone cleared their throat to get their attention.

“Jon,” Arya said excitedly as she ran to her half brother. Arya gave hugged her brother tightly at the unexpected surprise.

“Can you loosen you grip a bit,” Jon gasped. “I can barely breathe.”

“Sorry,” she apologized as she gave one last squeeze before letting him go. “I just missed you is all.”

Jon smiled at his sister and pulled her in for another hug. “I missed you too.” After having small took with his favorite sister, her half brother looked at the two guys Arya had been with. “Who are your friends?”

“Oh, right,” Arya mentally chastised herself for forgetting that her friends were here as well. Even though Jon had gotten married two weeks ago, she hadn’t spoke to her brother in a while. The wedding had been hectic and they never got a chance to sit down and talk. As she said their names, she pointed to them. “Gendry and Hot Pie.”

In amusement, Jon raised an eyebrow at Hot Pie’s name and shook both of the men’s hands.

“And, as the both of you may have guessed,” Arya patted Jon on his shoulder. “This is my favorite brother, Jon.”

“I can see that Arya has told you all about me, but I know nothing about either of you.” Jon crossed his arms and looked at his sister.

Arya mimicked her brother and crossed her arms, and then looked at him. “As your lovely new bride has said for years, you know nothing, Jon Snow.” Jon mock glared at her, which made the young woman smile. “Gendry is a mechanic and Hot Pie is a cook. Both of them are from King’s Landing, but moved to Winterfell a few years ago. Anything else, dad?”

Jon ignored her, but didn’t ask anymore about Hot Pie or Gendry. He knew his sister would volunteer more information when she was ready to and it isn’t as if she was dating either of them. They were just friends and he could learn more about them at a later time.

For a while, the four of them played Frisbee with Ghost and Nymeria. It was really a combination between throwing it to each other and the direwolves. Arya asked Jon about work and if he was taking the desk job that had been offered. Her brother explained that he had accepted and that Ygritte wouldn’t be on the battlefield anymore herself. The both of them wanted to start a family, especially Ygritte. Mrs. Snow may have been fiercely independent and didn’t care for gender roles or adhering to them, she wanted to give Jon as many kids as she could.

Ygritte loved being on the battlefield, but she loved Jon more. He never asked her to switch to a desk
job, but if that meant she got to see her husband more and so they could have more time to work on making babies, she was all for it. Despite this, Arya never thought of Ygritte’s decisions as changing who she was and accepting gender roles. It was easy to see how much she loved Jon and wanted to create a family with him.

Eventually, Ned, and her other brothers joined them and they played a few short games of ultimate Frisbee. After every game, they would switch up the teams to rotate the players since there were an odd number of people. In a unanimous decision, the group went to go grab a plate to eat. Every single one of them stacked their plates with food and grabbed water and soda’s.

“Rickon, you’re such a cheater,” Arya accused as she sat down at the table and Ned sat next to her.

“No, I’m not,” he denied, and then laughed. “You’re just a sore loser.”

Arya threw a grape tomato at him, which he dodged, and then stuck out his tongue before getting hit the second time. She took a few bites of her food before stopping and looking around.

As she got up, she said, “I’m going to get some water.”

On her way back to the table, Arya noticed that Gendry couldn’t find a seat near her, so he sat on the other end of the table. Without a second thought, she picked up her food and joined him at the other side. She missed Ned’s hurt expression when Arya switched her seat.

“Are you trying to avoid me?” Arya teased after she sat down and sipped her water.

A smile played on Gendry’s lips at her words. “Yes, and then you found me, so I clearly didn’t do a good enough job.”

“Clearly,” she retorted, and then stuffed more food in her mouth.

Arya and Gendry became lost in their own little world as they conversed about various topics. Seamlessly, they could transition between topics even the ones that weren’t remotely related. It was one of the things she enjoyed about Gendry: they always had something to talk about. And, even when they didn’t talk, they enjoyed their silences together.

“Do you mind?” Arya gestured towards his cake to indicate that she wanted some.

“No,” Gendry shook his head and picked up his plate and tried to give it to her. Arya looked for a clean fork, but couldn’t find one. “You can use mine,” he offered as she took the plate and the fork from him. They took turns eating the big slice of cake. Gendry left to go use the restroom.

“Eddard fucking Stark,” a familiar voice boomed.

“Yoren!” Catelyn said in chasteisement and shock at seeing an old face.

“Sorry, Cat,” he threw over his shoulder before he and Ned hugged one another.

“Gods, its been years, Yoren; I didn’t think you were going to come.”

Yoren chuckled and took the beer his friend handed him. “I wasn’t.” He said seriously before a bellow erupted from him and Ned laughed with him. “It’s been too long. I know a lot of people, but you are one of the few people I consider a friend, so I figured that I should visit and catch up with you and the rest of your family.”

The two men spoke for a bit, and then Ned looked at his family. “It’s been decades since you’ve
seen the kids; you probably don’t remember who they are or which is which.”

“No, I remember,” he said proudly. He pointed to each of the Stark children and correctly named them. Yoren went in order of age. “Robb, Jon, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and Rickon.”

“No way,” Catelyn said in amusement. “How did you remember? And Rickon, he was in my stomach the last time I saw you.”

“Yeah, but I remember that you were naming him Rickon,” Yoren replied, and then looked at Ned. “I haven’t seen most of your kids in decades, but I have seen Arya. I am a dean at Wholistic Core.”

“Really?” Ned rubbed his beard. “And you never said anything until now. You could have called me.”

“You were a very busy man around that time,” he explained. “But, if the name wasn’t a dead giveaway, her Northern features sure as hell were.”

Ned beamed brightly at the last remark. As they spoke more about the kids, Gendry walked outside.

“Gendry?” The man in question looked at his former dean.

“Yoren,” Gendry was surprised to see Yoren, but happy at the same time. “Hello, sir.” The younger man shook the older man’s hand enthusiastically. “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too,” Yoren looked at Gendry, and then Arya.

“How do you know Gendry?” Ned inquired.

“He was at the camp at the same time as Arya—Hot Pie too.” Yoren nodded over to his other former camper. The dean had noticed him earlier, but didn’t say anything because he noticed Hot Pie was trying to hide. “The three of them were inseparable—more so Arya and Gendry.”

In that moment, Arya’s stomach dropped. This didn’t feel right. Everything was all wrong and she was on the verge of panicking. She wished Yoren would shut the fuck up or that he would leave. It wasn’t that Arya didn’t like Yoren, but she had a bad feeling. Gendry looked at his friend in confusion as a thousand thoughts ran through her head.

“It was Gendry, wasn’t it?” Ned asked across the table. Fury raged in his eyes and the wheels turned in his head. “Gendry was the one you almost had sex with when you were at Wholistic Core.”

Arya froze as if she was a deer in highlights.

Sansa choked on her chicken as she looked at Gendry, and then Arya.

“What is he talking about?” Yoren demanded.

“Yeah, what is he talking about” Ned asked once he processed the information. Arya said nothing. “What is this about you almost having sex with Gendry when you were at camp?” Anger colored his voice as he scowled at the dark haired man.

“But, we didn’t, dad,” she answered weakly. “Nothing happened.”

“I don’t call almost having sex nothing happening,” Catelyn supplied with incredulity dripping in her voice. “Just because it wasn’t sex doesn’t mean that nothing happened.”

Before Arya could explain the situation or attempt to, Jon ran over to Gendry and sucker punched
him in the face. Instantly, Gendry fell to the ground and Jon landed a few more blows and a kick in the groin before Yoren restrained him. In pain, Gendry writhed on the ground before curling into the fetal position while harshly gasping.

“Let go of me!” Jon frantically tried to pull his arms out of Robb and Yoren’s grip. Robb looked torn between letting his half brother go so he could continue to kick Gendry’s ass and keeping a hold of Jon to prevent further injury to the guy.

Arya ran over to Gendry, and then crouched over him to check on him and see how serious his injuries were.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Jon!” Arya inspected Gendry’s face after she turned away from her brother.

“What is wrong with me?” Jon tried to free himself once again. “This sack of shit took advantage of you—he almost got into your pants! Why are you mad at me for protecting you whens he should be mad at that piece of scum!” Jon’s face was red and spit flew from his mouth as he spoke.

“He didn’t take advantage of me, Jon,” she yelled back. “We almost had sex because I wanted to have sex. I was the one who allowed it to go that far—hell, I wanted it to go further than it did. Gendry was the one who put a stop to it.”

“Oh please,” her brother scoffed. “He was playing games with you, Arya! He wanted you to believe that he was respecting you by stopping, but it was all a game just to make you want him more. It’s obvious that you don’t understand how guys think.”

Arya abruptly stood up and walked over to Jon. Anger shined brightly in her eyes while she glared at her favorite brother as she was about to speak, her mother said:

“How could you allow something like that? Arya was only a kid!” Catelyn accused as she looked at Yoren. Her demeanor reeked of outrage and it looked like she wanted to hit the dean. “You were supposed to protect her.”

Betrayal echoed in Yoren’s eyes as he held Jon back. As if she was guilty, Arya cowered at his anger.

“Yoren,” she pleaded. “I—“

“Save it, Arya,” his tone was clipped. “You promised me you wouldn’t go near Gendry.”

“I didn’t!” Yoren stared at her unbelievingly. “Well, I did, but that was before our talk—weeks before. I kept the promise the I made to you.”

“What promise?” Ned, Catelyn, Robb, Jon, and Gendry all asked at the same time.

Arya turned to Gendry as he gasped in pain on the ground and he asked again, “What promise?”

“I made Arya promise to keep her hands to herself because she was going to get you in trouble,” Yoren stressed trouble as he stared at the girl in question. “Apparently, I got to her a little too late.” A beat, then sarcastically, “Is there any other incident I should know about?”

A slight blushed covered Arya’s cheeks. Yoren stared at her incredulously. “It was two times total and both times was before we spoke.” As if to help her case, she added, “And the second time didn’t go nearly as far as the first.”
It was important to Arya that Yoren knew she had kept her word, despite the fact that they hadn’t seen each other in years. She knew that Yoren had been trying to look out for her and Gendry—mainly Gendry—, which she appreciated. As the years passed, Arya gained a better understanding of how her actions could have led to very serious consequences for Gendry. People wouldn’t care how mature she seemed, they would just look at her age and color Gendry as a predator and send him off to jail. Yoren had knew better and saw what was going on and talked some sense into her before it was too late.

Arya wasn’t one to let her emotions or desires do the talking, but back then, they had definitely spoken for her. Gendry did share some blame in letting things get as far as they did, but Arya most certainly forced matters. What amazed her most was how much resistance and self-control Gendry possessed. She has heard of guys who crumbled under less pressure, but not Gendry. He had a ready and willing girl in his arms, literally, and he turned down both opportunities. Some guys would try to justify giving in, but he refused to.

“But, not because of a lack of trying, right?” Yoren yanked Jon back as the young man tried to rip his arm away. “You see what I was trying to tell you then? Gendry is the villain in all of this while you are branded as a victim.”

“Because she was a fucking victim, you idiot!” Jon turned his head and glared at Yoren as if to size him up.

Yoren shook his head. “You don’t want any of this, kid.” He looked at Arya, then Gendry before glancing at the people at Ned. “When I had realized that Arya and Gendry’s relationship had changed... that the lines were becoming blurry, I should have separated them immediately. But, one of the philosophies of the camp was to treat the kids like young adults and I believed that whatever what was going on between them would work itself out.”

“But, Arya was a kid, not a young adult,” Catelyn stated. “This is what happen when you give children the privileges of adults.”

“And you know what happens when you treat a young adult like a child,” Yoren slowly looked at Catelyn. “They act out. Arya didn’t have a behavioral problem when you sent her to me; she had a temperament issue, which is a difference. She may have been quick to anger, but she rarely ever fought. Before she was sent to Wholistic Core, her latest two incidences were with Joffrey Baratheon. And from what we know about him, that kid is so evil Satan himself asks for advice as to how to torment others.” There wasn’t any disagreement with his last statement. “It’s quite clear, you sent Arya away because of politics not because she was necessarily troublesome.” Yoren let the statement soak in for a moment. “As to why we treat ‘kids’ like young adults: when you respect young adults beliefs AND make them accountable for themselves, they are more likely to respond positively. Arya was already a good ‘kid’ when she got to the camp, but became an even better one when she left. We couldn’t put her with kids her age because her maturity and intellect was that of one who exceeded 14 year olds. It would’ve been counterproductive, so we put her around individuals who complimented her as a person.”

Catelyn softened at his explanation. Anger still radiated throughout her body, but she did see his logic regarding Arya. His actions were well thought out and illustrated that he had wanted the best for Arya. It was one of the reasons that Ned and she had sent Arya to that specific place—not only did they say they cared about the well being of your child, the words really reflective that as well.

“Remember when she got her citizenship award,” Catelyn’s eyes widened in recognition. She remembered being very proud of Arya that day. “If you recall, it was mentioned that she taught two people how to read. That was Hot Pie and Gendry. Neither one of them could read past a seventh
grade level. Arya took time out of her day to help them. Guess where they grew up: Flea Bottom. We are all familiar with the way of life there.” Ned, who had been observing and taking everything in, had looked at Gendry, “Even then, Gendry was a smart guy and very well mannered. You could tell after their first activity together that they just clicked. He always had her back and was always looking out for her. Always. So, if you want to know why I had him around her and didn’t separate them immediately, it’s because they had a positive impact on one another both socially and emotionally. I didn’t want to ruin that.”

Ned rubbed his beard in thought. Yoren had very good reason to do what he did, but Arya had still been young. The idea of his little girl almost having sex at such an age—at any age really—unsettled him. There was an age difference and fifteen year olds shouldn’t be allowed that much autonomy. The little bit that Arya had been given almost led to her losing her virginity to a guy who could legally drink. At that age, the age gap had been too wide and Yoren should have kept a better eye on them.

“Yoren, as mature as Arya may have acted, she was not ready for that type of…intimacy.” Ned finally voiced. “As much as I can understand why you were reluctant to act, Arya was still young.”

“She was sure as hell ready!” Yoren quipped. Before Ned could say anything else, he continued, “You weren’t there, Ned; you didn’t see what I saw. I agree Arya was not ready for the emotional part of sex, which was another reason I made sure that it didn’t happen. But, as soon as she experienced her sexual awakening, Gendry had a bull’s eye on his back—he was a walking, talking target. Arya was determined to get him into bed even if she didn’t realize it at the time. Every time I turned around, Arya was touching him in an increasingly intimate way and isolating him from other people. You could see on Gendry’s face that he was about to break at any moment, so we started giving him shit to do to decrease the amount of time they spent together, but that didn’t deter Arya. The day I had had enough, Arya had her hand on the inside of Gendry’s thigh very close to his cock.” Yoren could see Ned processing daughter’s actions. “Gendry may have been older, but he followed Arya’s lead. She was the one who called the shots. Hell, you all even heard Arya say that she initiated it Gendry was the one to stop it—both times.”

Yoren looked at the two and they blushed.

“I just—” Ned rubbed his face roughly. “I don’t know what to think right now.” In deep thought, he pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled. Arya may have had agency in all of this, but she was just a kid. “Gendry, I need you to leave. A part of me understands the dilemma you were in, but another part of me views you as this creep who tried to take advantage of my daughter.”

Gendry got up without saying anything and started to walk towards the fence that led to the front of the house.

“Where are you going?” Arya looked livid as she jumped up after Gendry. She turned her back to her family and walked towards Gendry before stopping in front of him.

Confused at Arya’s response, Gendry stared at her wordlessly for a moment before speaking. “Your dad just told me to leave.”

“And you’re just going to walk away!” Arya violently hit the air as she spoke before running her fingers through her hair. “You aren’t going to defend yourself and explain your side of the story?” Angrily, Arya pushed Gendry.

Calmly, Gendry held his hands up and said, “Calm down, Arya.”

“Calm down? Calm down!” There were so many things that Arya wanted to say, but a million
thoughts were running through her head all at once. She was torn between telling him to fuck himself and giving Gendry the worst verbal beat down of his life.

Meanwhile, Gendry stared helplessly at his lover and best friend. He had no idea what she wanted him to say or do. Arya could be unpredictable like that: the right answer could be wrong and the wrong answer could be right, but you never knew which route to go when she was upset. As well as Gendry liked to believe he knew Arya, she could be an enigma. Something was better than nothing in her eyes. And inactivity was the worst sin you could commit against her. But, what could he do? Her dad just dismissed him from the property.

Arya was one of the most intelligent people he knew, but she had an irrationality streak in her from time to time. Even if the choice is wrong and didn’t make any sense, any other option would be seen as a betrayal in her eyes. Whether she was in the right or wrong, Arya knew how to hold a grudge and only time dictated if she would get over it. More times than not, she did get over grudges that were irrational, but Gendry couldn’t discern the true reason for why she was upset now. He knew that Arya wanted him to stay, but at the same time, she heard her father uninvited him from the barbeque. Logically, Arya would know that her desire for him to stay was trumped by Ned’s wish for Gendry to leave, which mean that her anger stemmed from another reason.

Before this conversation, nothing seemed amiss with Arya. Gendry was pretty good at detecting when she was upset about something, so he wondered what set her off during the conversation and even more so when he tried to leave. She seemed to be more angry with him and not her parents, brothers, or even Yoren. Why was she solely angry with him? What about Ned? He started the whole mess to begin with?

“What else could I’ve said? Yoren said all there was to say.” Wrong answer. Rage exploded from Arya as she pushed Gendry again and again and again.

“Yoren said all there was to say,” she mocked. “Get the fuck out of my face! Leave—I don’t want you here anymore!”

“Arya,” Gendry pleaded. He didn’t understand what he did wrong.

“No! There is no point in you being here, right? Yoren said everything and, not only has my father told you to leave, I just told you to leave. Now go!” Harsh pants came from Arya’s mouth as she tried to get her breathing under control. Solemnly, she shook her head, and then bit her lip. A bitter laugh came from her mouth as tears rebelliously left her eyes. Profusely, she wiped her face, but they kept coming.

“Ar—” The woman held her hands up to stop him.

Again, she laughed humorlessly. “I—I can’t believe you’re going to abandon me again.” As she spoke her voice cracked, “I mean…I’m old enough now, right? I’m not some 15-year-old little girl who you can’t touch because you’ll go to jail. And, still, you choose to leave.” Gendry picked up the subtext. She was accusing him of not caring for her.

“Abandoning you?” Gendry looked offended at her accusation. “What the hell is going on here, Arya? For the past few months, I’ve worn my heart on my sleeve for you—I told you that I loved…that I wanted to be with you and you turned ME down!” Anger tinged Gendry’s voice as he pointed to himself. Gradually, tears fill his eyes, but didn’t spill. “And just because I won’t argue with your father suddenly I’m abandoning you and—and you mean nothing to me? That is such bullshit and you know it. You got some fucking nerve. You’re family knew nothing about me until today. I’ve never been over your place until today, but I’m the one in the wrong for not fighting your dad! I don’t think you care for me at all; I seem to be more of a dirty little secret than anything else. You
fuck me and leave; you lie to your family about where you are—can’t let your family know that your fucking some poor guy from the wrong side of the tracks. Hell, I’m just a warm body until you decide to go back to Ned or Aegon.”

Arya was overwhelmed and wounded, but irate. How could he…how could he think that? She didn’t want to admit that he had a point. Arya hadn’t even introduced Gendry to any of her other friends as well. He was right; he was a secret, but not a dirty secret. Yet, she was still pissed off. That was not the point. He was turning this around on her when he was the one who was leaving—again.

“OR am I some charity case?” He yelled passionately. “Did you draw your lines so that I knew not to ask for more? Or did you figure that I wasn’t going to ask since this was the best I was going to get? I get to fuck you, right? What more could I possibly ask for? I sure as hell wasn’t supposed to ask you to be my girlfriend and to meet your family. How dare I, right? I should know my place by now.”

“Get out of my face!” Arya screamed in an abrupt manner as she pointed in the direction that Gendry had to take in order to leave. “Get the fuck off of my property!”

Gendry’s jaw tightened and he gave her a tight-lipped smile. “Gladly,” he responded in a clipped tone. As he walked away, he threw over his shoulder, “I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your reunion with Ned.”

“Fuck you!” A tightening sensation developed in Arya’s chest as she watched Gendry walk away.

He turned around and walked backwards as he addressed her. “Been there, done that.”

A lump form in her throat as Gendry disappeared from her line of vision. Her and Gendry had never argued before. Never. They had small disagreements that they usually got over seconds later. They could never stay mad at each other for too long. But, this felt too real...too permanent. Did Gendry really just walk away from her? Did she really just ask him to?

Why did Ned have to say anything? Why was it so important to him to name Gendry as the guy she almost had sex with? Now her family knows about it and hates him and Gendry is upset with her.

In all the time that they had known one another, Gendry has never been mad or angry with her. Not truly. But, this was different. All of his anger and insecurity had been brewing and brought to the surface and Arya hated to admit that she was the cause of that. Without meaning to, she had hurt him with her rejection in response to a committed relationship and not returning his love. For months, he kept quiet and played by her rules, but he couldn’t keep his mouth shut at her accusations.

He didn’t understand.

Arya wasn’t ashamed of him and he wasn’t some charity case—she wanted to protect him, to protect them. For years, she carried a torch for him despite being in relationships with other men. She had loved Ned and that went away. She had loved Aegon, but it wasn’t enough to keep them together. Arya was afraid that her love for Gendry might disappear if they were in a real relationship.

A sharp pain shot through Arya’s lip as she tried to prevent tears from falling, but it was useless: they fell anyways. Silent choked sobs wrecked her body while she brought her hands to her face to wipe her tears away. After she was done, she covered her eyes and continued to cry.

He left.

Gendry left.

Someone had placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and squeezed comfortably. When Arya turned to
look at the person, she found Sansa staring at her sympathetically. Roughly, she wiped her face again as she tried to figure out what to do next.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. Gendry was supposed to come over and meet her family and that was all. Her family wasn’t supposed to find out about that night and she and Gendry weren’t supposed to be mad at each other. Fucking Ned. Fuck! Why did he have to say anything?

Abruptly, Arya turned around and faced the table. Catelyn audibly gasped at her daughter’s bloodshot eyes and tear stained cheeks. It was a rarity to see Arya cry and, even then, she would only shed a few tears. Her youngest daughter was truly upset and that devastated her. Ned went to comfort his daughter, but she shrugged him off and went her ex-boyfriend.

“Leave.” Arya demanded with venom in her voice. “Leave now!”

“But, Arya, I—“

“I don’t care!” She shouted. “I don’t want you here. I don’t want to see you and I don’t want you near me or—or in the same place that I’m at.” For a moment, she looked at her hands, and then gaze shifted back to him. Her tears started to fall down her face again. “This is your fault.”

With that, she left the table and went to her childhood bedroom. It was closer and she just wanted to lie down.

He left.

This wasn’t her. Arya didn’t cry over boys. She didn’t cry when she broke up with Ned, but she was upset at the fact that she had hurt him. Despite no longer wanting to be with Ned, Arya did still care for him and considered him a friend. That honeymoon period of having a boyfriend wore off and Ned wasn’t able to meet her emotional needs. He didn’t challenge or stimulate her. If they had stayed together it would have only been for his benefit and not hers.

With Aegon, everything felt right, but she’d been slowly drowning in their relationship. Their time together had been right for that moment and to go on any longer would’ve been foolish. Love didn’t have an expiration date, but relationships did. Arya didn’t want their relationship to deteriorate to a point of no return and eventually come to resent one another. She supposed that her beliefs were hypotheticals and could have been wrong, but she hadn’t regretted calling off the wedding and not continuing her relationship with him.

Yet, her heart ached for Gendry in ways it never had before. That was new. Perhaps, her heart always ached for him and only recently it had been acknowledged. He was here and very real. Arya got to touch and do all of the things she had fantasized about when she was younger. But, she had been scared to give him anything more. Terrified even. And now her worst nightmare has come true. He left. He had walked away, but this was her fault. She only gave so much before pulling away. She had encouraged him to spill the contents of his heart, but gave him measured hope. Gendry bared it all while she kept her cards close to her chest.

Why did people enjoy falling in love again?

Sansa peaked in Arya’s room as she knocked on the door.

“Can I come in?” Sansa’s gave Arya a warm stare and small smile.

“I don’t care,” Arya mumbled.

Sansa gestured for Arya to sit up. “Come on, Arya.”
“Sansa,” Arya warned.

“Get up,” her older sister said sternly. Arya didn’t feel like arguing, so she sat up. Sansa grabbed Arya by her shoulders, and then pulled her sister’s head into her lap. “You love him.” Soothing fingers brushed her scalp as she spoke. “You have for years.”

“Is there a point you’re trying to make?” A stray tear fell on Sansa’s skirt.


“Excuse me?” Arya turned her head to face her sister.

“You heard me.” She grabbed Arya’s chin and slightly shook it. “I don’t know anything about your relationship with Gendry, but it’s clear that you care about him a great deal and that you’re in love with him. Whatever he has done in the past or whatever slight he committed against you is not too big to be overcome. But, you are so scared of realized and unrealized fears that, you’re acting stupid. I may not know Gendry, but it was pretty apparent that he returns your feelings just as much, if not more.” Sansa’s thumb rubbed Arya’s cheek. “You need to deal with whatever fears you have. It’s the only way your relationship will have a real shot at working because whatever you’re doing now isn’t working… That is, if you want to be with him.”

“I do want to be with him.”

“Then, why aren’t you acting like it?”

Arya knew what she wanted; she just had to show Gendry that he was who she wanted.
“Thank you, Officer Stark,” District Attorney Stevens thanked with sincere gratitude. “Your testimony was vital.”

Arya gave Fiona Stevens a small smile.

“It was my pleasure,” she began. “There is nothing I enjoy more than testifying to make sure scum rot in prison other than arresting scum, so they can wait for their trials in order rot in prison.”

The woman chuckled, and then turned to gather her papers and put them back in her suitcase. Arya stared at the DA as she gathered her belongings. For a moment, she got lost in thought as everything and nothing raced through her mind.

“Is something wrong, Officer Stark,” DA Stevens questioned as she threw her a semi worried glance.

“No,” Arya shook her head. “Everything is fine.”

While she walked out of the courtroom, Arya checked her messages. She quickly replied to Sansa and Robb and ignored Jon’s text. Briefly, she glanced at her e-mail as she walked down the stairs to her car. In irritation, a dramatic sigh was exhaled. Ned was waiting for her.

“What do you want?” Daggers were shot at her ex-boyfriend as she clicked her remote to unlock her car and walked to the driver’s side.

“Uh…hey, Arya,” Ned replied as he nervously rubbed his hands together.

“I asked you what did you want.” Ned was usually great at communication, except when it came to Arya and speaking about his feelings. “You’re lucky that I’m not ignoring you like I’ve been these past few months.”

Ned opened his mouth to speak, but abruptly stopped. Every few seconds, his mouth would move as if he was going to say something, but sound never came out. Hesitantly, he scratched the back of his neck before he began to pace back and forth. It was obvious that he had a lot to say and was trying to collect himself, but Arya didn’t care. He was the one who came to her, so he should have been prepared.

“I don’t have time for this.” Arya opened car door to get in when Ned’s words stopped her dead in her tracks.

“Gods, you’re so selfish,” he spat. “When do you ever think about me or anyone else?”

“Excuse me,” Arya slammed her door and made her way to Ned. “I’m selfish? Me? Arya Stark? What the fuck are you talking about, Ned? Just because I don’t still have feelings for you anymore don’t mean that I am selfish. So, if that is what you have come here for, then fuck you.”

“No, fuck you.” He shot back. “You’re selfish because you only think about yourself. You only think about how other people effect your life and not how you effect theirs.” Ned’s words struck a chord with Arya. “Yeah, I screwed up, Arya, but you never gave me a chance to explain myself…”

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Mistaken for Strangers (Someone that I Used to Know)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
you—you—you, just cut me out of your life as if we didn’t have history together…as if we weren’t friends. As if we hadn’t been friends for 13 years.”

Arya was at a loss for words for the moment. Stubbornly, she began, “No, don’t try to turn this around on me. You—“

“I what?” Ned dared her to list his wrongs. “I exposed your secret? Well, that wasn’t my intention. But, I was hurt. And you know that I would never intentionally hurt you. I didn’t think. I didn’t know that that would happen when I figured out Gendry was the guy. At that moment, all I could think about he had a piece of you that I never had and would never get. But, other than that, I had been a good—no, a great, fucking friend.”

And he was right.

Besides, spilling her closely guarded secret, on accident, Ned was and had been a great friend. Although it was a very big secret to let out, it wasn’t malicious or intended to hurt her, yet; she hadn’t spoken to him since that day. She had cut him out of her life. Arya had been thinking about herself and not him or them as friends.

Despite Ned being interested in her since day one, he had always respected and supported her. His friendship had added a tremendous value to her life. Even when they dated, Arya still considered him her friend. Their breakup had been hard on him, but he never lashed out at her and tried his best to get things to return back to normal in their friendship.

The first and only time he had really screwed up, she immediately cut him from her life.

That could be considered selfish.

It was selfish.

“I have no idea what this guy means to you. But, it’s clearly a greater deal than I ever meant or ever will, but this has nothing to do with him.” Ned harshly rubbed his face. “This has to do with us and the fact that I shouldn’t have been as easily discarded as I was. Or, despite that fact that we could have a great friendship, at times, it seems as if everything revolves around what you want and how you feel. I’m tired of that shit. I’m tired of the times when you take me for granted or don’t appreciate me. I’m tired of feeling like the only one who cares when shit gets tough.”

“Ned—“

“No, Arya, you don’t get to talk,” he interrupted. “You wanted to stay silent all of these months, well, you can stay silent now.” Arya listened.

It was then that the power dynamics had changed in their relationship. Arya no longer had all of the control and Ned wasn’t in complete control either, they were equals. No one person was calling the shots over another. That was a first.

Almost everything that had happened between them since they had known one another was because Arya initiated it or allowed it to happen. Ned followed her lead. This was actually true of most friendships and relationships that she had. Bran called it accurately months before: she did have control issues. Arya controlled what people knew about her as well as the relationships she had with them. If she could not control them, she didn’t have them in her life.

Ned had been a casualty of this philosophy.

“So, you don’t get to call the shots or end this friendship—no, not anymore. If anyone is going to
end this friendship, it will be me because I deserve better than this.” Ned then turned to leave.

“Ned, wait.” Arya grabbed his arm and Ned snatched it away.

He glared at her. “This is what you wanted, right? Oh wait, it’s different because I am the one walking away.” A humorless laugh filled the air. “Sorry, sweetheart, you can’t always get what you want.”

With that, he left and didn’t look back.

A week later, as Arya ran with Nymeria, she reflected upon Ned’s word. Each word, each thought, and each argument of his was taken apart and carefully analyzed. Every since Arya could remember, she had never taken well to criticism no matter how well intentioned it was. In her mind, it was a personal attack, despite the fact that she knew better than to take it as such. Oddly enough, Ned’s words didn’t have the same affect on her, as she would have expected. The irony was not lost on her that Ned’s words could be considered as a personal attack, but Arya could understand the reason for such harsh words.

Ned had been right on all accounts. He had been a great friend and only made one mistake. It hadn’t been intentional on his part and if she hadn’t been so secretive, perhaps, the outcome would have been different. Well, not her parents reaction, but Ned mentioning the extent of her relationship with Gendry. She doubt that her parents would ever be okay with their fifteen year old almost having sex with a twenty one year old. Maybe if this was England back in the day where they married off their young daughters to older men after they got their first period. Hell, they would have been eager to marry her away.

Arya shuddered at the thought as she followed Nymeria up an incline.

Well, if it had been Gendry that would be a different story. Inwardly, Arya rolled her eyes at herself as she pushed herself harder to beat her personal best. The burn in her calves was growing while she pumped her arms.

It would be a lie for Arya to say that she didn’t mean to hurt Ned because she did; she just didn’t think that his hurt extended beyond his romantic feelings for her. She assumed that everything was about their previous relationship and, maybe a little bit of it was, but his hurt had honestly stemmed from how easily she casted him aside once he fucked up.

Gradually Arya slowed down as she approached the guesthouse, and then walked up the steps. She stood on the porch for a moment to catch her breath and stretched for a moment, and then opened the door. Before seeing to tending to her needs, Arya filled both Nymeria’s food and water bowls.

After a brief search, she settled on two cups on yogurt, an apple, and a bottle of PowerAde. For a while, she listened to some music, and then had a mini marathon on Netflix.

As Arya stood up, her phone rang.

“What’s up, Franny,” she held her cellphone against her ear while she straightened up the living room.

Francisco groaned which Arya smirked at in response; she knew that he hated the nickname.

“Will you be on your way any time soon?”

“Yeah, why?” Arya threw up on a light jacket and gathered her keys.
“I just wanted to know when to order the pizza, so you could pick it up,” he explained before clearing his throat.

“Don’t worry about it,” she dismissed. “I’m going to order from a real pizzeria, so we don’t have to eat that imitation pizza.”

“Ha ha, you think you’re funny, don’t you?” Arya grinned.

“I know I am,” she quipped. “Alright; I’ll see you in about thirty—forty minutes.”

“See you then,” the line disconnected.

Over the past few months, Arya and Francisco had gotten closer. As unexpected as their friendship had been, it seemed to baffle them that it took them so long to actually establish a friendship. It took Francisco getting shot for them to truly get to know one another. Before, it was simply banter, shop-talk, and the rare serious conversation. Now, they conversed about a variety of things and frequently spent time together.

She and Gendry hadn’t spoken much since that fateful night; he said he needed time. At first, it devastated Arya before she speculated that she needed time as well. Although she had many things figured out, her mindset wasn’t one of them. As cliché as it sounded Arya was her own worst enemy—an enemy that was meticulously created to protect herself, but secretly sabotaged instead.

The time she spent working on understanding herself had been for nothing. She wasn’t any closer to resolving the conflicts that lay within her. Ned had been a testament to that. If she had honestly made progress, she would’ve realized her folly with how she handled him.

“Hey, Arya,” Francisco opened his door to let her in.

“Hey, Franny,” she explained as she carried the pizzas in. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ve seen better days.” He shrugged as he tenderly touched his side before he walked into the kitchen and looked at the contents. “Want anything to drink?”

“No, thanks,” she replied, and then thought better of it. “As a matter of fact, do you have any beer?”

Francisco chuckled. “Did you honestly just ask me that?” He stared at her unbelievingly before pouring two cups. “The home brew is finished. I don’t mean to toot my own horn, but I think it may be my best yet,” he boasted.

Arya sat the pizza boxes on the living room table and held out a hand to grab her glass of beer.

When Arya first visited Francisco’s place, she was impressed with the décor. His place had a nice blend of traditional and contemporary style. There was different kind of art that occupied the apartment—both paintings and sculptures. She knew his musical collection was eclectic and to be envied (she regularly borrowed music from him), but she was amazed at seeing it in person.

“Is everything going well with your rehab,” she inquired. Arya lifted up his shirt and gently rubbed the scar. The bullet penetrated Francisco just below his ribcage and barely missed hitting vital organs.

“Yeah, but surprisingly, that’s not the hardest part,” he said cryptically, and then rubbed his neck. “It’s the mental/emotional stuff—that really fucks up your pain.”

Absentmindedly, Francisco rubbed Arya’s leg.
“My therapist—no therapists—I have a psychiatrist and physical therapist, said that most of my pain is psychological.” Her companion solemnly stared at his lap. “They said that everything looked great and I am the only one holding myself back.”

“So, what is it—you’re issue, I mean?” Arya finished off her drink. “This really is good beer.”

“Just good?” He rose and eyebrow at her compliment. “Anyways, that’s what Wendy, my psychiatrist, and I are trying to work through.” He took her cup and went to refill it along with his own. “I just want her to tell me what it is, so I can go back to work.”

Arya laughed to herself. “It doesn’t work like that. Therapy is about you working on your problems. Therapists are there to help and point you in the right direction. Wendy might know what is wrong with you, but your sessions with her will only be successful once you realized what your problem is and what to do about it.”

Francisco gave her an inquiring look to explain her insight on therapy.

“I went when I was a teen; it helped a lot,” she nodded before taking a sip of her beer. “I think it would be good for you.”

“Would you recommend your former therapist,” Arya laughed as toppings from Francisco’s slice fell on his white shirt. He shrugged and ate the food off of his shirt. “I may go to him instead, mine isn’t working for me.”

“Her,” Arya corrected. “And no. You would have to be a participant of the program I went to, which you are too old for. Besides, therapy is only as effective as you allow it to be. Some relationships between client and therapists are shitty, but other times, therapists are limited in their effectiveness because the client doesn’t say shit to them or they are selective in what they say. Hell, I was,” she admitted. “The reason it isn’t working for you is because you aren’t letting it. This isn’t like you getting shot, and then getting surgery and going to physical therapy to recover. Therapy—psychology is deeper than that. It deals with the mind and the mind isn’t always honest with itself. Sometimes, it doesn’t even understand what the issue is. So, you work with your therapist to find out what that could be and, even when you do find out, it is still a process. You aren’t ‘fixed’, you’re just aware and have to make steps to deal with the issue.”

Her companion looked at her in awe.

“What?” Arya was unnerved by his stare.

“You have no idea how amazing you are, do you?” He scooted closer to her.

“You’re crazy,” she brushed off.

Francisco shrugged. “That may be, but that doesn’t make it isn’t less true. Crazy people make valid observations sometimes.”

“Well, this is an invalid observation; my shit isn’t together in the least bit and, to top it all off, I’m a shitty friend as well.” Arya tiredly exhaled as she evaluated herself.

“Arya,” her co-worker gave her an assessing look. “And you are aware of the issue, so what are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Start by not being so hard on yourself,” he offered. “Before that, take a deep breath and say, ‘I’m
only human’. We make mistakes, okay. Sometimes we aren’t the best people or even the best friends. Sometimes, our shit isn’t together—it happens. After you realize that, you make a game plan. It doesn’t happen overnight. It takes time. You have to realize some fucking ugly truths and Gods knows people hate to hear the truth about themselves, let alone confront it,” he finished off. “So, don’t be so hard on yourself. Arya Stark, you’re an amazing person and having flaws doesn’t change that.”

Hurriedly, Arya blinked back tears. The past few months haven’t been the greatest for her and, after Ned gave her some perspective the dynamics of her friendships, she had been feeling pretty low. To have someone think she was amazing…it touched her. It made her feel happiness in a way that she couldn’t adequately express.

The two finished the first box of pizza before moving onto the second as the conversation was steered to another subject. Arya filled him in on what was happening at work and summarized her encounter with Ned. The topic then switched to overrated/underrated actors and movies.

“Although I hate to admit this, you were right: I was about to order shit pizza,” said randomly.
“You’ve shown me the error of my ways. How can I ever repay you?” Arya laughed at his overdramatic nature.

“By refusing to give any business to those con artists,” she answered.

“You’re wish is my command.” He slowly bowed, and then went to turn on the gaming console.

“Ready to get your ass beat, Franny?”

“How cute. Trying to pump yourself up with false confidence,” he retorted as he tossed a controller to her.

“You wish. Ain’t nothing false about my confidence,” she bragged.

“Well, then you’re deluded because this ass,” Francisco said as deliberately directed his ass in Arya’s face as he squeezed between her and the table to sit down. “This never been bruised—not even touched.”

They played a best of series and, although it wasn’t a clean sweep, not even close to it; Francisco was a worthy opponent. Arya managed to walk away with the victory, but his skillset impressed her.

“I guess I’ve been humbled,” he smiled and hung his head. Francisco finished off his beer, and then leaned back against the couch. “Now I know who to call when I play online.” He yawned audibly as he closed his eyes.

“Are you about to go to sleep on me?” Arya asked.

“In a bit; I’m tired,” he answered. “You can continue playing online if you want.”

“Come on, Franny, play with me,” Arya shook her friend. Francisco opened his eyes. “I knew that would get you…Franny.”

Francisco closed his eyes again and as Arya was prepared to say the despised nickname again, he pounced her. He began to tickle her and she laughed uncontrollably in response. Every time she tried to outmaneuver him, it seemed as if Francisco anticipated her moves. Arya laughed so hard that tears fell from her eyes and she struggled getting her breath.

“Franny, Franny,” Arya, screamed as she wiggled against his body, which was positioned, between
her legs.

“Gods, just give up,” He offered

“Never!” Francisco chuckled at Arya’s rebellious nature as he continued to tickle her.

Suddenly, he stopped as if distracted by something. Arya took that as her opening and tackled him to the floor. She didn’t waste time in straddling, and then tickling Francisco, preventing him from gathering himself. Guffaws filled the air and echoed off of the walls.

As expected, Francisco overpowered her and as he sat up, he puts her hands behind her back. It was then that Arya understood why the momentary pause earlier. An erection pressed into her ass as she contemplated her options.

On impulse, Arya kissed Francisco before he could say anything. Involuntarily, he returned her kiss and inserted his tongue in her mouth. The longer they kissed, the deeper and more intense it got. Arya struggled against Francisco’s grip as a signal for him to let go of her hands. He complied immediately and laid her on her back. As if they had done this a hundred times before, they expertly took off of each other’s clothes.

Arya licked her way up from Francisco’s chest to his neck to his face, and then bit his on his lips. The biting turned into kisses as Arya wrapped her arms around his neck. Francisco picked her up by her thighs and sat on the couch with Arya straddling his legs. She took his cock in her hands and stroked it firmly. Her partner grabbed her hips and lifted her up on her knees. Slowly, he pulled her forward as she lowered herself and directed his cock inside her. Simultaneously, they both groaned, and then Arya rocked her hips.

The next morning, Arya woke up alone on the couch. A sheet was thrown over her and a pillow was under her head. She put a hand to her head in response to the slight hangover. Cautiously, she sat up and tightened the sheet around her body. As she tried to get up, she felt disoriented and knocked a cup over on the table. Arya grimaced at the loud noise.

“Oh, Gods,” she moaned.

Francisco peeked his head in when he heard the noise.

“Finally, you’re up,” he smiled. Arya gave him a forced smile in response, which Francisco read before scratching his head. “Umm, I washed your clothes so you could have something clean to wear. After you take a shower, breakfast should be ready.”

“Okay,” Arya mumbled and went to go wash up.

As she water splashed against her skin, Arya tried to work out what came over her the night before. She wasn’t interested in Francisco that way. Well, she wasn’t interested in him romantically. To be honest, she had wondered what it would be like to have sex with him, but she didn’t expect it to happen. And not in the way it happened either. Arya was reckless the previous night. Unprotected sex? Gods, what the fuck was wrong with her? No offense to Francisco, but she didn’t know what he had and she could end up pregnant.

A trip to the pharmacy was in her near future. Near as in an hour from that moment.

Without wasting time, Arya finished her shower, got dressed, put away the things she used, and joined Francisco for breakfast. He fixed eggs, bacon, and pancakes. Fresh squeezed orange juice was served.
“I hope you don’t mind that I used your shampoo,” Arya, said as she cut up her pancakes. She hadn’t looked at Francisco since she walked into the kitchen.

A muffled laugh escaped Francisco.

“What?” Arya stared across the table.

A forkful of eggs was stuffed into Francisco’s already filled mouth, as he said, “Nothing.”

“Clearly, it something,” she argued. “Now tell me what it is.”

“You,” he said without hesitation. “You’re ridiculous. And before you get upset, I don’t mean that in a bad way. It’s just that…” He smiled to himself. “I know what it was—just sex. I’m not looking anything into it, okay. I know the deal. You don’t have to worry about me asking you to be my girlfriend and me giving you a promise ring. Hell, you don’t even have to worry about wanting some friends with benefits type deal either. So, there’s no need for you to avoid eye contact with me as if I’m going to pounce when our eyes meet.”

“Are you insinuating that I’m bad at sex?” Arya raised an eyebrow as she waited expectantly for an answer.

The male chuckled. “See? Ridiculous. You’re more concerned about me not expecting sex with you than you are with me being uninterested in a relationship.” He shook his head. “If I didn’t know you as well as I did, I would come back for seconds. Last night, my dick was screaming, ‘encore, encore,’ after every round and, keep in mind, I was tired before we had sex. If that isn’t testament about your…. performance, then I don’t know what is.”

Arya shook her head. He was right; she could be ridiculous at times.

Francisco winced as he got up and searched a pantry filled with prescriptions. After a moment of looking, he found the bottles he was looking for. He dry-swallowed his medicine, and then joined Arya at the table again.

“Pain management, anxiety, depression, and so forth,” he said as way of explanation.

“Oh,” Arya sipped her juice.

“One of the reasons I can’t come back to work,” he offered vaguely. “Not all the meds, but the anxiety. I didn’t’ get shot while on the job, but it’s difficult to be around guns. That’s something hard to admit, but getting shot is getting shot. Regardless of how it occurs, you still almost lost your life.” Francisco tightened his jaw and swallowed hard. Arya grabbed his hands in hers and gently squeezed.

“Everything will work out,” she whispered.

“Maybe.”

Arya looked at her watch. “Oh shit.”

“What? You have to go?”

“Yeah,” she replied, as she stood up. “I’m having lunch with my brothers and sisters today.”

“Well, just so you know, it was a pleasure having you over.” Francisco stood up and began to follow Arya to the door.
“No, the pleasure was all mine,” Arya, grinned at Francisco shaking his head. “Remember, I’m ridiculous.” She pointed to herself as she spoke.

Arya slapped his ass and Francisco winced, and then grinned. There was a bite mark on his ass. “There’s a bruise now.”

They hugged one another and Francisco waved as Arya drove off. She arrived at her destination with a few minutes to spare.

“Marco!” Arya shouted as she raised her hands in the air.

“Arya!” Marco mimicked her behavior.

They laughed at themselves before Arya took a seat at one of the table.

“You’re back, again,” Marco asked as he sat down across from her.

“If anything, I am persistent in my quest to bed you,” she replied. “Now, if you’ll just say yes and reward my hard work, you’ll be a happy camper.”

“Don’t you mean, you?” He corrected.

“I know what I said,” Arya looked at the menu out of habit. “No man can please me, I’m just in it for the chase. Once I catch you, you’ll understand what all of the fuss was about.”

Marco rolled his eyes and laughed. It never failed; Arya always found a way to make him laugh with her sexually laced conversations. She was quick with her retorts and knew how to give as much as she got. Marco usually would entertain her, but his boss was around, so he didn’t want to get in trouble.

“So, how are you?” He asked as he played with the salt and peppershakers. Before Arya could answer, he replied. “I’m not asking about how’s work and the family—I’m asking about you. And don’t tell me what you think I want to hear.”

Arya stared out the window as she contemplated her answer. “I…” the Stark woman licked her bottom lip, and then bit it. “I…” Mirthlessly, she laughed before leaning back in her chair. The words struggled to come out and Arya was unable to articulate her thoughts. In frustration, she shrugged and blinked rapidly at the moisture in her eyes. “Getting to okay.”

Marco rested a hand on hers. In that moment, she truly felt fine.

After conversing for a few minutes, Marco went back to work. Soon afterwards, her siblings began to show up. Bran and Rickon arrived first, followed by Robb, and then Sansa. Jon hadn’t showed up yet. Arya figured he was still upset at her for ignoring his calls and messages and was undecided about showing up.

He would show up. She knew it.

“Willas and I went to the doctor yesterday,” Sansa said excitedly. She pulled two ultrasounds out of her bag and handed one to Arya and the other to Rob.

“What did the doctor say?” Rob inquired as he grinned at his future niece or nephew.

“She said that everything looks great,” Sansa smiled proudly. Unexpectedly, she had gotten pregnant again, but this time she found out sooner and was being cautious. The doctor had explained that her
current routine was fine as it was, but Sansa didn’t want to take any chances. Her family understood her reaction and kept quiet on any opinions they had. Sansa needed to feel in control and they wouldn’t take that away from her.

The waitress came to their table and sat the food down as well and a waiter followed behind with the drinks.

“We didn’t order,” Bran replied as he looked at the food then the waitress.

“I did,” Arya, answered as she dug in. “And there’s no point in putting up any argument; you know you all are going to love it—smell the aroma,” Arya did a quick wafting motion as she inhaled the scent. Her siblings laughed at her. “And we always order the same drinks.”

“Whatever,” Rickon dismissed playfully before loading his plates up with pizza.

Bran followed his younger brother’s lead as he looked to his oldest sister. “So, have you guys decided on any names yet?”

“Well, we’re going to wait until the baby is born to find out the sex, but if it’s a boy, he’ll be named after Willas. If it’s a girl, I was thinking maybe naming her after mom or perhaps the name Hope.”

“Where’s Ygritte when you need her,” Arya quipped. Sansa gave her sister an exasperated look. “I’m sorry, Sansa, but it’s boring, it’s safe. But, it’s not my kid, so you can name it whatever you like.” She gulped her glass of water, and then sat the cup down.

“You’re right,” Sansa agreed. “It’s not your kid. I don’t see why you always have to comment every time this is mentioned.”

“Don’t be overdramatic, Sans,” Arya drawled. Sansa stared in annoyance at Arya nickname for her. “This is what? Our third time talking about it. If it’s that important to you, I won’t say anything anymore.”

“Thank you,” she softly remarked. Sansa would’ve comment on the nickname, but she knew that if she acknowledged it the name would stick. At the same time, Arya most likely already knew she hated it, so the nickname was official. No one could win for losing with Arya. No one.

Throughout the conversation, Robb kept looking at Arya and grinning, which unnerved her. She had no clue as to what was making him grin and how to stop it.

“What, Robb?”

“Nothing,” he held his hands up to indicate that he was innocent.

“Nothing my ass,” she retorted. “Your poker face sucks ass. The difference between you and Sansa is that she would have told me already.”

“Hey!” Sansa exclaimed.

“Hey!” Arya mocked. Sansa hit her sister on the arm. “You know you can’t bluff to save your life. The features aren’t the only strong Tully genes in Robb and you.”

Robb gave his sister a mock glare before laughing. “You’re such an ass, Arya, you know that?”

“Yes, and you wouldn’t have me any other way.” She smiled broadly.

Robb sipped his beer, and then tapped his neck. Arya looked confused, and then his meaning dawn
on her when he raised an eyebrow.

“Someone got lucky last night?” He crossed his arms and leaned forward. “Who’s the guy?”

“None of your business,” Her siblings gave her a knowing glance. “I am not secretive! Ugh,…fine! But, I don’t see why you perverts want to know anyways. It was a co-worker.”

“Is this leading anywhere?” Jon asked protectively and Arya stared at him defiantly. She wondered when appeared and why he didn’t announce himself sooner? More importantly, what made him think his concerns was wanted.

“Yes,” she lied. “I turned in my letter of resignation today. I’m currently pregnant with his child and plan to stay home and raise all of his babies—out of wedlock, of course.”

“Gods, Arya, why do you having to be so fucking stubborn?” Jon complained. “I just want to know what’s going on with you?”

“Jon! Arya!” Sansa said in a firm voice. Both Arya and Jon looked at her in surprise. “Can you two cool it for a moment? How about we eat in peace for once in a long time?” Sansa faced her siblings when she addressed them by name. “Jon, you can cool it with the whole protective, big brother shtick? Arya’s a grown woman, okay; she doesn’t need you assessing every guy she is interesting in whether it’s dating or fucking. And, Arya, I know Jon’s prodding into your personal life, but you don’t have to be such an asshole about it.”

Jon ran a hand through his thick locks and groaned. “Arya, is it so wrong that I’m trying to protect you. I just want to look out for you.”

“I don’t need you to look out for me—I’m an adult, Jon. I’m a cop, for Gods sake. I can take care of myself, “ Arya said passionately.

As hard as Jon tried to hold his tongue, he couldn’t resist. “Like you did with Gendry?”

“For the last time, I didn’t have sex with Gendry when I was away. He didn’t take advantage of me,” Arya, delivered in a clipped tone. “I don’t want to hear anything else about him supposedly manipulating me.”

“Gods, Arya, I don’t know what kind of hold this guy has got over you. He almost took advanta—“

“Shut the fuck up! Shut the fuck up! Shut the fuck up!” Arya jumped up abruptly and screamed. “I’m tired of hearing talk about Gendry. Talk about something else—anything else and I will gladly listen. But, I swear if you utter Gendry’s name again, I will walk out this restaurant; if you make hints about the situation that occurred YEARS ago, I will walk out this; if I even sense that thoughts about the matter is formulating in your mind, I will walk out this restaurant.”

“There’s no getting through to you, is there?” Jon mumbled.

Arya laughed at the irony. She was fully prepared to leave as she promised she would, but decided against it. “Jon, you’re right; Gendry almost took advantage of me.” Jon’s face dropped. “You’re completely right. I wasn’t experiencing intense, sexual feelings that I never felt before and wanted to explore with a guy I was very attracted to. No, that wasn’t me that was someone else. I’m asexual. To be honest, I don’t even know why I have sex now—I think I’m just a victim of all of these men taking advantage of me.” Jon glared at his sister. “I mean, I thought I was the one who initiated sex with Ned, but nope, I was manipulated into doing it. My former lover…he manipulated me too by asking if I wanted to have sex? Aegon, Gods, he manipulated me by asking me out on a date—he knew that would lead to sex. I don’t know if I’ve ever made a decision to have sex where I wasn’t
“Arya, that’s not what I mean and you know it!” Jon was seething.

“No, I get it now, Jon, I get it. I mean, I can only imagine if Gendry had had his way back then. He would’ve done any and everything to me and I would’ve thought I wanted it. But, I really didn’t. I understand. I do. I don’t have any agency in ANY decision I make. You’ve made that clear.” Arya’s jaw tense as she looked at he favorite brother.

“No, Arya,” Jon paced back and forth. “Gods, you can be so stubborn. The difference is that you were young and shit and Gendry should have known better.”

“And he did, which is why he didn’t fuck me! Do you not listen or are you just hard at hearing? You keep speculating about his motives, but nothing ever happened. Why do you insist on judging Gendry for lusting after me, but not acting on this desires? It could’ve happened and I wouldn’t have said shit about it to anyone. We had time and opportunity.” An expression that danced across Jon’s face indicated that he had entertained those thoughts as well. It was probably what terrified him the most. “But, he put a stop to that. How many guys do you know would stop a sure thing? I wanted it so bad, Jon. So bad. And he was on top of me and I could feel how hard his cock was every time he had grind against me—it made me even more excited—“

“Arya, stop,” he interrupted. “I don’t want to hear this.”

“No, you do,” she contradicted. “And then I was on top of him,” she continued. “I had unbuttoned his pants and was about to take them off when he stopped me. Can you believe it? He stopped me. Jon, I promise you, I was a sure thing that night and he stopped me.”

“I don’t care—he almost…” he provided weakly.

“…took advantage of me, I know, I know,” she said unentertained. “After that night, all I ever dreamed about was fucking him and they weren’t elementary either.” A small smile played on her lips as her tongue moved across to moistened them. “Like gagging his big, fat cock—I dreamt about that a lot. I would get the wettest would I dreamt about screwing his brains out, which ended up with me touching myself a lot. But, my dreams didn’t stop there...”

“Enough, Arya!” Robb exclaimed. He looked at his little sister as if she had grown an extra head. When she and Jon started conversing after Sansa spoke, the other three siblings silently agreed to let them talk it out. But, he was hearing far too much about his little sister’s sex life and fantasies than he ever cared to know. Although he had gained perspective on the Gendry situation, he still felt minuscule resentment towards the man.

“Is it enough, Jon?” Jon rested his hands on his hips, and then scratched his beard.

“I just…” he walked out of the restaurant.

It was decided after Jon left, that lunch was over. Arya apologized to her other siblings as well as the people who worked at the restaurant. Her behavior was inappropriate regardless of how much Jon had pissed her off.

Sansa had rode home with Arya just to spend time with her. When they arrived to her place, Arya went to run and Sansa visited their parents while she out. After her run, Arya tore off her clothes and jumped in the shower. The water sluiced Arya’s skin, as she got lost in deep thought. Absentmindedly, she put soap on her body and in her hair to clean herself. She came to understand that her biggest regret wasn’t the blow up she had with Gendry, but rather, the way she ignored Ned.
As much as Arya tried believed for a while that she no longer cared for Ned after the incident, it was clear that she still did. He was important to her than and now, but she had been blinded by her all or nothing attitude to understand this.

Her pride and secrecy led to her losing an incredibly important friend. Arya considered the situation with Ned worse because it really showcased her selfishness as a person. He was supposed to be her friend, but she refused to talk to him. It was something that she had done before with he and Mycah—she was hurt, but wouldn’t let them in. It was her being consumed with her pain and not considering how others felt when she pulled away. Arya didn’t think that her absence in their life was important; it was all about her pain. Never theirs. She can’t say that she never did that with Gendry, but she did try to be more aware of how he felt.

Without warning, a huge sense of loss and grief consumes Arya as heartfelt sobs wrecked her body. For a while, she sat in the shower and cried. When she was done, she took a deep breath.

What next?

“Everything will be all right,” Sansa reassured her sister. With care, Sansa runs her fingers through Arya’s hair as her head rests on the older girl’s lap.

“Yeah…it will,” she replied as she turned her body to face her sister. Sansa’s belly is in her face and which makes her smile. Tentatively, Arya rubs the pregnant belly and Sansa rests a hand on hers. ”I wonder who name the baby responds to. Willas? Catelyn? Hope?” After she said each name, she wanted for the baby to kick. It didn’t kick for any of them.

The improvement in the relationship between Arya and Sansa came the day when their mother asked Arya to forgive Sansa. Usually, Arya honored requests from her mother to placate her, but during that moment, she did agree with her mother. And she didn’t want to spend her whole life hating her sister for something she did when she was young. Arya didn’t want to hate Sansa for a mistake for the rest of her life when she had made thousands of mistakes herself.

From that on forth, Sansa and Arya carefully worked on their relationship so that they could be better sisters. And, so that they could understand one another better.

Arya supposed that she needed to do that with Jon as well. It’s not that they didn’t understand one another; they just tended to get very hotheaded and not listen to one another when they were upset. But, in Arya’s defense, she had more reason to be upset with Jon than he did with her.

Over the next few weeks, Arya became very wrapped up in work. There were a few open cases that she was investigating, so she didn’t get a chance to talk to Jon. After she closed them, she called Jon and they decided the best time to meet up.

“Hey, Arya,” Jon waved her over to sit at his table.

“Hey,” she smiled at her brother, which he returned. Jon gave her a bear hug and planted a kiss on her forehead.

“So, are you gonna sit down?” He laughed. “So, I’ve been going some thinking and I’ve decided that there isn’t much to say.”

Automatically, Arya became defensive. “There isn’t?”

“No, there isn’t,” Jon sipped his coffee. “I was an asshole, plain and simple.”

Arya smiled in relief.
“I guess I was so upset because I felt like everything had been my fault,” he explained. “You’re strained relationship with your mom at the time, getting into the fight with Joffrey—the first time…and the second, having no one to talk to when you guys moved to King’s Landing,” Jon sighed. “Then to compound the fact that I always used to think that when you entered high school, I would be there to protect you—that I would have to fight off the boys. I know, Arya, you don’t need protective, but I can’t help but feel protective towards you.” Jon looked around the café for a minute before continuing, “And I wasn’t there. And Gendry may be a good guy, but what if he hadn’t been? Gendry was like the symbol of my failure in being there for you.”

“Jon,” Arya sighed. “Gods, why do you have to be so stupid?”

Jon laughed.

“You have never failed me,” she replied. “Upset? Yes, from time to time. Failed? Never.” She took a piece of Jon’s muffin. “But, I wouldn’t have let myself be taken advantage of like that. It pissed off at you for thinking otherwise.”

“I know, Arya; but I’m a big brother, I don’t think, I just react.” He hung his head guilty.

“Apology accepted!”

“Now, that that is settled,” Jon began. “I got you an early birthday present.”

“My birthday isn’t for another six months,” Arya stated the obvious.

“No shit,” Jon shot back. “I’m your favorite brother; of course, I know this. BUT,” he said with emphasis. “Since I am your favorite brother, I always have to find ways to ensure that my spot isn’t threatened.”

“What did you get, Jon?” Arya asked excitedly.

“Close your eyes,” he instructed. “Close them!”

“I am,” she responded. Arya heard him half job, half run away, but didn’t hear him return.

She felt hands cover her eyes “Just to make sure you aren’t peaking,” he said in her ear.

“I’m not,” she denied.

“Are you ready?” He teased.

“Yeah.”

Arya opened her eyes slowly to see Gendry sitting in front of her. As if not believing what she was seeing, she looked at Jon, and then back to Gendry. He wore a deep green shirt with a bright red bow attached to his. Gendry looked the same, except there was sadness to him. She could tell that he was happy to see her, but he wasn’t her old, care free Gendry. It looked as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulder. But, they could talk about that later. Arya was just glad to see his blue eyes and stupid face. A nervous smile played on his lips as he rubbed his hands together.

“I was stupid before,” Arya said. “I’m a little less stupid now.”

Gendry smiled broadly.

“Me too.”
“No, you weren’t as stupid,” she remarked. “I was really, really stupid. And I missed you a lot. I’m sorry for pushing you away.”

Gendry grabbed her hand and pressed it against his check. “Just don’t do it again.”

Arya reached across the table to seal her promise with a kiss. “I won’t.”

She took the bow off of Gendry’s shirt.

“This is the best birthday present ever,” she smiled suggestively.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I’m a so, so sorry about the long delay. Although I had this part of the story mapped out, I was experiencing massive writer’s block. There may be parts of the chapter that some don’t like, but it was the only way to get me through the writer’s block, finish, and get the story back on track. I’ll try to be much quicker with the update next time. (Ch. 8)
Hearts a Mess (Part I)

Chapter Summary

The very mention of the name Eddard Stark made Gendry’s stomach dropped. It was hard to forget that night. There was a lot of damage done both figuratively and literally. He and Arya’s relationship was basically in limbo until he could adequately sort out his feelings on the matter. There was a part of him that found it difficult to forgive Arya for her actions that night. Then, there was the other part that just wanted to talk it out and get her to understand why he didn’t “fight” for her. At the same time, he didn’t want to explain himself to her—he did nothing wrong. He knew that for a fact. What was he supposed to do when the threat of being sent to jail hung in the air?

Chapter Notes

Warning: there is mention of rape. Not current day, but past event.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

YOREN

“What did you want to meet about, Yoren,” Ned asked before sipping his bourbon.

Yoren looked at Ned, and then deeply inhaled his cigarette. As if in deep contemplation, he looked into his glass, and then exhaled slowly. He then finished the remainder of his glass before tapping the counter to indicate that he wanted another glass.

“I’ve been at Wholistic Core a long fucking time,” he began. “A looooong fucking time.” The bartender placed the glass in front of Yoren and then man immediately took a sip. “Most of the kids that come to the program are rich, upper middle class or some shit like that. The other few are voucher kids—Gendry was a voucher kid; born and raised in Flea Bottom, but you already know that.”

“If there is a point, then make it,” Ned stated as he looked at his drinking companion.

Yoren’s chuckle was laced with a bitter aftertaste.

“He’s a good kid, Ned, don’t involve the police in this.” Yoren squared his jaw, and then looked at Ned.

“Don’t you dare tell me who I should and should not involve concerning my kids,” Ned seethed. “If this is why you asked to meet up with you, then you’re wasting your time. If you had done your job back then, I wouldn’t have to involve anyone now.”

“There comes a point in your life when right takes on various meanings,” Yoren said cryptically. “That’s when the lines that were drawn so precisely become blurry and, suddenly, you have to make a judgment call that is complicated and there is no longer a right answer, but rather, a right now.
What is the best decision right now? Have you ever been faced with a situation such as that… like when you sent Arya to Wholistic Core?"

Ned glared at Yoren. “You know that that was different.”

“Was it,” he questioned. “Was it right to send her away? You did right by Robert, but did you do right by Arya. Did you make the right decision in the grand scheme of things? Was it right to let politics interfere with your decision?”

“I did that FOR Arya!”

Yoren gave a bitter laugh. “As did I, but I don’t see you giving me the benefit of the doubt.” Before Ned could speak, Yoren interrupted, “I know; it’s different.”

“Why am I here, Yoren?”

At Ned’s question, Yoren pulled out a laptop out of the bag that had been on the floor. After he logged into the device, he searched for a folder and found the video he was looking for. Once he found it, he handed a pair of headphones to Ned, and then pressed play.

VIDEO INTERVIEW:

“Hello, Gendry,” the interviewer said as she reached out a hand to shake Gendry’s hand. Gendry shook it firmly before sitting.

“Hi,” he replied back as he sat up straight in the chair. His hair looked as if it was freshly cut and his face was clean-shaven. He wore a white dress shirt with a deep blue tie and black dress pants. It was apparent that Gendry was nervous and trying to calm himself down.

“My name is Rose Kendrick,” she introduced herself. “And I, along with Trent Favors, will be interviewing you,” Rose explained before smiling at Gendry. For a moment, she quickly flipped through Gendry’s file, and then looked back at him. “By law, I am obligated to inform you that this interview is being recorded.” She pointed to several cameras in the room. “But, it’s nothing you should worry about. Although Trent and I are interviewing you, a few other members of the Wholistic Core organization reviews the file and video as well before a final decision is made.”

Gendry stared insecurely at the camera behind Rose.

“Okay,” he nodded and straightened up some more.

“All right, first question,” Trent began. “What makes you qualified for this job?”

“Qualified in what way?”

“As in what skills do you possess that may be beneficial for this position,” he clarified.

“Like traditional skills,” he asked. “Such as experience with youth and what not?”

“Exactly.”

“I guess I’m not,” he truthfully admitted. “In a traditional sense, at least. But, Leslie saw something in me and I guess that counts for something.” Rose raised an eyebrow at his remark. “But, I do believe that I’m qualified. I was born and raised in Flea Bottom—the where the poorest of the poor and the roughest of the rough live and I survived. I lived there most of my life without getting into any trouble or becoming a criminal. My qualification is that I have life experience—survival skills and
this is a place for troubled youth. Not only that, my time in Flea Bottom gives me further insight into how these young adults think. Every single one of the camp counselors I had was rich and came from privileged backgrounds. And not to say that they weren’t great at their jobs, but imagine someone from a place like Flea Bottom seeing a guy like me in that type of position—that brings hope. It tells them that just because they came from Flea Bottom or, any similar place like it, that they can rise up to be more. And, here, everyone is equal—there isn’t any classism going on.”

Trent grinned, and then shook his head in appreciation at Gendry’s honesty.

Rose leaned back in her seat, crossed her legs, and clasped her hands together. Her eyes carefully assessed Gendry. “What is the difference between yelling and raising your voice?”

“I guess, in the context I believe you are referring to, yelling is losing your composure and venting out towards a person or persons in a loud tone. Raising your voice is speaking louder in order to be heard,” he explained. “Raising your voice has more an authoritative feel to it. There is some times where raising your voice can be a negative thing, but it definitely depends on the situation.”

A piece of paper was passed between Rose and Trent. The male looked at the paper, and then pursed his lips. “There are 3 problems to deal with and a camper is trying to incessantly get your attention. Your co-counselor is sitting on the side. What do you do to defuse the situations?”

“I would calmly ask the person what he or she needed help with. From there, I would assess if I could resolve the issue on the spot, if not, I would politely ask my co-counselor to help out the camper, and then deal with the other issues.”

“Who is your personal hero,” Trent checked off the question from the sheet.

At this, Gendry smiled. “My best friend Arya. I met her at the camp two years ago and her presence in my life is one of the best things to ever happen to me,” his smile grew even wider. “Despite being younger than me as well as smaller than me, I look up to her. She is so sure of herself and refuses to let anyone crush her dreams or get in the way of what she wants. And, she has a feisty personality and is incredibly stubborn, but she is very caring as well.” Gendry chuckled at his description of her. “I remember when she found out that I couldn’t read past the eight grade level. Rather than pitying me, she took it upon herself to teach me how to read, as well as our friend Hot Pie. It encouraged me to continue my schooling here. And she is so down to earth—there isn’t a sense of entitlement in her; she views everyone as equals. She is such an incredible person.”

“Why are you interested in this job?”

Gendry momentarily closed his eyes before struggling to swallow.

“Wholistic Core is a great place to be because it encourages independence and cultivates a sense of self and stimulates the campers minds. The program doesn’t treat the young adults like troubled kids; they respect each and every one and allow them to learn from their mistakes and express themselves to make well-informed decisions and form healthy habits. Most importantly, it feels like a family…like a place where you are welcomed no matter where you came from and,” Gendry paused. Tears formed in his eyes. A stray tear quickly rolled down his cheek and Gendry hastily rubbed his face. “I never had a family—not really.”

The rest of the interview was spent asking Gendry about his nurturing skills, leadership ability, work ethic, creativity, and conflict resolution.

END OF INTERVIEW
Yoren then showed Ned video of Arya’s time at camp.

“We had cameras everywhere for surveillance; occasionally, I would watch them,” he commented. He brought up a clip of Arya around other boys. “You see how she interacts with them. She has no interest in them besides hanging out.” Next, he brought up a clip of Arya and Gendry. “Do you notice any difference between how she interacts with Gendry opposed to the other guys? She invaded his personal space and touched him A LOT. I’m not going to say that Gendry didn’t like her touches, but as you can see, he was aware of the inappropriateness of her actions. He subtly removed her hands from his body—hell, he even looked panicked.” Yoren then open another video. “Now, in this clip, Arya is glaring at another girl who is showing interest in Gendry. Then, in this one... “A new video was open. “She is isolating Gendry from other people, especially girls. Hot Pie was the only person she never did that with, for the most part. Sure, they interacted with the other campers, but if they could get away, Arya made sure that happened and she definitely made sure that other girls didn’t talk to Gendry.”

Ned rubbed his temples.

“If you knew this was happening, why didn’t you stop it sooner?”

“Because we didn’t realize what was happening at first,” Yoren explained. “We knew that they were close. Eventually, we started to realize that there might have been some feelings between the two. After a while, we understood that we needed to put some space between them, which was why we started having Gendry help out with maintenance at the camp. It was effective at first, but Arya’s actions started to become a bit bolder, so I had to talk to her.” Yoren could tell what Ned was thinking. “I could have spoken to Gendry, but it’s quite clear who the problem was. After I spoke to her, I didn’t have any more issues. Ned, believe me when say that if I knew about what happened between them, they would’ve been permanently separated. I just wanted to do right by not only Arya, but Gendry as well.”

Ned gulped the rest of his drink, and then rubbed his eyes.

“Please don’t report him or try to make a case out of this,” Yoren pleaded. “Sure, Gendry wanted to have sex with your daughter, but he didn’t and Gods know Arya was willing. But, he never tried to take advantage of her—not even in the slightest. And, as you saw, Gendry not only respected your daughter back then, he admired her.” Yoren could see the wheels turning n Ned’s mind. “You could genuinely fuck up this guy’s life and for what? Fighting the temptation of having sex with Arya? How dare he refuse a girl who wanted him in the worst way because it was against the law! All this kid every wanted was for somewhere to belong, to have a family. I guess he’ll form one of sorts in prison.”

Abruptly, Ned stood up. “I get it, Yoren,” he yelled. “I fucking get it, okay! I won’t pursue this.” He stormed out of the bar.

Yoren shook his head. He didn’t believe that Ned would’ve pursued it on his own; it would have been under the persuasion of Cat. But, now that Ned saw Gendry’s interview and those other video clips, he knew that Ned would convince Cat to let go of the issue.

This wouldn’t even be an issue if the Stark weren’t rich as fuck, but rich people knew how to make the law bend to their will.

JON

“What’s bothering you?” Ned placed a comforting hand on Jon’s shoulder.
“Nothing,” he denied as he crossed his arms and leaned back into the couch.

“Is that why you’re pouting?” Ned chuckled.

“What’s so funny,” Jon defensively asked. “And I’m not pouting.”

Ned sat up straight and looked at the younger man. “It doesn’t matter how old your kids get, there’s a part of you that always views them as a kid,” he explained. “When you were a kid, you used to behave the same way: tightly crossing your arms, silently fuming, and pretending nothing was wrong. And nothing has changed twenty odd years later.” Jon’s expression slightly relaxed at his dad’s explanation. “What’s bothering you?”

“Why didn’t you press charges against, Gendry?”

An audible groan escaped from Ned’s mouth. Honestly, he was tired of talking about the situation. He argued about it with Cat for weeks after his drink with Yoren, until he made Yoren show her what he showed him.

“It wasn’t worth ruining the man’s life over,” he said before sipping his beer.

In outrage, Jon stared at his father. “You care more about his life being ruined than him potentially ruining Arya’s life?”

“No, I care more about the fact that nothing happened and that I’d be ruining his life based on an honest mistake,” Ned stated.

“Well, something almost happened.”

“Almost, but didn’t,” Ned clarified before staring at his son strangely. “Jon, I don’t like your tone. It seems as if you’re questioning my capabilities as a parent.”

Jon looked at Ned in surprise. “I’m not,” he defended himself.

“Well, then quit questioning my decisions.” Ned finished off his beer and glanced at the score of the game. “You think I reached my decision lightly? That I wasn’t upset at what happened? I was upset and it was an incredibly difficult decision and, as an adult, you should have learned that by now: decisions aren’t always black and white. I’ve been making hard decisions every since Brandon died and I’ve been making hard decisions about Arya’s life since Robert came back into my life. But, once I had all of the facts, my decision not to pursue Gendry wasn’t all that difficult.”

“What facts,” Jon asked with thinly veiled anger.

“Facts that Gendry wasn’t really to blame for all that happened when Arya was at camp.”

“How can you say that, dad?” Jon looked at his father in disgust. “Am I the only that cares that this creep almost took advantage of her!”

Ned stood up before looking down at Jon. His disappointment was barely contained when he spoke to the younger man. “No, Jon, you’re just the only one who seems to think you know what’s best for her. “ Jon tried to say something, but Ned held up a hand. “I understand that she’s your sister and that you love her, but you cannot fathom the love I have for all of my kids or the lengths that I would go to in order to protect them. But, clearly, in your opinion, I’m lacking as a parent because I didn’t do what you feel was best.”

“No, Dad, I didn’t say that,” Jon defended.
“No, you did.” Ned looked to the floor, and then at Jon before walking out of the room.

Jon stopped talking and looked at his wife. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Honestly, I tuned out a long time ago,” Ygritte replied truthfully and shrugged. “You’ve been going on about this for HOURS, Jon. I can recite your words in my sleep.”

“Ygritte,” Jon sighed before applying deodorant under his arms, and then walking to the bed before sliding under the covers. “This is important to me.”

“Why?” As soon as Jon opened his mouth, Ygritte interrupted him, “Save me the explanation about “saving Arya” and Gendry taking advantage of her; I know the story like the back of my hand. This goes deeper than that. Why is this so important?”

“Does there need to be any other reasons than the ones you stated? I didn’t know that it was a crime to care about your sister’s well being. I know that I am being vilified for being upset at what this pig almost did.” Ygritte groaned. As he finished with the conversation, Jon turned away from his wife and pulled the covers around his shoulders.

“You know nothing, Jon Snow.” She shook his shoulder and Jon tried to brush him off.

“Ygritte,” he warned.

“What? You don’t,” she said. Jon hated it when Ygritte said that because he knew that she meant that he was naïve and ignorant. Only kids were naïve and ignorant in his mind and he was a grown man. He had been to war and protected his country. “I mean, if you did know anything, you would trust your father’s judgment and, most importantly, Arya’s. Jon, you may be a guy, but you don’t think like a guy—you don’t act like a guy.”

Jon whipped his head up and looked at Ygritte in offense.

“You don’t—not a stereotypical one, at least,” she elaborated. “As someone who has dealt with those type of guys, I can tell you from experience, Gendry is not one of those guys.”

“You haven’t even met him to make that assessment,” Jon brushed off.

“But, I have spoken to Arya.” Jon sat up against the headboard to give Ygritte his full attention.

“And this guy you believe Gendry to be,” Ygritte chuckled. “Doesn’t even come close to describing the type of man Gendry is…Jon, Arya has been tough as nails her whole life when it came to everyday living and dating, but for me, that only applied to the day to day. I felt like an ugly duckling as a little girl and I’m a redhead—you can only imagine the teasing. When boys started to talk to me, I fell for anything, and then I learned a tough lesson. After that, I knew better; I paid attention to all of the tricks and could tell the difference. Gendry’s one of the good ones.”

“How do you know that?” Jon’s demeanor had softened at her story. “A feeling or did he do something in particular?”

Without hesitation, she replied, “Both.” Ygritte looked at her hands, and then her husband. “I’ve been with my fair share of guys when I was a teen. I was so desperate for approval from cute boys that I would do almost anything just to get them to like me. Which sounds odd, I know, strong, opinionated, no non sense Ygritte?” Apprehensively, she bit her lip. “But, yes, me. It was my experience with boys that really toughened me up. Before then, though…I let guys touch on me, gave them hand jobs, gave them blowjobs, eventually had sex with them. Some of it was because I
thought guys wanting to have sex with me meant that I was beautiful—that I was desirable. After a while, it was pressure. ‘Come on, baby, you know you want to,’” she mocked, and then started to make kissing noises. “‘Please…just the tip.’ After a while, I started to dislike it. Sex was fun, but the guys I was having sex with—they made me feel so used and cheap.”

“Ygritte,” Jon softly mumbled when he saw tears forming in her eyes, and then tenderly wiped them away when they fell.

Momentarily, she tightly closed her eyes.

“Then, one night I was partying with my girls,” she said. “I didn’t want to be bothered with guys; I just wanted to have fun. All night, this guy had been hitting on me; laying it on real think, but I had ignored his advances. “ Jon felt his stomach drop. “I was getting my coat out of the guest room when he approached me…asking me if I wanted to hook up. I told him no, but he didn’t take that for an answer. I just remember him saying to me as he violated me, that he heard about how easy I was—that the other guys told him that and that I was making him work too hard for some ass.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before now,” Jon said gently, but she could see the hatred in his eyes for the guy who raped her.

“Because you weren’t raped, Jon, I was.” Ygritte wiped her face. “It’s an experience that I can share with you, but it’s also an experience that I have to re-live every time I tell it. It’s not that I don’t trust you or that I’m forever a victim to my assault, but I just don’t like to talk about it.”

She took her hand and held it to her chest.

“I may not share everything with you, but that doesn’t mean that I love you any less just that there are some things I would prefer to keep to myself.” Jon pulled Ygritte to his chest and hugged her tightly.

“It angers me that that happened to you,” he said. “It angers me that rape happens in general. If you ever need anyone to talk to, even if it’s just a listening ear…”

Tears streamed down Ygritte’s face at Jon’s offer. She shook her head and said, “I know.”

“Anytime you need.”

“I guess you do know something, Jon Snow,” she gave him a moist kiss, which Jon grinned before he returned the kiss. “Jon, I’ve dealt with my fair share of scum. I’ve been involved with guys who didn’t care if I was too young or even sober to make a conscious decision. Those are the guys who take advantage of young girls. Not the ones who put a stop to sex with the girl is more than willing, not the ones who don’t assault while you are drunk off of your ass and sleeping barely clothed on top of him after making out moments before, not the ones who, despite you laying in their bed a million times, take that as an invitation for sex. Because all of those situations did happen between Arya and Gendry and he never took advantage of her. If a man who waits for a of age, sober girl to give him a clear yes to have sex with him is a pervert, I would gladly date his perverted ass if I were single and I would fuck him as much as he could take.”

“Ygritte,” Jon said sternly.

“Jon,” she matched his tone. “I’ve been taken advantage of in the past, so don’t you dare label Arya’s situation in the same way. Don’t you dare label a completely decent guy as a pervert. Sure, he made a mistake, but he’s not and wasn’t a creep. Make this right with Arya.”

“Honestly, I don’t even know where to start,” he admitted. “I’ve just spent so much time angry at
Gendry and the whole situation that everything is a mess.”

“There’s your answer,” Ygritte replied. Jon looked at her incredulously. “Start with Gendry.”

“Ygritte, you can’t be serious.”

“I’m completely serious,” she stated. “You can’t remedy things with Arya without making amends with Gendry. Arya will forgive you eventually, but only if you make things right with the source of all of this drama.”

“Okay,” he relented. Ygritte grabbed Jon’s face with both hands and peppered kisses on his forehead.

“I’m glad I found you,” she said in a low, pensive tone. “You taught me what it truly means to be loved, respected, and adored in a relationship. You’ve shown me how honorable men treat women… that sex is more than about pleasure, but expressing love and sharing that experience. You’ve taught me that even the most proud man can admit that he was wrong and try to rectify his mistakes.”

Jon kissed his nose.

“Let’s go to bed.”

Firmly, Jon grabbed his wife’s waist and pulled her closer to him. Their legs became tangled while Jon cupped Ygritte’s face lovingly. Jon seemed to be thinking about something.

“What,” she whispered.

“Nothing,” he dismissed.

“Jon.” Her fingers rubbed his facial hair, and then traced his jawline before resting in his thick black hair.

“Did you ever report him or was it too difficult to come forward?”

An odd expression formed on Ygritte’s face.

“He was reported.”

“And…did you ever want to get revenge against him for what he did to you? Like your own brand of revenge?”

At his question, Ygritte smiled. “I did get revenge,” she answered coyly. “I bit his cock off.”

GENDRY

“Hey, Mel,” Gendry greeted as Melisandre stood up, and pulled Gendry into a hug before placing a kiss on his mouth. Gendry tried to pull away, but was too late and wiped his mouth off.

“Hey, yourself,” she replied suggestively. Mel eyed Gendry appreciatively while her hand brushed down his chest before, and then lingered on his eyes. A mischievous glance fluttered across her face.

As Melisandre stared Gendry in the eyes, she slid a hand under his shirt and applied pressure to his ribcage.

“Does that hurt?”
“No,” he answered.

“Do you experience pain at all—even if it is minor?” There was a hint of concern in her features.

“No, the doctors said that I made a full recovery and I don’t disagree with them.”

“Good to know.” Melisandre smiled at him and gestured for Gendry to take a seat.

“So, why did you want to meet up?” A waitress walked up to the table and Gendry offhandedly ordered a beer.

In a faux pensive state, Melisandre tapped her chin. She then grabbed his hands and squeezed gently. The touch was a mixture of reassurance and asserting her will over Gendry. From the day he got in contact with her again to that present moment, Gendry knew that Melisandre had something up her sleeve. If he were honest with himself, he had felt that way since he first met her. The wheels were always spinning in her head—as if she knew more than she let on.

There were times that Gendry felt unnerved by her. There were times that she could see through him and he could never read her. Never. Melisandre only allowed people to know certain parts of her. She was never vulnerable. You never knew more than what she wanted. She controlled everything and always got her way. He couldn’t articulate it, but there was a sort of confidence she had about herself and her abilities. It simultaneously made he feel both frightened by her as well as admire her.

“You have to had known that I didn’t come to your help out of the kindness of my heart,” she began. The corners of her mouth tilted up in a slight grin.

“Believe me, I’ve always known better than that when it came to you,” he replied, and then sipped his beer. “Nothing comes without strings attached.”

Melisandre raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve seen how you work. Nothing is ever just a favor for others, except Stannis, everything you do, you do for him,” Gendry explained. A full-blown grin enveloped her face at his words.

“Well, of course, my loyalty to Stannis is no secret.” She shrugged. For a moment, she was silent as she cleared her throat, and then sipped her water. Melisandre then picked up a folder that sat beside her and pulled out a photograph. It was placed in front of Gendry.

In confusion, Gendry stared at the photo. Gently, he picked it up and analyzed it more closely. Another photo was place in front of him, and then another, and then another. Gendry stared at all of them in deep bewilderment. But, how could this…be? It was him, but it wasn’t him.

“What’s going on, Mel,” Gendry demanded answers.

“You have questions and I have answers,” she replied cryptically.

“Well, then spit it out,” he shouted, momentarily forgetting where he was. The other patrons looked at Gendry and he blushed in response.

Melisandre looked unfazed by his outburst. “Ask me.” Gendry glared at her. “If you want answers, then ask me.”

“This guy is me, but he isn’t me,” he whispered. “Is he my twin,” a beat passed, then he asked, “Or my father?”
If the guy in the picture had been in the Flea Bottom or some other place that he had frequented, he would have thought that he was being spied on. But, this guy was in lavish environments around people he never met in his life. This guy looked arrogant all while having the palm of the world in his hand.

“He’s your father, Robert Baratheon.”

“What!” Gendry yelled, and then said more softly, but in a harsh whisper, “What? No, no, no. My father isn’t Robert Baratheon. I’m just some bastard from Flea Bottom.”

His female companion laughed. “Yes, you are a bastard, but you are the bastard of Robert,” she explained. “Anyone who knew Robert as a young man or has seen pictures of him in her earlier years can see that you are a spitting image of him. Deny it all of want, but has anyone ever looked at you strangely,” she inquired.

Gendry thought for a moment.

“Did you ever feel unsettled or uneasy by it because those looked weren’t your usual stares? You know, people looking down upon you because you were poor, but rather, people looking at you in a way you couldn’t define, as if you belong to something else, something better than the slums? This is what the saw, Gendry? They saw Robert. Even if they couldn’t recognize it on a conscious level, subconsciously, they knew you were a Baratheon.”

It all made sense. Gendry thought back to Mr. and Mrs. Stark and how they looked taken aback by him—as if they had seen a ghost. His appearance puzzled them. He had had other instances of people looking at him like that: not judging, but as if he looked like someone they knew and was powerful.

“Gendry, your looks aren’t just coincidental,” she continued. “You not only have Robert’s face, you have the Baratheon build and strength.” Gendry looked at his arms, and then flexed his muscles. “If you just had his face it would be one thing, but you have it all: the face, the build, the strength, and the eyes. The Baratheon genes are strong and you are a Baratheon; you know a Baratheon when you see one.”

“If the Baratheon genes are so dominant, why does Joffrey look nothing like Robert?” Gendry leaned against the seat, and then crossed his arms. “So, there is a chance that I’m not Robert’s.”

Melisandre laughed audibly this time. “Nothing, and I mean nothing, is more dominant than the Baratheon genes.”

Her meaning sank in.

Gendry put two and two together.

“You want me to challenge Joffrey’s claim to Baratheon Industries?”

“Yes.”

“But, Robert Baratheon loves his job or, at last, the power that comes with it, I doubt would want to step down anytime soon,” Gendry said. “There is nothing for me to challenge if he isn’t passing it over.”

“Robert has lived a very unhealthy lifestyle and I’ve foreseen it catching up to him in the near future,” she said vaguely.
“Are you going to kill him,” Gendry mistakenly assumed.

The woman laughed at his wrong assumption. “Like I said, he has lived an unhealthy lifestyle; I don’t need to do anything when he is doing the work for me. Trust me, he won’t live long.”

“Why…why are you telling me this now? Surely, I can’t dispute Joffrey’s claim while Robert is living. I mean, I could, but I doubt that that fits into whatever plans you are brewing. How does my dispute of Joffrey’s claim benefit Stannis? Why can’t Stannis challenge it himself?”

Melisandre exhaled, and then pinched the bridge of her nose. “Because Robert hates him. He specifically put in his will that if he were to die; his sons would gain control of the estate. If, for some reason, his sons are unable to make a claim, it goes to Eddard Stark and his sons. Joffrey and his brothers aren’t the rightful heirs, but you are. Once Robert dies, you will challenge them and win to which you will then hand over your claim to Stannis.”

The very mention of the name Eddard Stark made Gendry’s stomach dropped. It was hard to forget that night. There was a lot of damage done both figuratively and literally. He and Arya’s relationship was basically in limbo until he could adequately sort out his feelings on the matter. There was a part of him that found it difficult to forgive Arya for her actions that night. Then, there was the other part that just wanted to talk it out and get her to understand why he didn’t “fight” for her. At the same time, he didn’t want to explain himself to her—he did nothing wrong. He knew that for a fact. What was he supposed to do when the threat of being sent to jail hung in the air?

When she called him a week later, he said he needed time and would call her back when he reached a conclusion on where they stood; that was two and a half months ago.

The physical damage was a constant reminder of that night. He broken ribcage bones and had been out of commission for two months, which meant that he couldn’t work and that meant that he couldn’t make money.

Once all the costs of surgery, pain medication, hospital stay, utility bills, etc Gendry knew that he was fucked. That was the only way to sum it up. As he was going over all his options, it was then he remembered that Melisandre had told him if he ever needed anything, he could come to her. Heavily, he weighed the pros and cons on asking for her help. Finally, when he made his decision to be in her debt rather than being in debt with bill collectors, he hoped the price wouldn’t be too high.

She agreed readily and said nothing about the strings attached, but he knew it was there. It was Melisandre after all; she did nothing if there wasn’t a way she could benefit as well.

And this was her price: rightfully claiming Baratheon Industries in order to hand over to Stannis Baratheon.

“Won’t people challenge my claim even though I am the rightful heir,” Gendry asked as he spoke slowly. “I’m clueless about running a business.”

“Don’t worry; we’ll take care of that,” Melisandre assured. “You have your GED and took a few business classes,” she stated matter of fact. “So, we’ll get you a private tutor and prep you for standardized tests and essays, and then enroll you this spring semester.”

Gendry’s mind was going a thousand miles per hour. “Hold on, hold on, hold on.” He held his hands up in front of him, before running a hand through his hair. “How do you know I got a GED and took business classes?”

“I’m thorough, as you know.” Gendry caught the double meaning.
“You don’t even know—“

Melisandre interrupted him. “I know that this is a lot of information to process, but now isn’t the time. I spoke to your past educators, they all spoke very highly of you. They said that you were intelligent and a hard worker, but that you lacked confidence in yourself and your abilities.” Gendry was ready to dispute her findings. “You may not agree with that concerning your personal life, but I happen to agree when it comes to academics. I’ve read your work; you’re intelligent and dedicated, but insecure and it’s understandable. You don’t need to graduate from college, but you do need to take certain classes in order for people not to be as vocal about their displeasure.”

“All this for a guy who won’t even run the business?” He finished off his beer, and then looked out of the window.

“No, all of this for a guy who will appoint Stannis as the head of the company.”

Fuck it all,” Gendry groaned. “Fuck it all to hell.”

He tossed his notebook and books on the floor, and then harshly rubbed his eyes.

“Gendry,” Melisandre said softly.

“I can’t do this shit,” he shrugged. “I can’t. This is not going to work—it’s too much!”

Gendry got up and began to pace back and forth. Anger radiated off of him as his frustration and helplessness got to him.

“Gendry, take a deep breath, and slowly exhale as you count to five,” the woman said calmly. “No argument, just do it, and then keep doing it until you relax.”

Reluctantly, Gendry did as told. He closed his eyes and kept breathing slowly. It didn’t seem to make much of a difference until Melisandre began to rub him temples. After focusing on his temples for a few minutes, she began to rub his scalp, then the back of his ears, his neck, and his shoulders. All the stress and tension from their plan to school began to evaporate.

Due to being distracted by Melisandre’s ministrations, he didn’t notice that she had lowered him to the couch until she instructed him to lie back. She focused on his temples and shoulders more.

“I’ve never been good at school—I’m just not that smar…” Gendry trailed off as Melisandre put a finger over his mouth.

“No talking, just relax,” she replied. The tension in his arms left when she moved her firm and knowing grip there. Her fingers were magic.

He was in a trance of sort; a slave to her touch that he didn’t notice her unzipping his pants. Carefully, she cupped his cock and balls in her hands. Gendry jumped on.

“Settle down,” she chastised.

“Mel,” he warned.

“Mel,” she mimicked. “You’re stressed. This is a stressed reliever. You’ll feel euphoric after the endorphins kick in.”

Expertly, she pulled his penis out of boxers, and then his pants. She examined briefly before fondly
smiling. Gendry closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the couch. He felt some sort of liquid on his cock that he figured she was using as a lubricant. Her grip was firm, but she began the tempo at snail’s pace. Involuntarily, he thrust into her hand that held his cock, but he other hand pushed his hips down and she told him to calm down and don’t rush it.

Methodically, she moved up and down, occasionally twisted her hand and putting pressure on the head of his cock. Gendry moaned and gasped at the sensation, which she seemed to feed off of. It was encouraging to her to hear noises come from him and his pleasure never wavered, it only intensified. Eventually, she placed her free hand on his hips to encourage him to thrust into her hand, but she held it there to maintain a pace.

“You like that,” she whispered.

“Ye—yeah,” he stuttered.

More liquid was poured onto her his cock and she increased her tempo. Gendry felt as if he was going to lose his mind. It had been a while since he had his cock touched by another person. And, Melisandre, well, she was in a league of her own (not including, Arya, of course, but he didn’t want to think about her).

A warm mouth then began to suck on his cock and, for sure, Gendry knew that he had lost his mind. He tried to fight against the urge to rest a hand on her head, but it settled there anyways. Against his consent, his hips began to thrust forward.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

As Melisandre bobbed up and down on Gendry’s dick, she looked him in the eyes for a moment before concentrating fully on brining him pleasure. The hand that rested on her hand, gently pushed her head down, which she didn’t seem to mind. She began to take him deeper into her mouth, which was when Gendry remembered that Melisandre didn’t have a gag reflex as he hit the back of her throat. Suddenly, his cock slipped out of her mouth. In displeasure, he looked down. Melisandre coyly smiled before placing open mouth kisses on his cock as her tongue simultaneously brushed against the erect flesh. Her tongue swirled around the head, and then made its way down to the base before going up again.

“Mel,” Gendry strained out.

“Say please,” she mouthed against his penis.

“Please.”

She enveloped his cock in her mouth again and began to suck frantically while her hand moved in unison with her mouth. The sucking noises were audible. Gendry felt his climax approaching.

“Mel, I’m about to come,” he warned. Melisandre ignored him and kept slurping enthusiastically. “Mel,” he tried again to no avail. “Mel!”

Quickly, she removed her mouth from his cock, and then lifted up his shirt and her hand continued to eagerly stroke Gendry. Less than a second later, his cum splashed on his stomach. Harsh gasping filled the room as Melisandre slightly increased her tempo in order to ride out Gendry’s orgasm as the last remaining drop on cum covered the head of his cock.

“Shit, Mel,” Gendry sighed. Through hazy lids, he looked at her as his cock began to get limp in her hand. “Shit.”
Her grip slightly tightened on his penis as she looked at it intensely, and then put it back on her mouth. She tenderly sucked the cum off his head, and then swallowed. A smile appeared on her face as she then went to his stomach to lick up the rest of Gendry’s seed.

In between her mouth cleaning up his cum stained stomach, she spoke, “I’ll give you a few minutes to rest, but no longer. You will finish your homework tonight.”

~*~*~*~

Gendry never expected restart his sexual relationship with Melisandre when he asked her for the loan. He just thought that she would give him the money and make him do whatever she needed him to do to help Stannis. Gendry didn’t care for Stannis, but he knew who bankrolled her, which was also where her loyalty lied.

“Mel,” he groaned as he felt her leg lock around his waist.

“Why fight it, Gendry, we both know how this is going to end,” she said in a bored tone. She was tired of him resisting when he always gave him.

“Let go of me,” he said. Mel rolled her eyes. “I have to undo my pants,” he said in a resigned tone.

“No, I got it,” she volunteered as her leg fell to the bed. Hurriedly, she undid his jeans and pulled them just below his ass. Without missing a beat, she slipped a condom on and pulled up her dress.

Melisandre locked her leg around Gendry’s hips against as he began to unrelentlessly pound into her. A sharp cry escaped from her lips as she pulled Gendry closer. She softly bit on his chin before nibbling on his lip.

Out of all of the men Melisandre had sex with Gendry was her favorite. He wasn’t the most skilled lover, but he was very good. What made him her favorite was his unmatched passion. She can feel his anger, his fury and, yes, theirs definitely was the fury. Melisandre lived for the raw emotion, the pain, the frustration, and the rage. And when it came to sex, Gendry couldn’t contain his. Oh, he tried to, but she knew how to bring out the side of him. She nurtured it until there weren’t any masks whenever they fell into bed—it was just pure, raw emotion. No censor bullshit.

One leg rested on Gendry’s shoulder while the other was pushed all of the way forward with her knee resting next to her head.

Stannis could never fuck her like this.

He was always too proper and frigid. And she enjoyed his power—having sex with a powerful man, but she didn’t enjoy his technique. He may have had the Baratheon looks, but lacked the intense emotions.

Quick gasps escaped from Melisandre as Gendry began to repeatedly hit a sensitive spot. She was pressed up and against the hit board awkwardly, but could feel every last inch of Gendry. Every. Last. Inch.

When he was done with her, she was nothing but bones.

~*~*~*~

After his breathing slowed down, he looked for a pack of cigarettes and lit one.

Melisandre took the cigarette from him and inhaled.
“You don’t trust me, do you?”

“I wouldn’t trust you as far as I could throw you; you’re too calculating.”

“Then you are smarter than I give you credit for.”

Gendry took his cigarette back and puffed.

“When it comes to politics, you mean,” he corrected. “I trust you to keep your word on the deal we made.” One of the agreements that were made when Gendry agreed to hand over Baratheon Industries to Stannis was that he would get a lucrative payout. “I just know better than to trust you on Stannis related matters as in trying to betray or double cross him.”

“And you’re right not to.”

~*~*~*~

As the professor droned on, Gendry fought to pay attention. He meant no disrespect to the woman, but she was boring as hell. After a while, the boredom of the class and sitting for a long period of time began to get to him. Gendry rested his head against his left hand and put his pen to the paper. It was a big enough class where he could go to sleep without the professor noticing, but he couldn’t be too obvious about it.

Just as Gendry could feel himself getting lost in the abyss, someone tapped on his shoulder. He jumped slightly and looked to his right. Autumn Cassidy smiled at him. In relief, Gendry smiled.

“Sorry to interrupt you, Gendry,” she sweetly apologized. “But, I wondering if you wouldn’t mind studying together for the exam next week?”

“Uh…I guess,” he replied. “But, I’m not that smart, so I don’t think working with me is going to help any.”

Cassidy laughed at him. “You’re so funny, Gendry. I got a C on the last exam and you got a B+, I think you’re going to help a little.”

“No, I just got lucky,” he dismissed. “It was really hard and I was puzzled most of the time.”

“Well, Jenny Stevens copies off of you all of the time and she only copies off of the smart people,” Autumn said. “It’s either you’re very smart and don’t know it or very lucky.” She wrote her number on a piece of paper. “Either way, call me because either your smarts will help me or your luck will rub off on me.”

Jenny copied off of him? And she only copied off of smart people? Gendry didn’t think he was smart. Sure, he was street smart, but book smart? It was impossible to believe. He had been doing well in school so far, but he didn’t think it was because he was smart; he just worked really hard. Gendry studied a lot, which was easier to do since he wasn’t working and didn’t have any other responsibilities. But, it was still hard.

The material was already hard enough as it was; he wondered how he would fair once the real hard stuff came.

Around five in the afternoon on a Friday, Gendry cracked open his books to study for the exam. He was planning to study for the whole weekend. Most kids partied and went out, but he wasn’t a kid and he couldn’t fuck around. Unlike his peers, he didn’t have a few years to find himself. No, he had a few months to be moderately familiar with the ins and outs of the business structure and how it
worked. So, no, he wasn’t going out—it didn’t interest him in the least.

After an hour of studying, Gendry decided to order himself a pizza. As he opened his wallet, he saw Autumn’s number. He mulled over whether or not he should call her before deciding to dial the number.

The phone rang once, then twice.

“Hello,” he voice sounded unsure as she greeted him.

“Hey, Autumn, it’s Gendry,” he said.

“Hey, Gendry!” Her voice instantly became lighter and genuinely welcoming. “What’s up?”

“Well, I’ve been studying for an hour or so and was about to order a pizza when I found your number in my wallet,” he said awkwardly. Mentally, Gendry chastised himself. He wasn’t trying to talk to Autumn in a romantic way or anything, but he still had difficulty talking to women. He was a grown man for Christ sake. Why was it so hard? “I know it’s the weekend—”

Autumn cut him off. “It’s fine, I’m glad you called. To be honest, I wasn’t sure if you were going to. You seem like such a loner and I guess I understand. You’re like one of the only few real adults at college surrounded by kids who just graduated from high school,” she rationalized.

“No, it’s nothing like that,” he disagreed. “I’m just very busy.”

“Oh, okay,” she replied. “But, I would love to come over and study with you.”

Autumn arrived twenty minutes later prepared to study. They compared answers and searched through their textbooks to double check that their original findings were correct. Occasionally, they would converse about the questions and compare it with lecture notes or additional information that the professor gave.

More times than not, Gendry had the correct answer and would explain to Autumn why his answer was the correct answer.

“See, Gendry, you are smart,” she complimented. Gendry blushed.

“Naw, I just work really hard is all,” he said as he flipped through the book to find the explanation for one of their questions.

“So, there are different types of intelligence,” she argued. “Some people can teach it to themselves, others can listen and pick up on it immediately, and some just work hard—it doesn’t mean that you aren’t intelligent. Gods, I could read these books for hours and still not get it.”

“Yeah, well….” He trailed off. To get back on subject, he opened her textbook to the page in his own book, and then pointed to some of his highlighted notes. As Gendry explained the exam material, Autumn examined him. “See, it’s right here. With professor Andrews, you have to pay careful attention to her note, and then go back to the book.” A loud yawn came from Autumn as she stretched her arms. “We can take a break; I’ll go make some coffee.”

In no time, he put the coffee on and joined Autumn on the couch to wait.

“It should be finish in about five minutes,” he informed as he settled into the couch. “Oh…umm, how do you like your coffee?”
“I’m not picky; whatever you make is fine,” she said offhandedly as she took in the apartment. “So, you come from money?”

“No,” Gendry replied as he followed her gaze at his apartment. Her question made sense once he reminded himself that she didn’t know him or where he came from. Autumn only knew Gendry as a student at the university.

Melisandre wanted Gendry to take residence in King’s Landing up until he handed his claim over to Stannis, so she bought him a place. She furnished his place with lavish furniture, various types of art like: paintings, sculptures, and handmade pottery, a personal library filled with over a hundred books. Melisandre had given him assigned readings to do in addition to his schoolwork. She wanted him to be a somewhat “cultured” man. Gendry was supposed to read the same books as people like the Baratheon, Lannisters, Starks, Tyrells, and so on.

On the weekends, when he wasn’t studying, Melisandre took him to art museums, sailing on yacht, fancy restaurants, and dinner parties (to have him observe how the better half lived). She taught him how to eat properly; which utensils he should use and when and how he should chew. For hours, they worked on correcting his posture; they worked on properly enunciating words; they worked on almost everything he could think and things he didn’t think of.

He was tired and barely had any time for friends, let alone, himself.

“Umm, I don’t come from money, but my family does.” Autumn looked confused at his answer. “This is my uncle’s place, he’s just letting me stay here. He is rich, not me.”

It was weird to refer to Stannis as his uncle when he had never even met the man. All of is correspondence with Stannis, which was rare, was through Melisandre. Gendry looked him up once on the Internet to find pictures of him, but that was all. They hadn’t even spoken on the phone together.

“So, do you have a scholarship to the school or something?”

“Uhh, no…he’s paying for that too.” Gendry scratched the back of his neck. “He wanted me to have more opportunities so he funded for me to go to college and let me stay here.”

“That’s awfully nice of him.”

“Yeah,” Gendry said distractedly as the alarm for the coffee went off.

Gendry grabbed two huge mugs out of the cabinet, and then poured coffee in each mug. Carefully, he poured measured amounts of sugar and creamer in each cup with a few drops of French vanilla syrup. Slowly, he walked back to the living room and handed Autumn her cup.

They conversed about school and talked about the classes that they enjoyed and the ones they didn’t. They spoke about who were the best professors and those who needed improve. Autumn briefly told Gendry about herself, but Gendry didn’t reveal much about himself, which she didn’t seem to mind. He found himself laughing and smiling for the first time in months.

After their third cup of coffee, he put the cups in the sink, and then looked at the time.

“It’s getting pretty late,” he commented. “I can take you home, so you won’t be out so late by yourself.”

He grabbed her jacket and his own. While Autumn put on her jacket, Gendry waited for her before walking to the door. As he opened the door, Autumn put her hand against it to stop Gendry from
opening the door any further.

“It is pretty late, I should stay here,” Autumn proposed as she stepped closer to Gendry.

Not catching her meaning, Gendry replied. “I have a car and could drive back with you; it’s really no problem.”

Autumn smiled and shook her head.

“Let me rephrase,” she began. “I was having a good time and I don’t want the night to end, but rather, become a little more interesting.” Her thumb gently stroked Gendry’s bicep as she stared at him longingly.

“Oh—umm,” Gendry stuttered. “I don’t think that we should do that”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I do. Now, what is it,” she pressed.

Gendry groaned, and then crossed his arms. “You’re young.”

“And?” Autumn laughed, and then mimicked Gendry’s position. She crossed her arms, and then leaned against the wall.

“Autumn, I am thirty-two and you’re—you’re nineteen. Do you see the problem?”

“No, I really don’t,” she denied.

Gendry peeked out his door into the hallway, and then closed his front door. He racked his brain trying to figure out a way to make her understand.

“Because of the age difference, you could be easily influenced. Or think you want something that you do not fully understand,” he explained. “Since you are so young, me having sex with you could be viewed as me taking advantage of you.”

At this, Autumn laughed at loud. She laughed non-stop for a full minute that tears streamed down her face once she calmed down. When she thought of Gendry’s explanation, she started back up again.

“Oh Gods, Gendry, that was funny.” Autumn waved at her face, and then dried her face with the palms of her hands.

“I don’t get what’s so funny.” Gendry wore a confused expression.

“Gendry, a lot of things are funny like the idea that you would be taking advantage of me if we were to have sex. I want to have sex with you, Gendry, and I have for wanted to do so for a while. Although I was serious about wanting to study with you, getting to bone would be an added benefit.”

She read the shock on Gendry’s face.
“And I’m not the only girl in our class who feels that way; I’m just the only one to ask you to study with her rather than go out drinking or to a party,” she explained. “I’ll admit, my motives weren’t entirely pure, but it’s very hard to get your attention outside of school.”

Vaguely, Gendry could recall various girls asking him if he wanted to hang out and do something to which he turned them down.

“I fully understand what’s going on,” she continued. “I may be young, but I’m not naïve; I know exactly what I’d be getting into.”

‘She wants me,’ Gendry thought to himself. ‘This beautiful, young girl wants me. She wants me to make a move and take her to bed.’

Hesitantly, Gendry lightly placed his hand on her neck, and then used his other hand to cup her face. For a moment, he stared at her just taking her in. His lips slowly descended upon hers until he met soft, sticky lips touching his own Experimentally; he kissed her to get a feel of what she was like—to taste her. Although Gendry was in his 30’s, he had only kissed three women in his life: Arya, Melisandre, and his ex-girlfriend Ruby. His relationship with Arya had been interesting and complex, so he didn’t know how to define the lines drawn and crossed there, but they never dated either. Melisandre was a different story; he had lost his virginity to her and they were lovers for a while.

Gendry figured that he was thinking too much. All Autumn had wanted was sex, which he could give her. He has been a lover to two women and they never complained. Hell, if he had been bad, neither one of them would’ve allowed him to be their lowers.

Firmly, Gendry pushed her against the wall and continued to kiss her as he hands explored her body. Her body responded positively to his touch, which excited Gendry. Autumn moaned and gasped and writhed against his body.

Oh Gods, she wanted him. She wanted him so badly.

Blindly, he navigated them to the couch as he mouth never left hers and his eyes never opened. They arrived to the couch safely as he gently lowered her to the couch. Without hesitation, he pulled off her jeans and Autumn sat up to unbuckle, and then unzip his pants. As she undid his pants, Gendry took off his shirt and blindly threw it not caring where it landed.

In admiration, Autumn stared at his body.

“I’ve wanted this since the first time I saw you,” she confessed before placing butterfly kisses up his abdomen. In a wanton fashion, she lay back down on the couch and eagerly opened her legs.

Gendry needed to further convincing.

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“What are you worrying about,” his friend Tracy asked.

“I got my exam back,” Gendry answered. “I’m afraid to look at it.”

“Just look at it,” she stated. “Whether or not you see the grade, you still got it and it still counts in your GPA. So, you might as well see what you got in order to figure out what you know and what you don’t know.”

“Easier said than done,” he quipped.
“But, it’s been done, which is why it’s graded,” she shot back. Tracy extended her hands and moved her fingers back and forth, which Gendry understood to mean that she wanted to see the exam.

He handed over the dreaded examine and drank in her expression as she looked at the test score and back at his answers. Tracy raised an eyebrow and made a few noises as she read the answers. After she was done, she threw it away.

“What did you do that for,” Gendry shouted.

“Because you’re too much of a chicken shit to look at it yourself,” she justified.

He glared at her. “That still doesn’t justify throwing my exam away. Gods, I need to look at it so I know what I need to improve on for the next examine,” he explained.

“You don’t need to improve on anything,” she said nonchalantly.

Gendry dug in the trashcan and pulled out his exam. “Because I would have nothing to compare it to,” he replied as he flipped through the test packet before reading his score. His eyes widened in shock.

“Or because you aced it,” she supplied.

“No way,” he exclaimed. In an unbelieving state, he held the exam in his hand. “That means that I’m the only one who got an A+ in the class.”

“Are you serious?” Tracy looked at her friend. “In that case, treat yo self! Stop worrying about your other classes and do something for yourself.”

“Tracy, I can’t I have so much school work to do.”

“You always have so much school work to do,” she said. “Take a break and enjoy yourself, Gendry; you’ve earned it.”

“Yeah, I have,” he agreed.

Gendry decided to treat himself to a car show. He hadn’t been around cars in a while and it brought extreme pleasure to be around hundreds of cars…. if only he could work on one. After spending two hours looking at cars, Gendry left the place with a permanent grin on his face. As he was on his way home, he saw a diner that he hadn’t been to in years. They made the best desserts, especially apple pie.

He ordered himself an apple pie with ice cream on the top and a side of coffee. In order to make the taste last, he ate slowly to cherish ever ingredient. Before he finished his pie, he ordered another one and hoped it arrived before he took his last bite.

“Gendry?” At the familiar voice, the man in question turned his head in the direction of the voice.

“Ruby?” He was incredibly surprised to see her. He knew that she still lived in King’s Landing, but it was such a big city.

“How are you,” she asked as she stood beside the table.

“I’m done fine,” he automatically answered. “How have you been?”

Ruby shrugged. “Okay.”
“Oh, umm, if you like, you can sit downß,” he said while mentally chastising himself for having her stand for so long. “It’s been a while.”

“Yes, it has,” she agreed. “I wasn’t sure whether or not I was going to see you again when you moved to Winterfell. Have you moved back here?”

Gendry thought for a moment. “Yes.”

“Back in the shop,” she guessed.

“No, I’m going to school.”

“Really, I thought you hated KLCC,” she said referring to King’s Landing Community College.

“I do, but I’m not going there, I’m going to University of King’s Landing,” he corrected. Ruby raised an eyebrow, which Gendry knew was asking how he got the money to pay to go to a university. “It’s a long story.”

“A settlement for an accident,” she guessed.

“You’ll never guess it, so don’t even try,” he said. “But, enough about me, tell me about yourself.”

The next few weeks, Gendry and Ruby spent time catching up and getting to know one another again. They went out to lunch a few times and would spent time at each other’s place. Ruby introduced Gendry to her daughter Poppy. The three of them went to the park, zoo, and movies together.

Gendry never really seriously considered having kids, but Poppy made his heart swell. It also made him realize that he had been in only one serious relationship for a man in his 30’s. If he ever wanted to settle down and have kids, he needed to start taking dating more seriously. He had to discard his fear and insecurities.

Ruby had agreed to meet him at his place in Winterfell, and then they would go out for dinner. Hot Pie should’ve been there to let her in and she would wait for him. He still paid his share of the rent in his old apartment because Hot Pie needed help with the rent and his next pay raise would be enough to rent the apartment on his own.

Every once and a while, Gendry would go to Winterfell to escape, which wasn’t often. There was so much on his plate and he really had to sell his image to get Stannis the company for whenever his father died.

Gendry supposed that he should feel upset about the idea that his dad was going to die one day soon, according to Melisandre, but he felt nothing. He didn’t know the man and, from what he knew about him, he was better off not having Robert in his life. Although Gendry questioned if Stannis was the best to head Baratheon Industries, Melisandre put those questions to bed as she gave an impassioned speech about how great a leader and thinker Stannis was. He wasn’t completely convinced, but Melisandre’s faith in Stannis put some of his worries to bed.

As Gendry opened the door, he looked around the apartment expecting to see Ruby or Hot Pie and saw neither. He wondered where they were, but didn’t think on it too long and sat his stuff besides the couch and went to the refrigerator to get a bottle of water. The envelopes on the table caught his attention as he quickly searched to see if anything had been sent for him to this address.

Gendry could’ve sworn he heard someone…moan, but he wasn’t sure. He became very still and listened intently. He heard it again. It sounded as if it was coming from his room. Hot Pie and Ruby?
In his room?

Suddenly, Gendry made his way to his seldom-used bedroom and opened the door in an abrupt manner. What he saw made his jaw drop.

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

Spoilers in note:

OMG! I don't know how some of you feel about this chapter, but I had to go where the story took me. Most of Gendry's segment was not in the original rough draft. I was stuck about how to execute this chapter, which is why it is told from various POV's to explain how they got to where they were in the last chapter, but I wasn't expecting this. lol. Honest. This chapter became way longer than I intended, and then I realized that the ending I planned for the chapter didn't fit, so I had to split the chapter (because this was going to be much, much longer).

Gendry's section was ten times longer than I planned because of the new ideas that came to me. And I was reluctant about writing these ideas because I didn't want to polarize the audience. But, I felt that I wouldn't be true to my story if I didn't write what I felt was right for the story. And, I know, there are explicit scenes between Gendry and Melisandre when he and Arya don't even have one. That was not my intention, but this was where the story took me. Also, before anyone comes to concrete conclusions about Ruby and her role in this fic and concerning Gendrya, wait for part II (which shouldn't be long).

And I apologize for the grammar mistakes as well.
Chapter Notes

Timeline: The barbeque took place in September and Arya and Gendry reunited in June. The last chapters explain: the immediate reaction of Ned, what convinced Jon to talk to Gendry, and what had been going on with Gendry during that time.

Arya: Sept.-June (The chapter before ‘Hearts a Mess Part I’)
Yoren: Sept. a week after the barbeque
Jon: June
Gendry: November/December-June

See the end of the chapter for more notes

GENDRY (cont.)

“What the hell is going on,” Gendry asked incredulously as he took in the scene in front of him. Ruby was lying naked in his bed and moaning non-stop. She lay underneath the covers, which hid the other person.

When Ruby heard Gendry’s voice, she jumped up.

“Gendry!” Shock colored her face as she wrapped the covers around herself and scooted against the headboard. “I—I—I,” she stammered.

“I don’t want to hear it, get dressed,” he said in a firm tone.

Gendry walked over to the bed and yanked the cover off of the other person. Instantly, his anger boiled over when he saw who it was. Of course, it was her because literally fucking him wasn’t enough. She wanted to fuck the people in his life too.

“Mel,” his voice was low and threatening.

Slowly, she brushed her thumb across her mouth, and then licked it. “Sorry that I got started without you, but you took so long,” she said, and then gestured to Ruby. “But, don’t worry, I’m warmed her up pretty well for you.”

“Get the fuck out,” he demanded. She gave him a blank stare. “Get the fuck out!”

Frantically, he searched for her clothes on the floor, and then threw random articles of clothing at her.

“What is your problem?” Melisandre threw the clothes aside, sat up on the bed, and then crossed her legs. She folded her and placed them on her knees.

“You,” he stated. “You are my problem. I was already stressed before you came along, and then you fucking multiplied it by ten.”

“Gendry, you knew what you were getting into when you came to me,” she interjected.

“No, I knew that there was a price to pay, but I didn’t think it would be this high.” Gendry
aggressively raised his arm above his head to emphasize his point. “Shit, I thought you were going to ask for me to do a few favors not devote my life to Stannis and you.”

“I may have set the terms, but you agreed to them—no one forced you to.”

“Yeah, because I was desperate. I had already made the deal with you and didn’t want to go back on it,” he explained. “You had already paid my bills for me and I had no way to pay you back without ending up in the situation I’d been trying to avoid.”

Melisandre pulled on her pants, and then her shirt as she spoke. “Why now?”

“What?”

“Why are you now voicing your anger and frustration? Why not last week or the week before that? What about me fucking Ruby set you off?” She threw a glance to the woman behind her as she buttoned up her shirt.

“Besides the fact that you’re fucking her in my bed,” Gendry asked in disbelief. “Because you taint everything you touch. I don’t care who Ruby fucks, but you…you are a parasite: a fucking leech. You feed off of any and everyone only for you benefit and leave them nothing in return. Oh, you may give material things, but you leave the person feeling less than emotionally than before you met them and I don’t think that’s a trade off that anyone wants.”

“Is that how you really feel,” Melisandre asked. Her demeanor was defiant, but Gendry could tell he hit a nerve.

“Yes,” he barked. “And, you’re not as half as smart as you think, Mel. Don’t think I don’t know you’re game: you think that by fucking me you can control me and make me do whatever you want. You’re trying to insert your presence in every facet of my life that I can’t and won’t try to escape your influence, but you’re too late, I’m immune. Like I said, I only agreed to this deal because I was broke and you already had paid my bills.” Gendry ran a hand through his hair. “So, you want to know why now? Because you never know when to stop, Mel. You never stop scheming. You may have had a passing interest in Ruby, but you only fucked her to get to me. You used her to keep me in line.”

“Well—“

“Get out,” he demanded again. “I don’t want to look at you, let alone hear your voice. Leave.”

Melisandre looked furious, but did as Gendry told her to. He didn’t move again until he heard the front door close.

“What the hell what you thinking,” Gendry asked as he rapidly tapped his forehead. He searched for her clothes on the floor, and then handed it to Ruby when he found them. “In my bed to top it all off.”

Nervously, Ruby swallowed.

“I—I wasn’t,” she admitted.

“No, seriously, what were you thinking,” he repeated. “And to sleep with some woman you don’t even know—that’s not like you.”

“I do know her,” she whispered.
“What did you say?”

“I do know her.” Ruby insecurely wrapped her arms around her torso after she put on her shirt. “I met her a couple of months ago at the gym. She was really nice and we got along great. A couple of times we went out for drinks and dinner.”

Gendry’s stomach dropped.

“Were you two…dating?” Although he hadn’t seen Ruby in years, he believed that she was straight unless she had been in the closet or something while they came together, or a later in life realization.

“Um…no,” she said. “At first, it was just a platonic thing. Well, it had been a platonic thing until tonight,” her face reddening at her confession. “For a while now, I’ve been kind of curious about being with a woman. I still love men, but I’m a little more…open minded about sexuality and relationships.” Ruby brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “Dinners started out as friendly and increasingly became a little too friendly to full blown flirting, but nothing ever happened.”

“Until tonight,” Gendry stated.

“Until tonight,” she confirmed. “I’m sorry. What I did was flat out inappropriate and couldn’t tell you what the hell I was thinking

“Fucking Mel!” Gendry sat on the bed and put his head in his hands.

“She used me, didn’t she?” He heard Ruby sniffling behind him.

“Ruby,” Gendry sighed.

“Didn’t she?”

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“My friends never liked Mel, but I told them that they were wrong about her,” Ruby confided. “My friends could see right through her, but I was too blinded by the way she made me feel…a way I hadn’t felt since we broke up.”

Gendry held Ruby as she cried in his arms. “Everything will be okay,” he mumbled into her hair.

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“Oh, turn that frown upside down,” Melisandre, grinned.

Gendry glared at her as he sat down.

“I’m surprised you showed up,” she said before leaning forward to get closer to him. Without thinking about it, Gendry leaned back to get away from her.

“I am too,” he admitted. He had been avoiding her calls for two days.

“So…about our deal?”

“We are still on,” he reluctantly stated. “But, you leave Ruby out of this; you only deal with me. If I think you are involving her or anyone else in our agreement, I will break our deal, are we clear?”

“Crystal,” she said in a clipped tone. “But, how will you repay your debt?”
“You said that Robert Baratheon’s sons inherit Baratheon Industries, right?” Melisandre shook her head yes. “Well, I’m assuming that goes for his estate as well.” The woman narrowed her eyes at his question. “There’s your answer.”

“I know you think that I’m a monster, but I merely satisfied a curiosity of Ruby’s,” Melisandre stated randomly.

“Yeah, and while you did, you used her to get to me,” he shot back. “I never thought that you were into women, but now that I think about it, it doesn’t surprise me.”

Melisandre laughed. “I’ve been known to eat the box on an occasion or two,” she shrugged. “But, that wasn’t the only thing I did.”

“Please spare me the details.”

“Gendry, are you disgusted by the idea of two women having sex,” she said in an admonishing tone. “I would think that you were above that type of thinking.”

Gendry gave her a dismissive look. “No, I’m disgusted by you having sex with anyone in order for you to use them to get to someone else.”

“So, that means you weren’t disgusted having sex with me?”

“No, I was,” he answered. “But, I was running from myself; I was running from my issues. I’m not anymore.” Gendry got up, preparing to leave and said, “Leave Ruby alone, I mean it.”

“Scouts honor,” she promised. “You know, although she was screaming my name, she was thinking of you; she’s always thinking of you.”

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Gendry threw a few pieces of popcorn in his mouth, and then sipped his drink. Impatiently, he looked at his watch.

“Ruby, what is taking so long?”

Although Gendry was still a bit miffed at Ruby about the Melisandre scandal, he was deeply sympathetic for her as well. She had been trying to be true to herself and someone took advantage of that. He couldn’t imagine how awfully that had been for her. Ruby had been genuinely interested in Melisandre.

“Ruby,” he called out again.

Gendry got up and looked for his ex-girlfriend. He found her staring in the mirror at herself. She looked to be lost in a daze.

“Ruby,” Gendry said gently this time. “Is everything okay?”


“I was calling your name and you didn’t answer,” he explained.

“I just get lost in my thoughts from time to time,” she stated, brushing off his concern. “Nothing to worry about.”

Ruby grabbed his arm and pulled him into the living room. She pushed play on the remote and took
the popcorn from Gendry. They watched the movie in companionable silence. Occasionally, Gendry would steal a glance at her; he was worried about Ruby. The way she had been looking at herself in the mirror was unsettling to him. When she was around others, Ruby was fine or appeared to be fine. But, whenever he saw her by herself, he saw a different, darker side to her.

As the credits rolled, Ruby muted the credit. She was quiet for a moment before speaking.

“Have you ever thought about us and where we would be if we’d stayed together,” she asked randomly.

“When we first broke up, it was all I thought about,” Gendry admitted. “But, at the same time, I don’t think we were meant to get married and have kids. We were great together, but our relationship seemed more like a friendship than two people who were in love.” Ruby nodded her head in agreement. “I’ll admit, I thought about it again when we bumped into each other again a while ago, but when we started to hang out again, all I saw was how much we were great friends. But, it made me think about my life and how you were the only relationship I had ever been in. It made me think about marriage and kids—I want that.”

“But, you haven’t met her yet,” she guessed.

“No,” he said as if figuring something out the first time. “I met her years ago, but the timing wasn’t right.”

“And now?”

Blue eyes met brown eyes. “We both had some growing up to do.”

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Since the night Gendry had caught Ruby and Melisandre in bed together, he hadn’t slept in his bed. He now claimed the couch as his bed. There was a perfectly fine one back in King’s Landing, but that place just reminded him too much of Melisandre. Sure, she had been at his place and took claim on his bed, but as long as he didn’t lie in that bed, he was fine with being in Winterfell. He felt home.

School wasn’t as stressful for him as it had been, but he still found himself overwhelmed. He didn’t want to be there; that place was of no interest to him. He was happy to only have a few weeks left, and then get out of that place for good.

Tiredly, Gendry walked up the stairs and dragged himself to his front door. As he was about to put his key in the lock, the door was opened.

“Hey, Gendry, “Hot Pie said in an odd tone. “You have a visitor.”

Gendry looked up and saw Jon wipe his hands on his pants as he walked out of the bathroom.

“What are you doing here,” Gendry’s voice became defensive.

Jon held his hands up.

“I know you have every reason to hate me,” Jon began. “But, I came here to apologize about what happened last year. And I wanted to talk.”

It took all of Gendry’s might to fight back a sarcastic response about how he didn’t let him talk back then.
“Is that okay with you?”

Gendry harshly rubbed his face.

“Sure…fine…whatever,” he said as he dropped his book bag by the door. He didn’t have the energy to conjure up those negative emotions that he held for Jon and the way he treated him that day.

Jon sat on the loveseat and Gendry sat on the arm of a single person chair with his arms crossed.

“Say what you have to say.”

“Gendry, there aren’t words to adequately describe how awful I feel about that day,” Jon began. “In my mind, I’d been protecting Arya, but in reality, I was subconsciously mad at myself because I believe that I had failed Arya. I thought that if I made you pay for taking ‘advantage’ of her then it would make up for me not being there,” he admitted. “I always thought that I’d be around when boys started to take interest in her and would protect her, but I wasn’t. And then, when I found out about that night in addition to the fact that I knew how old you were, it just set me off. I thought you were some pervert that preyed on young, vulnerable girls without ever trying to hear the full story or knowing nothing about you. It didn’t matter what anyone said to me, they were wrong and I was right—I had made your situation with Arya about me and didn’t give you a chance. For that, I sincerely apologize.” Jon looked truly remorseful for his actions. “You didn’t deserve that; not at all. It took my wife slapping some sense into for me to understand that you aren’t a bad guy and you never were; it was just a case of unfortunate timing. You loved Arya then and you love her now. I was just the jackass who made it about himself.”

“You know, that’s a really great apology and all, but you fucking put me in the hospital,” Gendry fumed. “I had a broken ribcage. I had to take off of work and made a deal with a Satan just so I wouldn’t end up in debt so I could pay my medical bills and rent. So, I’ve had a few shitty months, and I don’t want to hear your apology if it’s just about easing your guilt and making yourself feel better.”

“I don’t want to ease me guilt,” Jon refuted. “I want to make things right with you. Tell me where can I start or how I can do that.”

Gendry shrugged, and then got up to get a beer out of the refrigerator. He grabbed one for Jon as well.

“You said that you made a deal with someone to get out of debt,” Jon asked. “What was it?”

“I’m handling it,” Gendry said as he handed the dark haired man a beer.

“You wouldn’t have been in that situation if it weren’t for me,” Jon reasoned. “The least I can do is help you. Tell me what I can do. I honestly want to make this right.”

Gendry wrote the cost of his deal on a piece of paper and handed it to Jon. The man looked at the figure and made a deep whistle.

“Consider it done,” he replied.

“You’re not going to ask why it’s that high?”

Jon bit his lip. “I didn’t want to push my luck.”
“Well, there is something someone wants me to do that I only have the power to do. They invested some money in me that I didn’t ask for, but it was apart of the deal,” Gendry explained.

“Is it illegal,” Jon inquired.

“No,” Gendry immediately denied. “It’s perfectly legal, but they need me specifically to execute their plan.”

“And paying this,” Jon pointed to the number on the paper. “Gets you out of the deal?”

“Yes.”

Jon looked at the piece of paper again. He couldn’t fathom what deal Gendry had made that made someone invest this much money in him, in addition, to paying his medical fees and rent. Those other things were five times the amount Jon believed Gendry initially had to pay.

“As I said earlier, consider it done,” Jon said. He stared at Gendry for a moment, and then got up to leave.

As he was walking to the door, Gendry spoke, “How is she doing? Arya, I mean?”

“She’s hurting, but afraid to show it. It’s her fear of being vulnerable; she thinks that letting someone see your pain and letting them in will hurt her, so she closes herself off and tries to control everything.” It was obvious to Gendry that Jon was implying that Arya was hurting over him; that her guarded nature had turned against her. “You know her, she’ll pretend to be strong even if it kills her. And that’s what it was doing?”

“And now?”

“Now, she’s letting people in, just a little bit,” Jon, said. “Not me, though. She never forgave me for the way I treated you that day and how I reacted whenever your name was mentioned. But, Gendry, she knows that she’s wrong and, I don’t mean to pry or push you to her, but you would know that if you spoke to her.”

“Honestly, I don’t even know where to start,” Gendry said. Jon saw the parallels between him and the other man. “I spend the first few months so angry at her and the next few months trying to avoid dealing with her.”

“Start with her,” Jon stated simply. “I know you are upset with her, but the only way to resolve your issues with her is to talk to her.”

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For the last few days, Ruby hadn’t been feeling well; she had caught a bad case of food poisoning, and asked Gendry could he pick Polly up from school. Gendry happily said yes and had spent time talking with Polly as he drove her home from school. The little girl was smart as a whip and funny too. She wasn’t one of those kids who were wise beyond their years, but a kid who saw how weird the world was and commented on it.

Gendry definitely wanted kids and he wanted one like Polly. He wanted at least two and didn’t really care if it was a boy or a girl.

When they arrived at the apartment, Gendry unbuckled her from her car seat, and then took the car seat out of the car. Gendry was tired and wanted to take the elevator, but Polly loved running up the stairs even though Ruby warned her a million times not to do it.
“Polly, wait for me,” Gendry said as he held the railing while he walked up the stairs.

“You walk too slow,” she replied back. Gendry chuckled.

“I know, but can you please slow down?” There were seven flights of stairs; Gendry didn’t know why he let her talk him into doing this.

“Okay,” she sighed.

When they reached the seventh floor, Gendry opened the door and she ran into the hallway and to her and her mother’s apartment door.

“Open it, open it,” she begged as she yanked on his shirt. He could tell that she missed her mother and wanted to tell Ruby all about her day…in toddler speak, of course.

Gendry opened the door with the key Ruby had given him a few days ago when she asked him to pick up Polly. As Gendry turned the doorknob, Polly pushed the door open and ran into the apartment.

“Mommy,” she yelled. “Mommy!”

Polly ran to her mother’s room, and then her own room and couldn’t find her mother.

“Mommy!” She then banged on the bathroom door when she saw that it was closed.

There was no answer.

Gendry heard the water running and knocked on the door.

“Hey Ruby, your mini-me is impatient to see you,” he said. “Hurry up in there.”

Fifteen minutes later, Ruby still hadn’t emerged.

“Ruby,” Gendry called again as he knocked on the door. He had managed to keep Polly occupied with promises of her mother exiting the shower shortly. “Ruby.”

Gendry turned the handle and saw that the door was unlocked. When he opened the door, he gasped at what he saw.

“Ruby!” Ruby was laying in the tub with her arm draped over the edge. A pool of blood had gathered on the floor over spot underneath her arm. Her body was wrinkly from all of the hours under the running water.

‘Ruby killed herself,’ Gendry thought. ‘She committed suicide.”

Gendry didn’t get much time to process what had happened when he heard foot steps running towards the door.

“Mommy!”

Abruptly, Gendry got up and stepped outside of the bathroom and hurriedly closed the door behind himself.

“I want to see mommy,” she demanded. Polly smiled, but he could tell that the little girl was frustrated.
“You can’t see mommy right now,” Gendry said as he tried to keep his tone even. He fought back the tears as he realized that Polly would never see her mother alive again.

“I want to see mommy,” she demanded again. This time her smile disappeared.

Gendry picked up the little girl and she began to cry as he walked away from the bathroom door.

“I want to see my mommy,” she angrily cried and Gendry’s heart broke in that moment. Tears streamed down his face as he grabbed a bag with Polly’s toys in it as well as her car seat, and then exited the apartment. Hot tears fell on his shoulder as Polly cried her heart out.

After he settled Polly in his car, he called the police.

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ARYA

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Choked sobs escaped form Gendry as he recounted the story of how he found Ruby and the devastation it brought Polly when she found out her mother was never coming back.

“Her grandmother says that Polly won’t eat and sleeps all of the time,” Gendry said as he wiped his face. His eyes were bloodshot red. “Even when she sleeps, she has nightmares.”

Arya rubbed Gendry’s back to calm him. Eventually, his sobs subsided.

Gendry looked like he hadn’t slept in days or showered for that matter.

Suddenly, Arya got up and pulled one of Gendry’s arms to indicate that she wanted him to follow her. She led him to the bathroom and turned on the shower. Without asking, she pulled off Gendry’s shirt and he helped her by lifting up his arms. She then unbuckled and unzipped his pants, but stopped there. He could do the rest himself. Arya was about to leave to give Gendry some privacy when he deposed of his pants and underwear in front of her. As he was about to step in the shower, he abruptly stopped.

“I know, Gendry,” Arya said supportively. “But, you need to wash up.” She then turned off the shower. “You don’t even need to go in there; you can wash up using the sink.”

Gendry shook his head no, and then stepped into the shower and turned the water back on.

“I’ll be fine,” he reassured.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

Arya then left Gendry and went into the kitchen. She warmed up some left over dinner from earlier that night and fixed some chamomile tea. As she was getting ready to get Gendry out of the shower, he walked into the kitchen and sat at the island.

“When I’ve never been here before, but I seem to have clothes here,” Gendry observed. “At least, I’ve solved the mystery of my missing clothes.”

When Arya looked at Gendry, she didn’t see any malice, but a playful smile on his lips. She sat his food and tea in front of him.

“This shirt looks more worn than the last time I saw it,” he noted as he looked at the shirt he was
wearing.

“Well, that’s because I sleep in that shirt.” Gendry took a bit of his food and his taste buds watered at the various flavors.

“That’s funny because I wear your shirt to bed at night too.” Arya playfully shoved Gendry’s head. “What? I do!”

Arya chuckled. “As if you could fit my clothes. Perhaps, one of your biceps.”

The petite woman sat next to the much larger man.

“How are you feeling,” she asked.

“A little better.” Gendry stuffed some more food in his mouth. “But, Ruby’s death is still fresh, you know. And I found her. That’s going to take a while to get over.”

“Well, anytime you need me, I’m here for you,” Arya offered.

“I know.”

Arya could tell that Gendry was tired and led him upstairs into her room. She pulled back the covered, puffed the pillows, and then patted the bed for Gendry to lie down.

“Why am I sleeping in your room?” Gendry sat on the bed, and then pulled the covers over his body. Arya tucked him in.

“This is the best bed in the house. Once you fall asleep, you fall into a deep, magnificent coma,” she said, “I promise you, you’ll thank me in the morning.”

As Arya walked away from the bed, Gendry called out to her. “Stay with me.”

“Gendry.”

“Stay with me,” he repeated.

Arya put on a pair of shorts and a long sleeved shirt. She turned off the lights, and then lay on top of the covers and faced away from Gendry.

Loud enough for her to hear, Gendry said, “I’ve missed you, Arry.”

“I’ve missed you too, stupid.”

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As Arya chewed on her eggs, she kept stealing glances at Gendry.

“What?” Gendry bit into his English muffin, and then took a sip of his orange juice.

“I just can’t believe you slept with that nineteen year or girl”, Arya said. “Or even Melisandre, for that matter.” She didn’t appear to be judging him, but rather, disbelieving.

“Me either,” he admitted. “There is a part of me disgusted with myself. Not about Autumn, but about Mel.” He took another sip of his orange juice. “That relationship was just so fucked up and twisted and, yet; I continued to have sex with her.”
“Why,” Arya inquired.

“I don’t know,” Gendry sighed. “A variety of reasons: she was familiar, I was both angry and trying to get over you, trying to ignore my problems, she was there—the list goes on. But, at the end of the day, I think I began to lose sight of who I was…that I started to become a person that wasn’t me.”

He took a deep breath. “When I reconnected with Ruby again, I felt like the old me again. I felt like a person who wasn’t so consumed with anger and doing things he didn’t want to in order to pay off a debt.”

Arya played with her eggs on her plate. “Did you want to be with her again?”

Gendry nodded his head. “No. She just reminded me of who I once was, but that was all.”

“I’m sorry, Gendry,” Arya said. “I’m sorry for my behavior months ago. I was completely wrong to treat like that and I understand why you wanted nothing to do with me. No one has a right to be treated like that especially when they are in a position that you were in.” Arya looked truly remorseful about her actions that night. “I was just thinking about myself and my feelings and not you and your reality.”

“And why were you mad?”

“Because I was being stupid,” she stated. “I equated you leaving when my father dismissed you to you leave when you left to be a camp counselor at Wholistic Core,” Arya explained. “But, in both occasions, you were exactly right to leave. As much as you tried to fight it, you were eventually going to break; it was going to happen. And I hadn’t been helping matters either because I was the one chipping at your resolved. But, most importantly, you were trying to find someone where you fit in and, at the time, you felt that there was your best option. Gods, and we saw how my family reacted, you would be in prison right now if you hadn’t made that choice.” Gendry shuddered at the thought. “And, as you said back in September, my father had dismissed you. He was fucking off and wanted to kill you, but at the same time trying to see reason in the situation—it was all sorts of a cluster fuck. And I shouldn’t have made that about my feelings and me. I was being selfish and couldn’t see the difficult situation I had put you in while we were at camp together.”

“Arya, it wasn’t all you,” Gendry reasoned.

“No, but it was mostly me.” Arya dared Gendry to deny that fact.

“True,” he relented. Gendry was about to speak when Arya then said:

“And don’t play the age card either,” she warned. “You know exactly what I’m talking about ‘but, I was should have known better, I was older,’” she mocked.

“Fine.” Gendry shook his head and smiled at her. “And I was apologize for keeping you waiting for an answer for so long. Whether I wanted to be with you or not, I should’ve give you an answer soon rather than making you wait nine—ten months.”

“Shit happens.” Arya shrugged.

She called off of work for the day.

Arya didn’t know when she was going to see Gendry again, but when she had, it was a bittersweet moment. It was great to see his face, but she saw that he was troubled as well. In order to get some true privacy, they went back to her place and he told her everything. He told her about the broken bones, being unable to work, bills adding up and having to make a tough decision.
Many things troubled him, but Ruby bothered him that most, especially since she left a daughter behind and he knew the pain of losing a parent even if he couldn’t remember his own mom that well. Polly was such a sweet girl and that day haunted his dreams.

They spend the whole day talking and eating. A surplus amount of junk food was ordered and they pigged out without a care in the world. Arya caught him with work and revealed that she had slept with Francisco. Gendry was a little jealous, but didn’t make a big deal of it. He told her about how his first full semester in college was and that he enjoyed it, but college life wasn’t for him. He preferred to work on cars and didn’t mind that he would never own his own business.

There was a best of seven foot wrestling series, which there were many handicaps on Gendry to make the fight “fair”. Arya and Gendry may have been adults, but they felt like kids—spending the whole day doing nothing and having fun.

It was the first time in months that they felt peace.

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When Arya entered the bathroom, she saw Gendry on the tub.

“Care if I join you?” She braced herself against the wall and looked down at him.

Gendry leaned forward and felt Arya as she slipped in behind him. Comfortably, he settled against her chest.

“Besides my mother, I never really lost anyone before,” Gendry mumbled. His fingers slowly moved back and forth on Arya’s knee. “I was so young when she died, I barely remember her. I have so memories, but all I really felt and feel is longing; the loss of something I never had a chance to really appreciate,” he voiced his thoughts. “With Ruby, she was the only serious relationship I ever been in. As a matter of fact, she was the only relationship I’d been in.” At this revelation, Arya’s stomach dropped. “I was in love with her once upon a time and I still care for her deeply, so to lose her…to find her the way I did and for her daughter to be there,” he trailed off. Arya took Gendry’s face in her hand and turned his towards her. She kissed his tear stained checks; she wanted to kiss his pain away.

They stayed that way for hours.

There were weirder places to fall asleep.

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Francisco snapped his fingers three times in succession.

“You better work it, girl,” he encouraged. Arya gave Francisco a puzzled expressed in response. He had gotten cleared for work the week before.

“What are you talking about,” she said as she looked at her friend strangely.

“You know what I’m talking about,” he said suggestively. Ever so slightly began to thrust his hips forwards and held his hands in front of himself as if he was holding something, more specifically, someone. “They have a name for the walk you are doing.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, it’s called I-just-got-my-brains-fucked-out-the-night-before-and-want-the-world-to-know.”
Arya snorted. “I didn’t have sex last night.”

“Okay, then it’s called: Gendry-is-back-in-my-life-and-I’m-just-so-excited-that-I-just-can’t-hide-it walk,” he sang.

Francisco opened his arms and pulled Arya in for a hug.

“How did you know,” she whispered in his ear.

“I told you over a year ago,” he began. “There’s a smile for Gendry and there’s a smile for everyone else; and let me say, there’s no way you could ever confuse the two.”

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A day had turned into a week and a week had turned into a month and Gendry was still staying at her place. To be honest, she didn’t want him to leave and it wasn’t just because they hadn’t seen each other in months (well, that was the primary reason). It just felt so right and natural with Gendry living with her. There wasn’t any awkward mishaps or confusion, Gendry fit very well in her personal space. Occasionally, he teased her about her messiness, but it was all in good fun.

They took turns cooking dinner and completing chores. They would watch shows together and play games or sit and talk for hours. And there wasn’t any guessing about it, Arya knew that this was what she had been missing when she didn’t agree to be Gendry’s girlfriend. Her fears and controlling nature had ruled her back then, but now, she was able to see what it could have been like—what it could be like and she never wanted to let him go again.

Arya kicked off her shoes as soon as she walked into the door. She was hanging up her jacket when she saw Gendry walk down the stairs and that when it hit her, what she has always known; there was no other man for her, it had been just Gendry—it had always been Gendry.

Arya wondered what was it about the simple mundane moments that made her have huge realizations like when Gendry was snacking on cookies when she realized she was in love with him and, now, him walking towards her to greet her after coming from work. Even if they never got married, there would be no other man besides him. Their souls had imprinted on one another since they day that met and they were two halves of a whole.

Suddenly, Arya ran to Gendry and jumped into his arms. A deep kiss was planted on his mouth as Gendry walked backwards and settled on the stairs. Arya straddled his lap as Gendry ran his hands up and down her back. Shivers were sent up her spine as she became reacquainted with his touch. Gendry rotated between kissing and nibbling her neck, which she leaned her neck back further to give him better access.

Hurriedly, Gendry undid her buttons of her work shirt, and then brushed it off of her shoulders. Arya shrugged the shirt completely off and took off her tank top. She could feel him hardening underneath her. To arouse Gendry even more, she began to grind her hips against his. In response, Gendry grabbed her hips and began to thrust upwards.

“I’ve miss you so much.” he moaned before kissing on her collarbone, and then each of her breasts. Without detracting attention from her breasts, Gendry unclasped her bra and threw it to the ground. He played with her breasts in his hands and she felt herself increasingly get wet; she bet her panties were soaked. No, she knew they were.

“Not nearly as much as I missed you.” A sharp gasp escaped from her as Gendry aggressively
rubbed the fabric that covered her clit. They maneuvered Arya was now sitting on his lap and took her pants and underwear off. Quickly, Gendry slid down his sweatpants and underwear so that they rested at his ankles.

Eagerly, Arya straddles his lap again. She took Gendry’s cock in her hand stroked it the way she knew he loved. When his erection stood as proud and tall as she knew it could, Arya began to lower herself on the aroused cock.

At first, she started of slow to stretch her vaginal muscles and get used to him again. His cock stretched her deliciously and she wanted to cum at that moment. Gendry placed his hands on her hips again so that she had better stability. Every once in a while, he would thrust upwards, but primarily, he let her do all of the work. He knew that she had to get used to him and not the other way around.

She kissed him once, then twice, then three times.

When she felt that her body had adjusted to Gendry just fine, Arya increased her pace. She began to roll her hips the way Gendry enjoyed and in a way that maximized her pleasure. Arya placed her hands on his chest and made Gendry lay against the stairs. It was something about the way Gendry watched her while she was on top that made her lose herself. And that present moment wasn’t an exception.

His gaze was intense, but full of admiration and loved. Gendry loved watching Arya take control and getting into a zone of sorts. She moaned without a care in the world as Gendry repeatedly filled her with his cock. Messy kisses were placed on his face, in his ear, and on his forehead.

A brief pause occurred as Gendry still Arya’s movements and sat up. He then grabbed her thighs and stood up before backing her against the wall. Arya wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his shoulders.

This new position brought a new sensation over Arya and she gasped in delight. Over and over, Gendry stroked a sweet spot, which drove her insane. She pulled him closer and wrapped her legs tighter.

“Oh Gods,” she cried. “Please go deeper.”

Gendry obliged and she spoke nonsensical words into his chest. He lifted her legs a bit higher and stroke her even deeper than the time before. An orgasm unexpectedly hit Arya.

To increase her pleasure during her climax, Gendry went faster and Arya’s nails pierced his skin. He knew she drew blood. He sowed down his pace after he believed her orgasm started to dwindle.

They then moved to the floor and Gendry took his time this time. He knew that it would take a while to reach such a state of arousal again, but he didn’t mind. Through daze eyes, Arya examined Gendry as he pumped in and out of her. Gods, he was beautiful from any angle.

Sweat began to form on his forehead, which didn’t surprise her. Gendry’s face was a mixture between extreme concentration and pleasure. She opened her legs a little wider and Gendry groaned in appreciation.

It was obvious that Gendry wanted to cum, but he was trying to hold it in for her second orgasm. Arya began to move underneath him as she pulled him closer. She hated the distance even during sex. It was a constant conflict for her whenever they had sex: she wanted to watch him, but she wanted him close.

Gendry was on the edge.
“Cum for me, Gendry,” she whispered. He shook his head no and she laughed.

“Gendry, cum for me,” she whispered again. He placed a kiss on her forward and continued pumping. Arya then grabbed Gendry’s ass and pulled him closer. Another orgasm hit Arya and she cried loudly at her second release. Gendry’s wild pumping told her that he had lost his battle and, well, the loud groaning she heard in her ear.

“What was that about,” he asked after he regained his breath after rolling off of her.

“You mean jumping on you?”

“Yeah,” he breathed heavily.

“I finally found where I belong,” she smiled. “With you.”

Gendry thought about what she said, and then nodded in agreement.

“I spent my whole life trying to find a home,” he confessed. “Never did I realize that sometimes, home is a person and not a place. No wonder I felt restless everywhere I went except when you were near.”

The cold tiles didn’t bother Arya at all.

~*~*~*~

“Daydream delusion
Limousine Eyelash
Oh, baby with your pretty face
Drop a tear in my wineglass
Look at those big eyes
See what you mean to me
Sweet cakes and milkshakes
I am a delusion angel
I am a fantasy parade
I want you to know what I think
Don’t want you to guess anymore
You have no idea where I came from
We have no idea where we’re going
Lodged in life
Like two branches in a river
Flowing downstream
Caught in the current
I’ll carry you. You’ll carry me
That’s how it could be
Don’t you know me?
Don’t you know me by now?”

-“Milkshakes” Iris Watts Hirideyo (I think)

TBC...

Chapter End Notes
The reaction of some of you did not surprise me; I knew this chapter would be polarizing. I read some scathing reviews (not just from here). I would just like for readers to have trust in me as a writer even if you do not particularly like a certain chapter. I'm not going to mislead. BUT, I will say this: these are adults. Not all adults act like this, but Gendry is a grown man and can have sex with whoever he likes. Arya is a grown woman and can have sex with whoever she likes. Just because they have sex with other people doesn't mean that they don't love one another—it just means that their lives aren't centered around each other (which isn't healthy, btw).

As much as I enjoy some of your support and reviews, if you expect me to write a story based on how you want things to go, I can't do that for you. There are other writers who do write that way and you can go read their stories. I mean no disrespect. I may be influenced by fan input, but I do not let it dictate my story. Despite influences from several fans, my story is still on its original course give or take a few things.

One more thing, if you just don't like the chapter just because it doesn't fit or whatever reason, that is fine. But, if you disliked the chapter and overall story because Gendry and/or Arya slept with other people, refer to the second paragraph.

S/O: To Meli, your input/reviews mean everything to me. :-D
“I did some thinking,” she revealed. “Just about every problem I’ve had within the last few months was because of my own doing and I’m not referring to just Gendry. I used to see all of my problems as other people doing things to me and not what I was doing to them as well.”

“Good morning, mom and dad.” Arya placed a kiss on her mother’s cheek, and then went over to her father to do the same.

“Good morning, sweetheart.” Warmly, Catelyn smiled at her daughter as she ate her breakfast. Her mother looked genuinely happy to see her.

Ned rested his newspaper on the table and examined at Arya. He could tell that his daughter had something on her mind. “It’s been a while since you joined us for breakfast,” he said in a low, deep voice. “Is this a courtesy visit or do you want to talk about something?”

As Arya poured herself some coffee, she thought over her answer.

“Both.” She grabbed a few pieces of toast and spread Nutella on the before putting bacon, eggs, and strawberries on her plate. “I know that I’m not always the most open person,” she said.

Catelyn tried to bite back a smile by stuffing eggs into her mouth.

“That’s one way to put it,” Ned chuckled.

Arya smiled at her father. “So, I’m trying to work on having an open and honest relationship with you guys,” she announced.

“Really,” Catelyn said in shock. She knew that her daughter has made some changes to herself through the years, but her guarded nature and stubbornness was the most consistent thing about her. “What brought about this change?”

“I did some thinking,” she revealed. “Just about every problem I’ve had within the last few months was because of my own doing and I’m not referring to just Gendry. I used to see all of my problems as other people doing things to me and not what I was doing to them as well.”

In shock, her parents stared at her. As honest as Arya could be, she had a difficult time taking criticism, let alone, admitting that she had faults. “When I was younger, I used to think that my bad relationship with Sansa was because of Sansa, but it wasn’t. She tried, but I wasn’t helping her out and doing my part; I wasn’t trying to understand her. Our relationship only got better when I stopped thinking about myself and thought about Sansa for a change. And it made me realize that I did this same thing to my friends and, as much as I can be a good friend, there are times where I can be a shi—a crappy friend as well and I don’t like that about myself. It’s not a good trait to have. And it’s not a good trait to have either when you have family that loves you and wants to be there for you.”
Catelyn looked proud of Arya. “Arya, that’s very mature of you; even adults that are older than you never come to realize this.”

“Did this just suddenly come to you or did something spark it,” Ned inquired.

A sense of sadness came over Arya. “Ned sparked it. He came to speak to me a few months ago and what he said really got me to do some thinking.”

“And how is Ned?” Catelyn just realized that she hadn’t seen Ned in a while.

“I don’t know,” Arya shrugged. “We aren’t friends anymore.” At this, Arya got a little teary and bit her lip to prevent from crying. “I didn’t tell you guys because he was right about me and I was ashamed of how I had treated him.”

Ned got up and went over to hug Arya. “Oh, sweetheart.” He gently kissed her on her forehead and tucked her head under his chin. Catelyn also got up and rubbed her daughter on her back.

“He was so mad at me,” she whispered. “And right. Everything he said was true.”

Arya disentangled herself from her father’s arms.

“Do you think you two will ever be friends again,” her mother asked as she pulled over her chair so that she could sit closer to Arya. Ned did the same.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “But, regardless, I still want to apologize to him. We were supposed to be friends and I wasn’t always a friend to him.” Arya looked at her hand. “But, that isn’t what I came here to talk about.”

“Well then, what did you want to talk about,” Ned prodded.

“Gendry.” Arya took a deep breath. “He’s been staying in the guest house with me for a month and a half.”

“Come again,” Catelyn asked her daughter to repeat so she was sure she heard what she thought she heard.

Arya sighed. “Mom, it’s not what you think…per se,” she explained. “Gendry needed to get away and be where no one could find him for a while. No one would ever think to look at my place.”

“Is he in some kind of trouble?” Her mother now looked concerned.

“Not exactly, but he is in a bind,” Arya offered vaguely. “I originally asked him to spend a night because he was having a rough time. His ex-girlfriend had killed herself and Gendry took it really hard. He’s never really lost anyone he cared about. I mean he lost his mother, but he was young. Gendry found his ex-girlfriend dead, so that was another thing that fuc—messed with his head.”

Ned looked to be processing what Arya was telling him.

“So, what was he doing with his ex-girlfriend?” Ned didn’t seem to be accusing Gendry of anything.

“They had bumped into one another and was re-establishing a friendship,” Arya explained. “She had gotten a really bad case of food poisoning for a few days and had asked for Gendry to pick up her daughter during that time. When he arrived to her place, he thought she was taking a shower, but she had slit her wrist hours before.”

Catelyn noticeably frowned, “Oh my God; that poor little girl. Was there a note or anything?”
“No.” Arya took a bite of her toast. “But, Gendry told me that his ex girlfriend Ruby struggled with bouts of major depression. It started occurring a year or two after she had her daughter Polly. He didn’t know about it until he spoke with her father after her death. He said that she could be withdrawn and not always there, at times, but he didn’t think it was depression; he assumed that it had something to do with a potential relationship gone sour.”

“That’s really unfortunate,” Catelyn looked truly sympathetic. “That young woman must have really been going through something to leave her daughter all alone. I couldn’t imagine leaving any of you guys alone,” she grabbed Arya’s hand and squeezed tightly. “Let alone your father.”

Catelyn reached out a hand and caressed her husband’s bearded face. Out of habit, Ned leaned into her touch. He slid his face against Catelyn’s palm, so that her hand was covering his mouth. Ned then raised his big, warm hand up to cover hers, and then kissed the palm of her hand. A look of pure adoration flashed across her father’s face as her mother gazed lovingly at him. Ned then grabbed Catelyn’s hand, and then kissed the back of it. He kissed her hand again, again, again before quickly trailing kisses up her arm, and then placing one on her neck.

A bellyaching laugh erupted from Catelyn.

“Ned,” she said as she swatted him as he tried to kiss her neck again. Tears of laughter streamed down her face. “Ned,” Catelyn warned again, despite a huge grin being plastered to her face. “Arya was still talking to us.”

While observing her parents, Arya was surprised that they only had five kids.

Although she had many doubts about people and things, she never doubted her parents’ love and affection for one another. It may have been cliché for her to think that since they were her parents, but their feelings were undeniable. They didn’t just have love and affection; they respected each other as well. And Arya didn’t see that in many marriages, let alone relationships. She admired the fact that her parents could still genuinely make one another laugh and smile; she admired that the fire had never burned out in their eyes.

And she supposed that her mother was right about ‘what ifs’. They never got you anywhere.

“Sorry, Arya,” her father apologized. “Continue.”

“Uh, due to the injuries Gendry suffered from his one-sided fight with Jon, he had to take off of work for a few weeks to recover,” Arya began. “That meant that he didn’t have the money to pay for medical bills, rent, and so forth, which led him to make a deal with an old associate of his.” Arya then explained the details behind the agreement between Gendry and Melisandre and the amount of money invested in him because of it. She then explained that Jon and Gendry had made amends and that Jon had paid off the debt.

“So, if the money is paid off, why are you coming to us,” Catelyn asked.

“Because she won’t stop until she gets what she wants,” Ned provided. In confusion, Catelyn frowned. “Melisandre, I mean. All of this was done in order to put Stannis in control of Baratheon Industries.” He looked at his wife, and then said, “When we first met Gendry, you and I briefly discussed how much he looks like a Baratheon—Robert mainly; Melisandre most likely noticed this as well. She probably didn’t need him back whenever they first met and spent her off time lining up all of her ducks. Then, Gendry came asking of help right at the perfect time,” Ned pieced together. “If Gendry didn’t need the money, he wouldn’t have said yes to the deal. Without that, she couldn’t have gotten him to agree to it. He’s Robert’s biological child and the only one who has the power to give her what she wants.”
“Are we sure he’s the only one,” Catelyn questioned. “It’s no secret that Robert shared the beds of many women.”

“True, but she doesn’t have to go looking for them,” he rationed. “And she already had established contact with Gendry. She could go looking for the others, but who knows how long that would take.”

“What are you planning to do?” Catelyn looked at her husband intently as he wore a pensive expression.

He looked at Catelyn, then to his daughter.

“Give her what she wants,” he answered.

“You’re giving her Gendry?” Arya stared incredulously at her father.

“No, I’m going to make Stannis head of Baratheon Industries.” Both Arya and Catelyn looked perplexed. “Stannis isn’t a bad guy; he’s uncompromising and plays by the book. For whatever reason, Melisandre is his key adviser, so she must have pitched herself pretty well. But, that doesn’t mean he’s going to be bad for the company; I actually think he’ll do a better job than Robert, which is assuming that Melisandre’s ‘prophecy’ is true.”

Arya tore a piece of her bacon, and the put it in her mouth. “So, what’s your plan exactly? Find another one of Robert’s illegitimate children?”

“No,” her father shot down. “The plan is to have Gendry say nothing at all. IF Robert dies, Joffrey will inherit, which I will dispute. When the blood tests proves that Joffrey and Tommen aren’t Robert’s kids, I get control of the company, and then will hand it over to Stannis under a few conditions, including that he leave Gendry alone.” Ned then turned his head to Arya. “How do you think Gendry will feel about that?”

“He would love it,” she said before softly announcing, “There’s one more thing: Gendry and I are dating.”

Ned and Catelyn knew that Arya wasn’t telling them for their approval, but rather, to keep the airways of communication open. She told them that she was going to be open with them and it was clear that she meant it.

“We know,” Ned, said as Arya gave him a look of surprise. “As a parent, when you’ve been doing this for as long as we have, you notice things, especially the little things. Like when your daughter smiles for no reason and her eyes sparkle every time she thinks about nothing,” a smiled played on Ned’s lips, as he said nothing. He and Arya both knew that nothing was code name for Gendry when she didn’t want to tell people what she had been smiling about. “She’s more open and receptive than she’s ever been and how’s she always busy; or the swollen lips and secret smiles. Although we didn’t know that he was living in out guesthouse, the affect he has on you is the same as it was last year. I’m happy for you.”

Arya tightly hugged her father, and the hugged her mother.

“So, it’s serious,” he asked referring back to a past conversation where Arya said that she only introduced serious boyfriends.

“Yes,” she answered.

The wheels turned in Catelyn’s head as she did the math.
“You said that Gendry has been living there for a month and a half,” she stated. “How long have you two been together? I’m assuming that you two didn’t immediately get together.”

Arya smiled at the question. Without shame she said, “Two weeks.”

“Is it safe to say that there is no use in me cautioning you to take it slow?” Her mother sipped her coffee as she stared at her daughter.

“You’d just be wasting your breath,” Arya said. Most people spend their whole lives searching for something—anything that made sense; Arya found him when she was fifteen, but was too stupid to realize it and too young to do anything about it; she wasn’t anymore.

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A WEEK and A HALF LATER

Gendry gulped the rest of his beer and, as he tossed the bottle into the garbage can, Arya grabbed his hand to pull him towards the exit of the arena. The music becoming faint behind them the further they walked.

Out of habit, their fingers instantly threaded as they walked to the nearest door. Gendry doubted that Arya was aware of it, but it seemed as if she developed a handholding habit. Not the he minded; he loved touching Arya even if it was just holding her hand in a non sexual way, but he it seemed as if she was trying to prove something, such as not being embarrassed to be with him publicly. But, he suspected that it wasn’t all proving herself to him since they did hold hands at home as well.

They didn’t walk around holding hands at home as well, but when they talked or relaxed in one another’s presence, they would hold one another’s hands as a way of comfort and intimacy.

It was just something they did.

In public, their handholding felt different and less intimate, as if Arya was trying too hard to prove herself to him and that didn’t sit well with Gendry. He knew that they had been through some shit over the past few months, but he wanted to work past that. He didn’t think that they should forget, but he didn’t think that they should hold one another accountable for something they were to get past. He could see Arya was trying and he wasn’t holding her accounting for things that happened the year prior and, hopefully, she was doing the same. But, it seemed as if Arya thought she had to prove herself to him and he felt disappointed in himself that she even felt that way.

“Arya,” Gendry whispered in a low, but firm voice.

With a questioning glance, Arya raised her eyebrows and answered, “Yes.”

Gendry placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “You’re not on trial,” he stated. “You don’t have to prove anything.”

“What?” Arya stared at her boyfriend like he was crazy.

To clear up her confusion, Gendry raised their clasped hands. “You don’t have to prove anything to me. If you want to hold my hand, then hold it, but I know how you feel about me and I know that you aren’t embarrassed about me. I’m not going to hold the past against you.”

Arya softened at his words. “Thanks,” she mumbled. “I want the record to note that I was never embarrassed to be seen with you,” she began. “BUT, I am sorry if I ever made you feel that way or feel that you were some placeholder for someone else.
As they exited the arena they felt a soft, warm breeze. Just as they turned the corner, Arya pushed Gendry up against the wall and passionately kissed him. In between kisses she said, “If anything, all of the guys were placeholders for you.”

Gendry switched their positions, so that she was against the wall and leaned in for another kiss. Her fingers ran through his hair as he pulled Arya’s hips close to his own and their hips began to slightly grind. “Okay, now you’re just sucking up to me.”

Arya chuckled against his mouth, and then teasingly bit his bottom lip and pulling on it with her teeth. She let go and moved onto his jaw. “Maybe, but that doesn’t make what I said any less true.” She slipped her hands under his shirt.

“Doesn’t it,” he jokingly questioned.

She shook her head no. “It doesn’t,” she replied. “I love you,” she whispered without shame. Her voice and demeanor was vulnerable, but she wasn’t afraid.

It wasn’t her first time uttering the phrase, but it was her first time saying the words and giving herself to someone completely; they weren’t any restrictions or exceptions; she wasn’t only giving so much, she was giving him her all; she was bearing it all.

And she has been in love before with other men, but she wondered if it would have ever lasted if she didn’t end it when she did. They didn’t know all of her, only the bits and pieces that she allowed. And she wasn’t willing to give all of herself to the other men either.

Tenderness filled Gendry’s voice as he said, “I love you too.”

Their mouths rested near one another as they breathed each other’s air. Gendry lovingly squeezed her shoulders as Arya hands loosely gripped his waist.

“I know I seem confident and sure about a lot of things, but I’m not,” she whispered. “I’m just looking for something that makes sense and you do. I may doubt many things, but not this…not you. And I may—no, I will fuck up a lot, but I’m trying, okay?”

“Arya, I know,” Gendry reassured. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“No, I do,” she countered. “Because if I can’t voice these thoughts—my thoughts, it doesn’t seem real. I need you to know—I need you to hear my thoughts and how I feel because I don’t want there to be any assumptions. My cards are on the table and that makes me aware and accountable for my actions from the start.”

Gendry grabbed Arya’s face and pulled her into a deep kiss. Arya melted into his touch as her arms wrapped around his should and her body molded to fit his. Lips crushing together, tongues colliding, noses brushing, promises exchanged.

For a moment, they broke apart as Arya caught her breath.

“I told my parents about us,” she admitted. Gendry simply looked at her. “I know I should have discussed it with you first, but I was tired of keeping secrets from them, especially about you. Even though I’m not ashamed to be with you, it felt that way with you staying in the house and us dating, but they didn’t even know about it and your living on their property. You just felt like this dirty secret and I don’t want you to feel that way or even think that you feel that way because you’re neither and, although you used to be a secret, it was never dirty. Well, it was, but that was because of the whole age thing and us almost having sex, but not you personally.”
Gendry smiled at her. “Arya, I appreciate this outpour of honesty, but you don’t have to tell me everything at once. It’s fine if you take it one day at a time; I know what I signed up for.”

Arya blushed. “I know, but this is new for me, not relationships, of course, but being vulnerable and completely open without censor. And you are one of the most important people in my life and I don’t know what I’d do if I ever screwed this up again.”

“It’ll be different this time around,” he promised.

“How so?” Grey eyes met with black eyes.

Gendry rested his forehead against Arya’s. “Because it has to be.”

“So…changing subjects,” Arya stated. “That was a fucking great concert.”

“It was,” Gendry immediately agreed. He seemed to be surprised at how much he enjoyed himself. “You said that Mycah introduced you to this band.”

“Hot Pie actually,” Arya corrected as Gendry pulled her off of the wall and she looped her arm through his. Gendry seemed surprised at this revelation. “I know,” she agreed. “He was the one who heard a song or two from the band, and then introduced them to Mycah who had me listen to them.”

“Does it sound bad for me to say that I didn’t know that Hot Pie was into music like this,” Gendry asked.

“No,” Arya said. “Because he isn’t. Hot Pie had a thing for the band’s lead guitarist, which was the only reason why he listened to them to begin with. They came into his job a few weeks ago. He chatted with them for a bit before they suggested he look them up. Mycah said that Hot Pie told him he only did it because he had a thing for the girl.”

Gendry thought for a moment. “It’s the black girl, right?”

“Yeah,” Arya confirmed.

“She’s really pretty,” he stated.

“She is, isn’t she,” Arya looked at Gendry. “Do you think Hot Pie even has a chance?”

Her boyfriend shrugged. “You never know.”

~*~*~*~

TWO DAYS LATER

As if she was on time and everyone else was simply early, Arya strolled into the dining room.

“Look who finally decided to show up,” Robb playfully mocked. “We thought you’d got stuck in traffic on the way from your house.”

Without making any noises, Arya moved her mouth as if she was laughing. “That’s supposed to be funny, right, because I live in the backyard?” She gestured behind herself towards where she lived and, as she was about to speak, she heard Sansa’s daughter giggle.

“Le Fromagée, don’t laugh at your uncle Robb’s terrible jokes—it’ll only encourage him and his own kids have to endure his terrible humor as it is.”
Sansa and Robb both glared at Arya.

“My jokes aren’t terrible,” Robb said, offended by Arya’s statement. “My kids laugh all of the time.”

“Robb,” Arya gave her brother a sympathetic look. “They’re kids, they think everything is funny—that’s why dad’s jokes were funnier when we were kids and not so much now.”

“I’m funny,” Her father asserted.

“Of course you are, dad,” Arya said in a saccharine tone. “Of course you are.”

“Arya,” Sansa began. “Stop calling my daughter le fromagée. That’s not the correct way to say it and you know it.”

“Fine,” she replied. “Quétaine it is.”

“What is so hard about either calling her Catelyn or Hope?” Arya looked at her sister in confusion as if her suggestion was a foreign concept, “You’re insufferable, you know that, right?”

Arya shrugged, and then gave her parents a kiss before sitting at her place at the table.

“Hey, Arya,” Rickon called out.

“Yeah,” Arya said as she laid her napkin on her lap and moved her silverware so the maid could place her plate on the table. The maid sat the plate in front of her, and then poured her a glass of wine.

“Weren’t you friends with Shireen Baratheon?”

Curiously, Arya stared at her brother.

“Why,” she questioned as her fork hovered over the plate in indecision as to which food she should start with first. “You’ve never cared for any of my friends in the past, why do you care now?”

“So, you two are friends,” Rickon declared.

“Not exactly; Shireen was a nice girl, but we weren’t friends. I wouldn’t have minded being her friend, I mean, she was the only person who was nice to me when I attended high school in King’s Landing, which doesn’t say much considering, but before we could become friends, her mother took her out of school to home school her,” she explained. “Why are you asking?”

“Nothing,” he dismissed.

“Sure,” Arya said in an unbelieving tone.

Rickon groaned. “Why don’t you ever believe me?”

From beside Rickon, Bran snorted, and then stuffed his mouth with food.

“Because you’re always up to shit,” Arya shot back. “And no one just randomly asks about another person for no reason—there’s always a reason. If there wasn’t, you wouldn’t be asking to begin with.”

With suspicion, Sansa stared at her youngest brother. “Why didn’t you ask Bran? Doesn’t he do volunteer work with her?”
“Yeah,” Jon agreed. “And they studied together in college. Even if she and Bran aren’t friends, he’s likely to know way more about her than Arya.”

Bran grinned, and then looked at his brother. “So, I was righ—“

“Fine,” Rickon relented. “I like Shireen; I’m trying to ask her out. I can tell that she is interested in me, but she’s a little hesitant for whatever reason.” He then directed his gaze towards Arya. “I was asking if you two were friends to see if you could put in a good word for me.”

Robb spit out his drink, Sansa choked on her food, and Bran laughed under his breath. Their parents looked at one another. Arya raised an eyebrow; she was surprised, but not all that much. She wouldn’t have expected Shireen as someone Rickon would be interested in, but it made sense in an odd way.

“Even if I could put in a word,” Arya began. “She’s twenty-eight and you’re twenty-two.”

Rickon frowned. “And that means what, exactly? I’m not asking for your permission to date her. As I already said, I know that she is interested in me, so it’s not like she doesn’t like me or think I’m too young; I just wanted to find out more about her and, hopefully, have you sing my praises, but I guess that’s out of the question,” he spat as he held his hands up as if he had committed a crime. “I know I’m not the only one who notices the irony here: Arya lecturing me about age when I’m legal and she fucked a twenty-two year old man when she was fifteen.”

The room was silent as a few of the Stark kids snapped their heads to look at Jon, except Arya and Rickon. Ned and Catelyn saw that the situation was spiraling out of control and decided to intervene.

“Now, hold on, Rickon,” Ned began. “That is no way to talk to your sister.”

“What? By pointing out that she is a hypocrite?”

Arya looked to be mentally over the accusations about what she did as a youth. “For the last time, I did NOT have sex with Gendry.

In disbelief, Rickon snorted, “Sure, you didn’t.”

“Rickon, that is ENOUGH!” Catelyn shouted as she stood up. “I will not tolera—“

“Mom,” Arya interrupted, and then shook her head to say stop. “Let me handle this.”

Not a word was uttered as Arya and Rickon exchanged stares. Rickon seemed furious, but Arya was unaffected. In concentration, her left thumb rubbed the palm of her right hand. She knew that Rickon didn’t really believe that she had sex with Gendry; he wore his heart on his sleeve and would’ve said (or did) something sooner.

Her younger brother’s feelings for Shireen seemed to be more than like, but a little less than love. Rickon probably thought about the possibility of them actually getting together and dating and knew that people would be against them or believe he didn’t have a chance. Shireen was a nice woman and very sweet. Although she had insecurities due to her disease, she didn’t let that define her and was very active in the community, despite her mother sheltering her for most of her life. Rickon was bit of a wild child and was generally misunderstood even more so than Arya.

Rickon perceived her initial words as threat to his potential relationship with Shireen.

“Rick, I dealt with a lot of shit from dad, mom, and especially Jon, as EVERYONE in here knows, but you never said anything. You didn’t even seem bothered by the whole situation and now,
suddenly, you’re outraged by me sleeping with Gendry, which, again, I never did, despite my efforts,” she admitted. “You’re upset because you thought I was saying that the relationship would be inappropriate, but I’m not,” she denied. “I’m saying that she may feel uncomfortable about the age gap. Women tend to feel uncomfortable dating younger than dating older due to maturity levels and, more times than not, guys usually date younger women. Let’s not forget that you have a reputation that isn’t all fabrication. So, if there is anything you take away from this little talk it should be two things: one: I don’t know Shireen well enough to vouch for you and two: she has some very real drawbacks concerning dating you. The best thing you can do is lay your cards on the table and see what happens from there.”

The Starks moved on from the conversation and the rest of dinner went without a hitch. Sansa raved about her newborn daughter and Robb offered her some advice as well as Jon for his own impending fatherhood. It was clear how much Robb enjoyed being a father with how enthusiastically he spoke about his own kids and the trials and tribulations he went through when he first became a father. He spoke about all of the methods he tried, the books he read, and how things become second nature. He also explained that worrying is usual and how much a parent worries depends on the day and situation, but it’s always there.

Ned and Catelyn chimed in with their experience parenting and how every child is different and that one technique may work with one change, but does nothing for the other, despite being raised in the same household. They used Arya and Sansa as well as Bran and Rickon as examples.

Sansa gleefully devoured everything Robb and her parents told her. She had read tons of books herself, but there was nothing like hearing first hand experience to learn from. As soon as Robb started speaking, Sansa had pulled a pen and small notebook out of her purse and instantly jotted down what she heard. Every once and a while she would ask a question or clarification about a remark.

In amusement, Arya ate her food and watched the scene in front of her. Whether or not Sansa used the information that was being given to her, she knew her sister would be a good mother. It was impossible to see her as anything, but that. Now, for herself, Arya used to be on the fence, but every since Gendry came back into her life, she’s been thinking more and more about kids and what type of mother would be. But, one thing she knew for sure: she would need all the advice she could get whenever that happened.

Parenting seemed so natural for Robb and Sansa. Even with the late night feeding and constant state of tiredness, Sansa glowed. Hell, Robb seemed to thrive off of the challenges being a parent threw his way. He said that having kids was a big responsibility, but it had a lot of rewards as well, which was a sentiment that Sansa seemed to share even very early in her parenting career.

There were parts of parenting that was appealing to Arya, but at the same time, that was a huge investment and her time would never be her own anymore. Well, it’s not as if she had to make a definite decision on parenting at that very exact moment.

“Arya,” Sansa said.

“Yeah,” she responded.

“I’ve been trying to get your attention,” she laughed.

Arya moved her food around on her plate. “Oh. About what?”

A smile played on her older sister’s lips. “Kids—if you wanted any. You get along with Robb’s kids, but I’ve never heard your opinion either way.”
“Well, that’s because I never thought about it either way for a long time,” she admitted. “But, now, I’m leaning towards having some pups of my own.”

“Really,” Bran wore a puzzled expression. “I figured that you broke off your engagement with Aegon because of kids since no other reason made sense to me.”

Arya frowned at him. “No, the reason I ended it with him had nothing to do with kids,” she replied. “If I was flat out against them, I wouldn’t have dated him to begin with. It just wasn’t working for me, that is all it was.”

“And now,” Catelyn asked as a small smirk played on her lips.

“Are we talking about kids or Gendry,” Arya said after she sipped her wine.

Without hesitation, Catelyn said, “Both.”

A small chuckle escaped from Arya’s lips. “Am I that transparent?”

“Like your father said, as a parent, you notice things,” Catelyn shrugged.

Robb, Sansa, Rickon, and Bran stared turned their attention towards Jon for the second time that night. It was obvious that they were expecting him to explode at the mere mention of the man. He hadn’t reacted the first time, but they wondered if he would keep it in the second time around.

Jon held his hands up. “I made my peace with the man months ago, so you guys aren’t going to get a reaction out of me.” At the surprised expressions he said in response, “I deiced to make it right after Ygritte smacked some sense into, figuratively speaking.” It seemed as if Jon was over his grudge against Gendry and had moved on completely. He then directed his gaze toward Arya, “So, are you two together or is that in the works?”

“We’ve been together for about a month.

“And you’re just now telling me,” Jon said in faux rage. “I gave him to you in a bow

Arya grinned widely at his statement. “Well, you have to give me the proper amount of time to fully enjoy every aspect of my gift, which was very much appreciated.”

“I don’t know whether I should say you’re welcome or TMI,” Jon mumbled uncomfortably as he looked at his plate.

“Whichever is most fitting,” she stated. From the corner of Arya’s eyes, she could see she had some explaining to do to her older sister. Despite minor squabbles, after she and Sansa buried the their differences years ago, the two sisters spoke and confided in one another most of the time. “Sansa, I’ll explain everything after dinner.”

“Catie is sleepy, so you’ll have to do that explaining in my old room.” Sansa was staying a few days at their parents’ house for a visit.

In disbelief, Arya stared at her sister. “Catie? Are you serious?”

“Now, what is wrong with Catie?” Sansa crossed her arms in disbelief at Arya’s disbelief. “You didn’t like Catelyn or Hope as a name and now you have an issue with Catie.”

For support, Arya looked around the room. “Am I the only one here who sees the issue?”

“Oh, Sansa,” Rickon spoke up. “How exactly do you plan on spelling that? It would work if the
original name were spelled with a K and not a C. Most people would pronounce it as Catty.”

At Arya’s laughter, Sansa said, “Shut up, Arya.”

“Personally, I think Quétaine is preferable over Catty,” she supplied.

“Of course you do,” Sansa said as she bent down to pick up her daughter. “Come on CATE-TEE”

“Sansa,” Arya began. “Stop pronouncing your daughter’s name CATE-TEE. That’s not the correct way to say it and you know it.”

“Gods, why are you so insufferable.”

“I believe it’s one of my endearing traits,” Arya provided.

“OF course you do,” Sansa said. “I’ll be waiting for you upstairs.”

~*~*~*~

GENDRY

~*~*~*~

TWO WEEKS LATER

Gendry opened the door and let the direwolf walk through. He had taken Nymeria to get her check up because Arya had to go get a check up on her own. After asking a few questions and the veterinarian examining her briefly, Nymeria was ruled to be in perfect condition. Gendry took the direwolf to the dog park and bought her some treats as well for being so well behaved.

“Arya, we’re home,” Gendry greeted. He tossed his keys on the counter by the door, and then slipped off his shoes. “Nymeria was well behaved at the vets office, so I bought her some treats; I hope you don’t mind. And, it goes without saying, but she missed you a lot.”

He was greeted with silence.

Gendry knew that Arya was home and could hear him.

It was odd to him, but he went about his routine as usual. He made his way into the kitchen and pulled out an apple and a bottle of water. Eagerly, he bit into his apple as he looked at the mail on the counter.

“Arya,” Gendry said softly. Usually, he wouldn’t have paid any mind to her low voice, but her tone sounded…off.

“Yeah,” he replied. In concern, Gendry turned to face his girlfriend. What he saw shocked him: Arya’s eyes were red and she looked distraught. Her hair was messy and looked as if she had ran her fingers through it a couple of times.

As if protecting and comforting herself, Arya tightly crossed her arms over her chest, and then looked to the ground after giving Gendry brief eye contact.

“I’m pregnant,” she mumbled. His stomach dropped. Arya didn’t have to say the words, but he knew. He knew what her silence meant. For a while, Gendry stood still in shock. His mouth began to move, but the words didn’t come out. “Gendry,” Arya said and this time she looked at him. “I’m sorry.”

“Arya, I…” He didn’t know what to do, what to say, or how to feel. Arya went over to hug Gendry
and his arms gently wrapped around her small frame out of habit.

“I’m so sorry,” she repeated. “I didn’t plan for this to happen. I wasn’t thinking and now…I—I—I just don’t what to do.”

Unable to believe it, Gendry shook his head. ”Are you sure? I mean this could be a mistake. The baby could be mine, right,” he pleaded.

In shame, Arya stared at her hands as she harshly rubbed them together. It was always something wasn’t it? Didn’t she say to her parents not too long ago that most of her problems stemmed from her own actions? She was the one that was irresponsible and had unprotected sex. She was the one who forgot to get the morning after pill. That was all her. She couldn’t blame Gendry or even Francisco. He may have gotten her pregnant, but Arya shouldn’t depend on others to look out for her best interests. Sure, Francisco cared for her, but at the end of the day, she is responsible for herself and, at that moment in time, she wasn’t.

“No,” she tearfully whispered. “I’m too far along for it to be yours.”

Tears sprang from Gendry’s eyes as he quickly wiped his face.

“Gendry,” Arya whispered as she tried to touch his arm, but Gendry moved his arm out of the way.

“Please, don’t,” he mumbled. Arya paced back and forth as she switched between looking at him and the floor.

“I just…” he trailed off, struggling to find the words. “I just need time to clear my head.”

“Gendry, no,” Arya immediately said. He was not leaving her…not after they only just got together.

“No, no,” he quickly replied. “I’m not leaving you—well, I’m literally leaving, but I’m not breaking up with you,” he shot down. “I just need to go outside and clear my head, that’s all. I need to sort things out, okay?”

“Why can’t you just sort them here…with me?”

At Arya’s plea, Gendry’s heart broke. It was rare to see her vulnerable, to see her show herself in a way that wasn’t strong and in control.

“Right now, it just feels so suffocating and overwhelming, you know,” Gendry tried to explained. He held up his hands in front of him, and then balled them into fists out of frustration. “I just need space…to clear my head.”

“If you aren’t breaking up with me, then why do you need space,” she reasoned, and then added, “To clear your head.”

“Because I need to sort out how I feel about if without letting your feelings influence me.” Gendry looked at his girlfriend. “This is difficult for us both, but let me process this, Arya. Just give me some time to myself; I’m not asking for a few days just a few hours.”

Arya looked at Gendry as if she knew it was over. A wave of intense emotions consumed her and a hand covered her eyes as she began to cry. Gendry wrapped her in his arms and comforted Arya. Hot tears stained his shirt as Arya sobbed against his chest.

“I don’t know if I even want the baby, Gendry,” she admitted. “I just found out today and I don’t even know how to feel about it.”
After all of the crying that Arya did, she tired herself out and was sleepy. Gendry carried her up to bed and settled into bed with her.

The next morning Gendry woke up to find Arya snuggled comfortably on his chest, but her facial expression looked pained as she slept. Gently, Gendry lifted Arya off his body and settled her onto her side. He then carefully exited her room and crept downstairs and put on his shoes. As he exited the house, he made sure the door didn’t slam and took off running once he was a few feet from the house.

Gendry pushed and pushed until he couldn’t go any faster, he pushed and pushed until his body ached, he pushed and pushed until he didn’t know where he was going, and he pushed and pushed until he got his answers.

~*~*~*~
ARYA
~*~*~*~

Arya’s heart dropped when she woke up to find Gendry gone. Immediately, she called out his name, but he didn’t answer.

Did he leave her?

He said he didn’t, but maybe that was only to comfort her. No guy wanted to leave a girl while she was screaming and crying. It just got worse and made them look bad. But, Gendry just wasn’t any other guy that was why she loved him and that was why she was crying.

Rough hands brushed against a tired face as Arya tried to clear her head.

What next?

Food.

To take her mind off of the living thing growing inside of her (which would need to be fed as well), Arya cooked herself some breakfast. She took out some eggs, and then vegetables and cut them out to make an omelet. Two pieces of toasts was put into the over to make some toast and she poured herself some orange juice.

Shortly after the food was finished and, as Arya was eating, Gendry walked back into the kitchen.

Arya continued eating as she said, “I didn’t hear you come in.”

Gendry placed a kiss on the crown of her head, and then her neck. “I didn’t know if you were still asleep and I didn’t want to wake you.”

“So, did that run give you the clarity you needed.” Arya asked, as she played with her food.

Fingertips trialed along her back as Gendry grabbed a chair and sat it beside hers. He then picked up her fork and ate a forkful of her eggs before putting more food on the fork, and then bringing it to her mouth. “Open up.”

Arya opened and let Gendry feed her. As he did, he grabbed her toast with his other hand.

“I did a lot of thinking when I ran earlier today,” Gendry began. “Everything—all of out history ran through my head.”
“Like what?” Arya took a sip of her juice.

“Like when we first met and our first kiss,” Gendry smiled at the thought. “Or when we met again after all of those years apart. Swimming in the lake, late night smokes, pillow fights in my bed...Jon beating me up at the barbeque. When I thought of everything we’ve been through, I laughed.”

For a moment, Arya stared at him incredulously. “You laughed?”

Gendry smiled at her. “Yes, I laughed,” he repeated. “We’ve been through a lot of shit together, Arya. A lot. But, I love you and I know for a fact that I could NEVER, NEVER love another woman the way I love you. And I know that you love me—I know that you feel the same way. Sure, it sucks that you got pregnant by another man, but we weren’t together and it’s not like I didn’t fuck around. For all I know, I could’ve gotten Autumn pregnant,” he speculated. Gendry would’ve mentioned Melisandre, but he didn’t even want to risk speaking that into existence. “And what if she wanted to keep the baby, what then? That difference between that situation and this is that I would have a constant, physical reminder and you wouldn’t, but in both cases a child would’ve been created.”

“So, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I love you and I still want to be with you. I’m not going to leave you even though you’re carrying another man’s child. I know some people may see that as ridiculous and crazy, but I don’t care. I love and I’ve loved you for years. The only way this would be a deal breaker is if you cheated on me and you didn’t.” Gendry put the fork down and grabbed Arya’s hand in his own. He brought her hand up to his mouth and tenderly kissed it.

“Gendry, you don’t have to worry about Francisco,” Arya reassured.

“I know,” he replied. “I don’t know everything that is going through your head, Arya, but I’m serious when I say that I’ll stick by your side even if you have this baby. I don’t want you to get an abortion just to keep me or because you think it’ll make me happy; it won’t. Because later on, you might regret it or hate me for it and I don’t want that to happen. Whatever you decide, I want it to be because it was the best decision for you.”

Gendry then placed a kiss on her forehead before they continued eating breakfast.

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“Come again,” Francisco said in shock.

Arya inwardly groaned. “I said I’m pregnant.”

In disbelief Francisco pointed to himself. “With my kid?”

“Yes,” she basically shouted. “With your kid. If I weren’t, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now. And, don’t ask me if I’m sure because, again, if I weren’t, we would not be having this conversation. I’m very sure.”

“I’m, I’m lost for words.” Francisco sat on the park swing and sipped his coffee.

“How do you feel about it,” Arya inquired.

Francisco shrugged. “Does it matter,” he asked. “It was a one night stand and you’re with Gendry; keeping the kid is going to mess up shit with him. Besides, it’s your body not mine, why should it matter how I feel or what I think? I’m not carrying the kid.”
“I didn’t ask you that,” Arya stated. “How do you feel about being a father?”

“Does it even matter, Arya,” Francisco shouted. “If you want to know so bad, I feel fucking ecstatic about being a dad, but the last time I felt that way my ex-wife got the abortion. She said it would be too complicated for us to raise a child when we had just gotten divorced and she was trying to move on with her life. So, if you are going to abort the child anyways, just do it. Don’t go asking me how I feel about it because it’s not as if it’s important anyway.”

Arya sat on the park swing beside him.

“It is important,” she said in a low voice. Francisco gave her an unbelieving stare. “I want to be a mother; I’d been thinking about it these past couple of weeks before I found out that I was pregnant. Then, when the doctor told me that I was, I didn’t want to believe it. This was supposed to be Gendry’s baby.”

She turned and faced him.

“But, it’s mine instead,” he finished.

“Yeah, it’s yours instead,” she repeated. “But, I don’t want to get an abortion just because the baby doesn’t share Gendry’s DNA; he’s going to love me and the child regardless. And I do want to be a mother even though it wasn’t in my immediate plans. So, are you in or not?”

Francisco gave Arya an enormous grin.

“I’m in,” he confirmed, and then got up to hug Arya. “And I just want you to know that I wouldn’t do anything to interfere with you and Gendry’s relationship. I enjoy working with you and being your friend and I just want to raise our kid together.”

“That’s good to know, but neither Gendry or myself is worried about your interfering,” Arya remarked. “As you said, there’s Gendry and there’s everyone else and a kid is not going to change that.”

Chapter End Notes

Do you guys hate me? I know some people didn't want Arya to get pregnant, but that was apart of the story. :-(( Sorry. But, I promise you all, they are together--no more being separated or mad at one another (for long periods of times) and no triangle or relationship angst. Francisco is a none factor romantically (and he doesn't get in the way in any way).
"Arya wrapped her arms around Gendry and hugged him tightly as her head rested in the crook of his neck. Deeply, she inhaled his scent, which quickly filled her lungs and calmed the restlessness that festered inside of her. It made her believe they could achieve a resemblance of normalcy one day; it made her believe that everything would be just fine."

Mindlessly, Arya flipped through a book out of boredom. She put it back in the wrong place, and then picked up another book to occupy her interests.

“Arya,” Sansa called. “Arya.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “What?”

“Look, I know shopping isn’t your thing,” her sister began once she approached Arya. “But, this is your baby we’re shopping for.”

“I didn’t ask you to go shopping with me, you planned this,” Arya retorted.

“Either way, we still need to go shopping for my future niece,” Sansa proclaimed.

With nothing else better to do, Arya relented. She promised Sansa they could go baby shopping, despite generally being bored to death by shopping. Even though it was her child they were shopping for, it still didn’t make the experience enjoyable; she liked to get in and out rather than looking at every single item the store owned.

Finally, they got around to packing the cart with items they would buy, which included: a few outfits, baby formula, wipes, and diapers. Sansa said it was best to start early because you could never be too prepared.

Arya half listened as they placed their stuff on the counter to be rang up. As they were unloading the cart, Arya saw the baby registry scanner. Even though they could buy everything the baby would need, Sansa said that it was important for family and friends to feel included by buying gifts. Arya didn’t care for a baby shower, especially under the circumstances, but she allowed Sansa to plan one anyway. Perhaps, it’d be the only day people weren’t judging her.

“So, have you decided on any names,” Sansa inquired as the cashier checked them out and she loaded the bags back into the cart.

“Hélène,” Arya stated, and then tossed a pack of Starbursts on the line.

“That’s pretty,” the cashier said as she smiled at Arya. In response, Arya fake smiled back. She appreciated the complimented, but it wasn’t anything major that someone complimented her the name she choice for her daughter.
“Thanks,” she replied as she opened her candy.

“It is really pretty,” Sansa agreed. “What made you decide on that one?”

“Orphan Black,” she answered.

Sansa’s eyes widened in disbelief, “After that—that crazy one.”

“She’s not crazy,” Arya dismissed. “Just a bit troubled.”

“Crazy,” Sansa repeated.

“Because society made her that way,” Arya argued as they walked on the door. “Imagine if she grew up like the others. And, as you said, it’s a pretty name.”

“Whatever,” Sansa smiled.

After they loaded the car, Arya suggested that they get something to eat. Although she had a big breakfast and several small snacks, she was starving. Since Sansa understood pregnancy cravings, she decided against arguing with Arya about where they’d eat or getting upset when she kept changing her mind. Finally, she settled on a place and it was somewhere Sansa liked too.

“Can I start you ladies off with anything to drink,” the waitress asked.

“We’ll have two glasses of water,” Arya said. “One with fresh lemon.”

“Coming up shortly,” the woman replied before turning away.

Sansa’s phone beeped and she checked her notifications.

“Awww,” she cooed as her hand waved her face. Arya figured it was to hold back tears of joy—she suppressed her laughter. “Look.”

She showed her sister pictures of Hope and Willas; there were pictures of them together and by themselves. They were having a daddy/daughter day while Sansa went shopping with Arya.

There were pictures of Hope smiling, playing with toys, and looking inquisitive.

“She looks like you when you were a baby,” Arya said as she glanced at the pictures.

“She does, doesn’t she,” Sansa beamed.

Arya ran a hand through her hair. “Gods, I hope Hélène looks like me.”

The waitress sat their waters on the table and told them she’d give them some more time to look over the menu.

Sansa didn’t have to ask why, she knew why. It was already enough that Arya kept the baby, which serve as a constant reminder that the child wasn’t Gendry’s, but if the baby looked like Francisco, it may be too much for him to handle.

“Why did you keep her?” Arya raised an eyebrow, which Sansa understood the confusion. “Yes, I’m pro-life and I’m glad you kept the baby, but I know you’re…pro-abortion and—“

“Sansa, no one is pro-abortion, you mean pro-choice,” she corrected.
“Oh, I’m sorry,” Sansa turned red. “Yes, I know you’re pro-choice and that you’ve expressed abortion as an option for yourself in the past. I would’ve thought that you…”

It was clear that Sansa found difficulty in finishing her sentences. Hélène was growing in Arya’s stomach, and it almost felt criminal to put her and abortion in the same sentence.

“Are you ladies ready?” The waitress pulled out her notepad and pen.

Arya ordered her meal as she handed the waitress the menu. Sansa took a bit to order as she explained how she wanted her food prepared.

“That’ll be all,” she finished. “Thank you.”

For a moment, Arya rested her face in her hands before she spoke, “For a while, I’ve been thinking about death—about my own mortality,” she admitted. “It’d been floating in the back for the last few months.”

“Really? What brought that on?”

“Everything and nothing,” she vaguely offered. “It started when Francisco was shot; that was the first time that I seriously thought about death… All of our grandparents are dead, so it’s not like I had to experience one of them dying. Dad’s brother and sister died before we were born as well. Hell, Uncle Brandon’s death is the only reason we are alive. So, we didn’t have to experience death and, that’s a good thing, but at the same time, we—I’m so unprepared to deal with it. Not literally—I’m not preparing to die, but the concept, the reality was so unfathomable to me until Francisco. Even then, it didn’t feel real.”

“So, what made it feel real?” Sansa wasn’t used to seeing the introspective side of Arya.

“The story about Gendry’s ex killing herself and hearing about how her daughter Polly is dealing with it,” she explained. “It just got me thinking: death is so permanent. We can tell Death ‘not today’ all we want, but it only delays the inevitable. I’m not afraid of dying, I’m afraid of what comes after that: nothing, reincarnation, Heaven??? Although I don’t subscribe to any established religion, I believe that a higher power exists; I just can’t pretend to know what happens after I die.”

“Is Hélène a way of keeping you alive?”

Arya took a sip of her water. “Yeah,” she answered. “And I know it’s irrational because I’ll be dead either way, but I’d like to believe there’s more to life than this and, if there isn’t, then at least I get to live on in some way.”

“Whether or not it’s irrational, it’s perfectly natural; you’re not the only one who feels that way.”

Arya shrugged. “Even then, it doesn’t change anything, now does it? I’m still going to die one day.”

“So, why now? Why not wait and try with Gendry?”

“Who knows what’ll happen if I wait,” she supplied. “Maybe I get shot on the job like Francisco or get into some freak accident and can’t have kids, then what?”

“Oh, Arya,” Sansa grabbed Arya’s hands and squeezed tightly. “Does Gendry know about this…. or Francisco?”

“No,” Arya answered. “I just told Francisco that I’d been thinking about being a mother for a while, which is technically true. Gendry didn’t ask me why I kept the baby; he’s just been supportive.”
Arya shook her head and laughed. “Mom was right.”

Sansa stared at Arya in shock. It was rare when Arya gave their mother credit for something. “About what?”

“Years ago, she told me that what ifs will drive a person insane,” she explained. “And what ifs is the reason why I kept Hélène.”

Their food arrived shortly afterwards and the sisters changed the subject. Sansa discussed the art classes that she was apart of and opened her up to new experiences and people. Passion radiated out of Sansa as she went in depth about the various techniques she learned and what she took from each class. It started to go down a philosophical path once her sister began talking about what these classes taught her about herself and life.

Once Arya was done with her food, she ordered dessert to share with Sansa; a slice of hot Dutch apple pie with ice cream on top.

“This is so delicious,” Sansa gushed.

“I know,” Arya said with a mouthful of pie. “I’m ordering another slice.”

“Go for it; I’m full,” she said as she checked her watch. “Also, I have an errand to run. How about you order your pie to go as I pay the bill?”

Arya picked up her dessert while Sansa waited for Arya at the front after she paid her bill. As she approached her sister, Arya saw someone familiar walk up from behind Sansa.

“Ned,” Arya said as she looked at her ex-boyfriend.

“Arya.” Ned was equally surprised to see her. “How are you?”

Arya shrugged, “Okay.” She followed his gaze to her stomach. “…And pregnant.”

“Of the many thing I expected to see when I saw you again,” Ned began. “I was not expecting a baby.”

Arya shrugged. “Neither was I.”

Ned took in that Arya and Sansa were about to leave. “I’d invite you to sit and eat with me, but it looks as if you’re on your way out.”

“Actually, you could stay, Arya, I don’t need you to run errands with me; it won’t take long.”

“Okay,” Arya replied, and then turned to look at Ned. They shared an awkward smile.

Arya and Ned waited for a hostess to seat them as they held small talk. Shortly after Ned was seated, he immediately ordered his food and a beer.

“So, do we want to start off by addressing the elephant in the room or do we ease into that?” Ned sipped his water.

“I guess elephant is better than beached whale,” Arya shrugged. Ned rolled his eyes as a smile played on his lips. Nervously, Arya tore up a napkin as she spoke, “I’m sorry; I realize now that there were times where I was a very shitty friend and, hopefully, I can rectify that.”

“Apology accepted.” Ned forgave. Arya looked surprise. “Arya, we’re adults; there isn’t any need to
draw this out. I understand that you’re sorry and I don’t need you to beg for my forgiveness, but I am glad that you said it.” Ned played with the sugar packets for a moment. “Yes. You could’ve been a better friend, but I also let my feelings interfere with our friendship. Most importantly, I should’ve expressed how I felt about your treatment of me years ago.”

“The question is: would I’ve listened?”

Ned chuckled as he looked at his ex-girlfriend/best friend, “At least you would’ve known.”

“I guess,” she mumbled, and then rubbed temples. “So, how you’ve been?”

“Honestly, I think I prefer to hear that from you first,” Ned honestly admitted.

“Of course you do,” Arya said. Audibly, she exhaled before starting, “I…I’ve missed you. It took you lashing out at me that day at court for me to truly appreciate what a great friend you were—are. As a result of that fight, I lost custody of Hot Pie for a while and shared split custody with you for Mycah. As you can imagine, it was pretty tough being on the rocks with four of your closest friends.”

“Well, I was one of those friends,” he supplied. “But, I know what you mean.”

“So, Francisco became my substitute friend,” she continued.

Ned’s face lit up at the mention of the male police officer. “How is Francisco doing?”

“Last year he was shot, but he’s fine now. He was cleared and is back on duty.”

“Oh wow,” Ned gasped.

“I know, it was scary for everyone,” Arya added. “So since I wasn’t really talking to any of you, Francisco was like my new best friend; we spent a lot time together. It made me realize how much I took my friendships for granted.” Arya paused briefly, and then squeezed Ned’s hand at the thought. “And one night I slept with him; I don’t know why, but I did. I mean, on a basic level it can be explained, but upon further thought, it was really stupid in hindsight. The sex was fantastic, but so many things could’ve gone wrong between us. Umm…shortly after that, Gendry and I began working on us again…our friendship, and then we began dating.”

“That’s great,” Ned said enthusiastically. “I’m glad you two patched things up.”

“Then…. I found out that I was pregnant with Francisco’s child.”

“That’s not so great.”

“That is definitely the understatement of the year,” Arya quipped. “But, Gendry said that he’d support me either way and he has. It’s a weird and awkward situation, but we’re working through it.”

“It definitely sounds weird,” Ned agreed. “Even then, I think that if it’d been me, I would’ve stayed too. Initially, that is. But, then I would’ve gotten insecure and shit, and then left—then I would’ve felt like a crappy person, but highly emotional at the same time,” Ned, said nonchalantly.

Arya laughed out loud. Ned described himself perfectly and it was clear that he’d dealt with his former feelings. Perhaps not completely, but Arya didn’t sense any lingering feelings from him, which was a relief. She figured that the space he had imposed between them was a good thing, despite the emotional distress it caused.
“No,” Arya denied after she gave it some thought. “You would’ve gotten insecure and needed a
thousand reassurances from me, but you would’ve stayed. You love far too deeply to let anything
deter you from being with the person you want. You’re incredibly loyal and committed.” Arya
chuckled. “You would’ve married me just so the kid wouldn’t have been born out of wedlock.”

Ned gave her words some thought, and then nodded in agreement.

“What can I say? I’m a hopeless romantic,” he said.

“No, Ned,” she denied again. “You’re a hopeful one. I know I’d give you shit for being a romantic,
but I did appreciate it and I know the future Mrs. Edric Dayne will too.”

“That is if I find her,” he said in a self-deprecating manner.

“You will,” Arya assured. “Even though you love deeply, you’ve never been one to rush anything.
Finding her is just taking longer than you planned, but she’s out there.”

Ned raised an eyebrow. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Shut up.” Arya folded her arms, and then leaned into the seat.

“I’m serious,” he joked. “Arya Stark…telling me to be patient for Mrs. Right???”

“This is why I’m not nice to people,” she said as a smile played on her lips.

“I missed you too.” Ned slid out of his seat, and then walked over to her side. He held out his arms.
“Bring it in.”

Arya complied with Ned’s orders and was pulled into a bear hug.

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Gendry jumped at the keys clanging on the table.

“Gods, Arya, where did you come from?”

“I’ve been calling your name every since I entered the door,” she replied as she stared at him with
concern. There were legal papers in front of him, which he placed back into the envelope. Based on
his reaction, Arya concluded that he wasn’t trying to hide them from her, but didn’t want to address
the issue with her.

“How was your day?” Gendry kicked a chair out for her to sit in.

“And who says that chivalry is dead,” she mocked as she sat down. “I think the better question is:
how was YOUR day?”

“Just humor me, okay?” Gendry sighed before rested his chin on one of his hands.

In exhaustion, Arya mimicked her boyfriend’s actions and thought over her answer.

“Well, Sansa and I went baby shopping and added gifts to the registry, we ate lunch, and then
bumped into Ned as we were leaving, so I stayed and talked to him. Then, I just hung out with Sansa
for the rest of the day,” she said.

“You bumped into Ned?” Gendry looked surprised and eager to hear about what happened. “How
did that go?”
“It went okay. I apologized and he forgave me—it’s all water under the bridge,” she shrugged.

“It went okay,” Gendry asked in disbelief. “You and Ned are talking again—that’s great.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t great—“

“Whatever,” he brushed off as he grinned at Arya’s announcement. “I’m happy for you.” Gendry pulled Arya into a hug and kissed the top of her head.

With a firm hand, Arya grabbed Gendry’s chin and directed his face towards hers; she placed a gentle kiss on his mouth. Out of habit, Gendry returned the kiss, and then pulled her closer.

“What’s going on,” she mumbled into his chest. Gendry knew that she was referring to the papers.

Gendry leaned against the table and had Arya stand between his legs. He brushed a few strands of hair behind her ear, and then traced a finger along her jawline.

“Ruby’s dad is dying,” he stated. “Terminal cancer…it could be any day now.”

Arya ran a hand through her hair. “Oh my Gods,” she gasp as she processed the information.

“What’s—what’s going to happen to Polly?”

“He wants to leave me custody of her,” Gendry stated, and then handed her the envelope. “He said besides himself, Polly doesn’t have any other family. She’ll go into the system,” he explained. “A Flea Bottom kid in foster care—it’s a fucking joke. Nice families don’t pick kids from that part of the town; those kids get stuck in the system and end up corrupted in some way. It’s rare to come out unscathed.” In despair, Gendry looked at the floor. “Ruby’s friends were considered as well, but he feels that she has a chance for a better life with me.”

“Why? Because you’re dating a woman with money?” Gendry frowned, and then scratched his goatee. He grabbed her hand and held it with both of his hands.

“No,” he answered. “Hot Pie and I were the success stories of Flea Bottom because we got out; we made something of ourselves and that’s what Ruby’s dad wants for Polly. Hell, if he were after money it wouldn’t be yours. He knows I have a girlfriend, but not who it is. Not only that, depending on what Ruby may have told him, he’d know that I’ve come into some cash. His decision may have been influenced by money he may believe I have, but I think he really just wants Polly to have an opportunity to make something of herself.”

In embarrassment, Arya’s cheeks turned red. Although it was understandable for her to reach the conclusion that she did, the fact that it had nothing to do with her was humbling. Ruby’s dad was just someone trying to secure a better life for his granddaughter before he passed.

Arya opened the envelope in her hands and skimmed through the document.

“You want to adopt her,” Arya asked as she flipped to the second document.

“I—I don’t know,” Gendry admitted. “Polly is a great kid and if me being her guardian makes things better for her, I’m all for it.”

“But, you’re unsure how I’d feel about it,” Arya provided.

“Yeah,” Gendry said. “We’re already dealing with…” he gestured to Arya’s stomach. “And now to add another kid to it and that’s not including all the shit she’s been through. That’s a lot to handle.”
Gentle hands cupped Gendry’s face as Arya looked into his eyes. Gendry was usually said what was on his mind, but his eyes gave the whole truth and nothing but the truth. They didn’t censor and weren’t selective about what they chose to divulge.

“But, you want to adopt her,” she started.

Gendry nodded, “Yeah, I do.” He pulled her close and rested his head on her chest as he mumbled, “I don’t want you to feel you have to agree just because I chose to stay; that’s totally separate from this.”

“I know.” Arya ran her fingers through Gendry’s hair, and then stepped back. “But, it’s something you need to do.” At Gendry’s confused expression, Arya elaborated, "Gendry, one of the reasons you stayed at Wholistic Core, besides the idea of having a family, was that you wanted to make a difference for the kids that came from Flea Bottom. You wanted to show them that they could become more than their environment. Also, you know what it’s like to lose a parent at a young age and not have any family—you could really make a huge difference in Polly’s life,” she explained. “I know you know that, but I want you to know that I don’t need any convincing.”

Harshly, Gendry rubbed his face, and then deeply exhaled. “This is crazy.”

“What?” Arya went to the fridge and got herself a bottle of water.

“You’re carrying your co-worker’s baby as the result of a one night stand and I’m adopting my ex-girlfriend’s kid,” he chuckled at the far-fetched, but current reality. It was utterly ridiculous, but it was life for them. “And we’ve only been together a few months.”

Arya took a big gulp of water and smiled at Gendry’s infectious laughter. The situation wasn’t literally funny, but she got it. They’ve been through a lot in such a short time when it would destroy most people or they’d walk away.

“No,” she refuted. “We’ve been together for years.”

With that, Arya left Gendry with his thoughts.

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THREE MONTHS LATER

A piercing scream echoed through the air.

Gendry tiredly groaned. He rolled over and faced Arya. Despite her eyes being shut and not moving, he knew she was awake.

“I’ll be back shortly,” he said, and then kissed Arya on her neck.

Gendry knew that Polly had a hard time sleeping and occasionally had nightmares, but every since she had come to stay with them a few weeks back, she hasn’t had a full nights rest. She either cried or tried to come in their room. To calm her down, Gendry would make soothing noises and rub Polly on her back or hug her. He’d then read stories in funny voices or they played with her toys. Most of the time, it calmed her down and eventually Gendry would get her to go to sleep. On the few occasions it didn’t, he slept in the room on the floor next to the bed and, on even more rare occasions, he brought Polly to their room.

Tonight was one of those nights.
Despite her nightmares, once calmed down, Polly usually fared well after fell back asleep. But, when it took longer than usual to calm her, he let Polly sleep in the bed with him and Arya. Although Polly didn’t know what to make of Arya, the older woman’s presence, in addition to Gendry’s helped her fall asleep. Arya, on her part, took the situation in stride. Considering Polly’s situation, Arya refused to make a fuss about how Gendry handled the sleeping arrangements. Gendry knew that she disliked it when he didn’t sleep in the bed with her, but she also understood that Polly’s emotional safety and security was important. Gendry signed a contract stating that he’d accept parental responsibilities for the young girl and that was what he was doing.

Every since Polly moved in with them, she’d stay close to Gendry. Gendry explained that he behavior was a result of her mother’s death, which Polly used to be a very extroverted child and became an introvert. Polly was always by his side or asking him to read and/or play with her, but she only spoke to Arya when necessary. Arya didn’t take it personally; she needed some time before she could feel truly comfortable around the young girl. It had nothing to do with the circumstances that led to Polly living with them, but the fact that the only little kids she felt comfortable around were her own nieces and nephews. Other than that, she tended to stay away from kids. Not to say that she didn’t make an effort, but rather, she needed to be eased into a relationship with the girl herself.

Arya felt Polly being laid next to her as she herself tried to fall back asleep. She heard heaving breathing and reassurances from Gendry to Polly. After that, she was dead to the world.

With a thump, Gendry sat a glass of water on Arya’s nightstand. When Arya’s eyes opened, she saw the concerned that colored Gendry’s face.

“Are you sick,” he asked as he handed her prenatal pills.

“You know that I don’t have morning sickness anymore,” she answered as she propped herself up on her elbow, and then tossed the pills in her mouth.

Arya looked to her side and saw that Polly wasn’t there. She figured that Gendry took her back to her room.

“I know,” Gendry said before gesturing for her to scoot over so he could sit on the bed. He then grabbed the glass of water and handed to her. “I mean have you come down with something?”

“No,” Arya responded before drinking her water to wash down the pills. “Why? Do I look sick?”

Gendry turned his head to get a better look at Arya. He put two fingertips under her chin and lifted her face up, down, and side-to-side to examine her. A hand was then placed on her forehead to check her temperature.

“Say ah,” he joked as he tried to look into her mouth. Arya opened her mouth and did as told before laughing into his chest.

“Am I sick, Dr. Waters,” she mumbled into his chest.

Gendry smiled at her, and then placed a kiss on her forehead. “Nah, you look and feel fine to me,” he stated. “I just figured that you had to be sick because you only longue around in your bed on your off days.”

A tired sigh fell from Arya’s lips. “You knew I was awake the whole time?”

“Yeah,” Gendry said as he shook his head. “If I thought you had overslept, I would’ve woke you up. I assumed that you were abnormally tired because of last night, but you still didn’t get up, so then I thought that you must be sick. And now that I’ve examined you, it seems as if you just don’t want to
“I don’t,” she admitted.

“Why not?”

Arya looked at her hands, and then to Gendry. “I’m tired.” At Gendry’s confused expression, she clarified, “Not physically, emotionally...mentally.”


“Work,” she groaned. “Society—fucking everything.” Arya tried to scoot off of the bed and Gendry stood up, and then reached out both of his hands to pull her up. Back and forth, Arya paced before harshly rubbing her face in frustration.

“I’m tired of my identity--my sexuality being used against me as if it’s something inherently bad or just in general. I’m tired of the idea of being a female is seen as disadvantage or something to be coddled. I’m tired of dealing with this shit and the fact that I’ve been dealing with this shit my whole entire life,” Arya passionately fumed. “Me being pregnant is just an excuse for these fucking jackasses to display their sexist beliefs. Granted, law enforcement was already a sexist environment, but I could deal—I could swallow it because I knew how to ignore it or I’d go toe to toe with the ‘big boys’. But, now... I can’t do shit. My hormones are all out of whack. One moment I’m ready to rip someone’s throat out and the next I want to break down and cry. And I can’t do either—it just makes me look weak; as if I am controlled by my emotions.”

Overall, Gendry knew Arya’s feelings and beliefs about her place in society as a woman, which was usually expressed through her opinions about specific situations or her briefly venting, but he had never seen her so bothered by the crap she had to put up with as a woman, especially in the police force.

“Did someone say something to you,” Gendry said with an edge in his voice.

“Please,” she scoffed. “They don’t have the balls, but I have ears. I know the shit they say about me: I’m easy, I’m a slut, I’m trying to sleep my way up the latter, which is funny because I’d bet that some of the higher ranked officers had to sleep with someone to get where they are. I’m a better cop than most of those above me and I’ve no interest in rising in the ranks. And this was after they found out I slept with Francisco. They weren’t saying shit before then,” she spat. “Now that I’m showing, I’m being asked if I’m going to quit the force and be a stay at home mom.”

Gendry’s eyes widened at that remark.

“Oh, but it gets worse,” Arya said as she read his expression. “When I told them no, they implied that I’d be a terrible mother by staying. Or—or, what if I get shot and injured, or worse, killed? Then, my kid would lose a mother. As true at that may be, they don’t seem to give a damn about if a kid loses a father. I asked them if they have the same concerns about Francisco and I either hear crickets or how it is different.” Arya ticked the points off on her hand, “We’re both cops, we both have the same likelihood of get shot, injured, and/or killed, and we both will be parents. Is it different because he’s a male and I’m a female—is it different because I’m carrying the child? I may be carrying the child, but that doesn’t make me the “more” important parent if something were to happen to me.”

Attentively, Gendry listened to her as his anger brewed beneath the surface. He couldn’t imagine the shit she had to put up with at work or how she did it for that matter. He knew that her words paled in comparison to actual events and that upset him them most; Arya put up with a lot of shit to do the job
that she loved.

“One would think that all the negative bullshit I have to put up with would come from you—my boyfriend,” Arya pointed out. “You know, the guy whose girlfriend is knocked up with another man’s baby, but no, it’s from my job. And from co-workers who are supposed to be my so-called family due to all the things we go through together. I’m slut shamed and my abilities as a parent is questioned, where as Francisco’s given a slap on his ass for fucking me, and no one blinks an eye at his dangerous job. Or, how I can’t do my job properly because almost everyone there treats me like I’m fragile and could break at any moment. I’m not even in the field, for Gods sake, I’m doing deskwork, research, questionings, and interrogation—that’s it. Not chasing perps, arresting, and tackling people…I love being a cop, I really do, but I’m tired. I can’t do this.”

In confusion, Gendry stared at Arya and tried to work out what she was saying.

“Can’t do what?” Gendry sat on the bed and patted a space next to him. ”You want to call in sick and just take a few days for yourself?”

Involuntarily, Arya sighed and sat next Gendry.

“No,” she answered. “I’m taking an early maternity leave.” She gestured for Gendry to hand her the glass of water. “I can’t be in the field, and almost everyone at work treats me like glass…if they aren’t whispering shit about me. I just—“

“Arya, you don’t have to explain or justify yourself,” Gendry stated as he looked at the floor then to his girlfriend. “You’ve put up with enough shit as it is; I can’t blame you for wanting to take your leave earlier than planned.”

All at once, Arya was overwhelmed by conflicting emotions: gratitude, grief, joy, elation, confidence, and insecurity were the few that she could put names to. The ambivalent feelings she was experiencing had nothing to do with Gendry himself, but rather, how her actions affected Gendry and the position she put him and their relationship in due to keeping the baby.

Even if Gendry had an issue with her keeping the child, which she believed despite the fact he never gave any concrete indications, he had been incredibly supportive and understanding as he could be given the situation. Whenever Arya had puked her guts out before the morning sickness phase had passed, Gendry was by her side holding her hair back. After she was done emptying her stomach, he’d have crackers ready for her with a glass of water. On a few occasions, he attended doctor’s visits with her and Francisco and offered to go to Lamaze classes when she hit the third trimester. There were several baby books about what to expect when you’re expecting that had sections highlighted with notes in the margins. Occasionally, Arya would see Gendry researching the safety of baby products.

It was all of those moments and more that Arya was extremely grateful to have Gendry in her life.

Then, there were moments when she tried to imagine the shit he went through due to her decision to keep the baby. A time or two she has overheard Gendry being ridiculed because he stuck by her side. There were remarks about his manhood or him only staying because of her money and even speculation that he may be shooting blanks. As usual, there were people who told him flat out that they believed that Arya was going to leave him for Francisco and others who had the nerve to tell him that he was interfering with the family structure by staying with her.

Arya knew that people were saying shit to Gendry to make him doubt her and their relationship and not once did he lash out at her or use her pregnancy against her.
As much as Arya appreciated that, it distressed her as well. It wasn’t fair to Gendry. Those people were flat out wrong for what they were saying to him and, despite Gendry deciding to stay, Arya felt at fault for the ridicule that he experienced.

“I’m sorry.” A large, warm calloused hand rested between small, cold hands.

“What for?”

“Not thinking this pregnancy thing out,” she replied.

A pensive expression appeared on Gendry’s face as he bit his lip. “Don’t be.”

“Gendry,” Arya began.

“No, Arya—“

“Arya—“

“Gendry!” Arya stood up again. “Let me finish, okay?” She took a deep breath, and then sipped her water. “Yeah, I wanted to have a kid, but that’s not why I kept the baby. I—I was thinking about how short life is and that I could die at any moment. That I didn’t know what came next and all of what ifs just bombarded my thoughts so I kept Hélène as a way of staying alive—a piece of that will live even after I die. I wanted so badly for my decision to keep her to be about wanting to have kids, but that wasn’t true. Although I want them, fear is what drove my decision. But, I didn’t think about you and us; that was selfish of me,” she admitted. “And I’m sorry for that. I’m sorry for all the shit you put up because you stayed. It may not compare to what I put up with, but that doesn’t make you experience less valid. I love you and words cannot explain how grateful I am to have you in my life, but it also makes me feel uneasy that you have to hear hurtful shit due to my decisions.”

“You know, when you first told me you were pregnant, I—I didn’t know how to feel…I didn’t know where I’d fit in with the baby if you kept it,” Gendry confessed as looked past Arya. “We hadn’t been together that long and it wasn’t complicated anymore; everything was laid out and we knew our places in one another’s life. Then it became complicated again.” He looked at her, and then took a deep breath. “So, the next day I decided that I was going to run until I found my answer and I did. By the end of that run the only thing I knew for sure was that I didn’t want to be with anyone else, but you; I was serious when I said that I would’ve stayed either way.”

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“Yes,” he answered. “People see it as the easier choice, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s the right choice for me.” Gendry patted the spot on the bed next to him again. He waited until Arya sat before he continued. “I’m not with you out of obligation, and no one would’ve blamed me for leaving; it was taken as a given. There are moments where this situation is difficult for me. There are moments where I’m anxious, upset, and angry, but overall, the times you make me happy far outweigh any of those feelings. And I can live with that. Perhaps I shouldn’t have to, but you’re my family and you’re my home. But, don’t take that as me saying that I can’t live without you; I can live without you, I just don’t want to.”

Arya wrapped her arms around Gendry and hugged him tightly as her head rested in the crook of his neck. Deeply, she inhaled his scent, which quickly filled her lungs and calmed the restlessness that festered inside of her. It made her believe they could achieve a resemblance of normalcy one day; it made her believe that everything would be just fine.

Truth be told, there were times where Arya did self sabotage her relationships. Gendry had been direct about what he wanted from her and she held him at arms length. Now she realized that it
wasn’t all about protecting him due to their secret; that was only part of it. In her mind, something was going to go wrong, so why get heavily invested? Why would she set herself up in such a way only to become heartbroken? So, she controlled him and their relationship. She allowed herself to have him, but not completely. And everything she feared happened, but it was due to her actions and not some written in the stars outcome.

The self-sabotage hadn’t been intentional, but that didn’t take away the self-inflicted wounds she gave herself. It didn’t make her hurt any less. Actually, it hurt her more because she hadn’t realized what she had been doing. She hadn’t known.

But, now she does.

Love is about sacrifice; understanding; forgiveness. It was about give and take. And Arya refused to love in that way, which is why Gendry left.

When he left her the first time, it was because he needed to or he would’ve gone to jail. The second time he left, it was because Arya was selfish and she was only thinking about herself. When he had the opportunity to leave the third time because she was pregnant by another man, he stayed.

Why?

Well, Arya didn’t know completely besides what he had explained to her, but she figured it was also due to her being open and honest with him. Gendry knew that she was committed to them and that may not be the only thing he needed from her, but it was still an important thing.

“Gendry, I don’t want you to feel like you have to play daddy,” Arya stated, as she laid her head on his shoulder.

“I don’t,” he replied. “Hélène has a father, but her and I are always going to share the same space and I don’t mean just literally. I can’t exist in your life in any capacity without having a relationship with her. Me and the baby will have to some sort of relationship and it may not be daddy, but it will be some sort of guardian or authority figure. I’ll have to watch her one-day when you’re at work or have plans. We’ll eventually do something together doesn’t you.”

Gendry didn’t stay with her because he thought he would die without her, he stayed because he wanted to be apart of her life

Although, some personality traits of Gendry’s had changed from when she first met him, but the core part of him, the essential part, stayed the same. Gendry knew how to listen, be understanding, and be supportive.

An overwhelming sense of gratitude enveloped Arya.

“Thank you.” Out of habit, she grabbed Gendry’s hand as a source of comfort.

“For what?”

As Arya cradled Gendry’s calloused hand in her lap, she thought her answer over.

“For being there,” she began. “For being supportive and not making our relationship or my pregnancy any more difficult than it already is.

Gendry tenderly kissed her hand.

He whispered in her ear, “You’re welcome.”
Gendry left Arya to her own devices as he got Polly ready for daycare, and then fed her breakfast. To occupy Polly’s time, he gave her a coloring book and had Arya watch her, as he got dressed.

As he gathered the rest of Polly’s things, he gave the young girl her jacket to put on. Arya was focused on laptop as she simultaneously wrote and highlighted notes on a pad.

“What are you working hard on?” Gendry asked as he handed Polly her book bag and put on his own jacket.

“Research,” she offered vaguely. “I’m narrow down our house hunting list.”

“Really,” he said interested. “How many?”

“Four,” she stated. “All of the places are in Winterfell. You’ve seen them.” Arya gestured for him come to her. “See?”

“Oh yeah,” Gendry said in recognition. “I like all of them.”

Arya looked at him. “That’s very helpful, Gendry; I’ll call the realtor now and tell her I’m buying all four.”

“Great!” Gendry kissed Arya on the forehead. “Come on, munchkin.” Polly grabbed his hand and shyly waved bye to Arya.

Arya smiled back as she waved her fingers.

Immediately, Arya got back to her research.

To be honest, Arya never thought about finding a place of her own until recently. Complacency had rooted itself in her life after she broke her engagement with Aegon. Arya was content with the way things were: separating her family with the time she spent with Gendry, living in her parents guesthouse, and the often one-sided relationships with friends and family.

There was a restlessness that lingered in Arya for the longest until she had a hard look at herself. She wasn’t allowing herself to feel complete attachments, full emotions, or true personal growth. Now, that Arya had opened herself to these experiences the restlessness abated.

Arya found herself wanting to finally leave the nest once and for all, which starting with finding a new place to live. She and Gendry were taking care of one kid and another was one the way, they couldn’t continue to live in the guesthouse. Although it was big enough, she needed to build a life of her own.

~*~*~*~*~

A WEEK LATER

A firm thumb pressed against the metal grinders and ignited the lighter. Gendry lowered his head and lit his cigarette. Deeply, he inhaled the smoke, and then blew out his nose.

Gendry turned his heard once he heard the door open only to see Francisco exit the house.

“Hey,” he greeted.

In response, Gendry nodded his head, and then took another puff of his cigarette. He wasn’t in the mood to converse with Francisco. Actually, he was never in the mood to converse with Hélène’s father.
“Can I have a smoke?” Francisco gave a tight-lipped smile as he stood beside Gendry. Without saying a word, Gendry pulled a cigarette halfway out of the pack and offered it to the man.

Without hesitation, he took the cigarette and put it in his mouth. Gendry tosses his lighter to Francisco. After the police officer took a couple of drags, he turned to Gendry.

“You don’t like me, do you,” Francisco asked as he exhaled.

Gendry flicked his cigarette and thought about the statement.

“I don’t like many people,” he mumbled. “It’s nothing personal.”

“It feels a little personal,” Francisco countered.

Although Gendry knew it was unfair to have ill feelings towards Francisco, he couldn’t help himself. He needed someone as a scapegoat to direct his negative emotions towards. Gendry didn’t mistreat Francisco; he simply ignored him and refused to establish some form of relationship with the man. To be honest, it was really counterproductive in the grand scheme of things, but his irrationality phase would pass. At the same time, he needed to behave better so Francisco wouldn’t sour towards Gendry once he decided to be mature.

“Fine,” Gendry admitted. “It’s personal. I just…I know it’s not logical, okay? But, it helps me work through…” Gendry searched for a word. “This.”

“We all have our illogical ways of working through issues,” Francisco offered. “But, I get it. It’d be one thing if I was some random one-night stand—it’d still be tough, but manageable. Since I’m around and you don’t know me that well, you’re unsure of my motives and that makes you feel uneasy. And it’s hard to take me out of the picture because I work with Arya—emotionally, you’re stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

“Let me guess: you minored in psychology in college.”

A chuckle escaped Francisco’s mouth. Reluctantly, he nodded. “Yes…I did.” A moment of silence passed between the two as the men took long drags of their cigarettes. “I don’t know how comforting this sounds, but even if I were trying to make a move on Arya, I don’t have a shot in hell. The morning after we had sex, I’d seen the panic in her eyes. She thought that I wanted a relationship or something and she didn’t want to deal with that. As soon as I cleared up that it wasn’t like that, the weight immediately lifted off of her shoulders. From that moment until now, I’ve never had any indication that feeling has changed. I was interested in Arya, but not that much and even if I were, I don’t pursue lost causes. And Arya is definitely one.”

Although Gendry didn’t doubt Arya’s loyalty and commitment to him, it did bring him some comfort to heat that. Perhaps it was due to hearing it from Francisco’s mouth that not only was he not pursuing her, but that there wasn’t a mistaken belief that there was a chance to begin with.

“Well—“

“Gendry,” Polly quietly interrupted. “Ms. Arya wants to see you.”

“Okay,” Gendry replied. “Tell her I’ll be there shortly.” The cigarette was thrown to the ground, and then smashed. Polly waited as Gendry put out his cigarette. He gave a half wave to Francisco, and then grabbed Polly’s hand to go find Arya.

As soon as Arya spotted him, she waved him over.
“We’re going to open the gifts shortly,” she announced as she grabbed Gendry’s hand to help balance herself as she lowered herself into her seat. Polly stood quietly to the side.

“You want me to get Francisco?” Arya raised an eyebrow. Although Gendry had never explicitly stated his feelings about Hélène’s father, she’d picked up on his behavior. “We had a little chat over cigarettes,” he said as way of explanation. “And this is his kid’s shower as well.”

“I already texted him,” she provided. “And, no offense to him, but I can’t get through this part of the baby shower without you.” Gendry grinned.

Of course Arya hated the gift-opening portion of baby showers, people cooing over baby clothes and products and telling more advice than necessary. It would’ve been bearable with alcohol, but considering her status, that was out of the question. Gendry made everything tolerable.

After the baby shower was over, Gendry packed the gifts into the car as Arya said her goodbyes to the guests. Once she finished, they went home and put the presents in one of the guest rooms. Arya was tired and didn’t feel like putting the items away. Gendry reheated leftovers and made plates for her and Polly.

“What’s wrong?” Gendry asked as he stuffed his mouth with food.

“Hmm.” Arya seemed lost in her thoughts. “I don’t know…it just all seems so surreal. I’m going to be a mother,” she said in disbelief. “I guess it always seemed like a concept and not a reality, you know, but with the baby shower and the due date approaching, the idea of being a mom is terrifying.”

“The fact that you’re worried is a good thing,” Gendry reasoned. “Not to say that if you aren’t, it’s a bad thing, but it shows that you’re concerned about being a good mum and so you’ll try harder to prevent from failing Hélène.” Arya’s fork stopped abruptly near her mouth as she looked at Gendry in disbelief. “What? You know I’ve been reading a lot of baby books.”

A faint smile appeared on her face. “It shows.”

They changed the topic to baby shower earlier that day. Overall, Arya enjoyed moments of the shower, but being the focus of attention made her uncomfortable. It was different around close friends and family, but a huge group of people beyond that was a bit unsettling.

Abruptly, Arya said, “I feel like everyone is judging me”

“What, for keeping the baby?” Gendry put his fork down and gave her his full attention.

“No, for not being who they wanted me to be,” she explained. “Like Sansa. The ideal Westeros woman: great wife, even better mother. She dresses the part, she looks the part, and she acts the part. Then, there’s me. The complete opposite.”

“Do you want to be the ideal Westeros woman?” Gendry looked at Polly to make sure she was eating. In addition to nightmares and reclusive social behavior, Polly also wasn’t eating much when she moved in with them. Gendry has asked around for the best child psychologists and met up with a few before settling on one.

The psychologist he had found came highly recommended and Gendry understood why. Although she still had nightmares and was withdrawn, he could see improvements with the young girl. Polly also had a begun eating more as a result as well.

“Of course not,” she spat. “I live my life the way I want, it’s just that if I were I’d know how to raise
a girl. I wasn’t much of one myself—how can I teach Hélène how to be one? I’m going to fuck up her life before she even has a chance to live it.”

Gendry scooted his chair away from the table, and then grabbed Arya’s chair by the side and pulled it towards himself. He leaned forward and looked her in the eyes.

“If you refuse to be confined and defined to and by gender roles, why would that be an option for your daughter?” Gendry placed his hands on her stomach and his heart started beating faster. “Like you said, you live your life the way you want, so why can’t she? By raising her with the ideas you believed growing up, you give her the chance to live her life the way she wants.”

A succession of emotions bombarded Arya as she harshly rubbed her eyes. “I know, I just—it’s one thing being responsible for only yourself, you know? That’s the only person you have to answer to. But, raising and shaping another person? I…I—just don’t want to mess her up. I don’t want her to feel like an outcast like I did growing.”

Tears slowly fell from Arya’s eyes.

“It was hard, Gendry,” she admitted. “It was hard being the girl who didn’t act like a girl. I love the person I am now, but I don’t ever want her to feel like she doesn’t belong or that she’ll never belong. I felt that way for a long time.”

Strong arms enveloped Arya as she cried into his chest.

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FIVE MONTHS LATER

It felt weird coming home to a new place after living in her parents guest house for so long. She and Gendry moved into the place a week after she gave birth. They had already moved most of their belongings into the place and set everything up, but Arya stayed a little longer for sentimental reasons.

Tiredly, she trudged up the stairs and went into her room. She took her gun off and put it safely away before crashing face forward unto the bed.

Sleep came to her instantly.

Hours later, she awoke to screaming, but these days it wasn’t Polly’s screams.

Groggily, she rubbed her face and followed the wailing down the stairs.

“There’s mommy,” her sister cooed.

Arya opened her arms to accept her child. “How was she,” Arya asked, then placed a kiss on Hélène’s forehead. The infant quieted somewhat, but she still cried. Sansa handed her a bottle, which Arya immediately put in her daughter’s mouth.

“An absolute Angel,” Sansa said.

Unbelieving, Arya chuckled. “Yeah, because she was sleeping. But, when she’s woke, that the last thing anyone gets.”

“Oh, Arya, she’s just a baby,” Sansa defended. “They cry a lot because that’s their way of communicating.”
“I know.” Arya sat down on the crouched, and then maneuvered so the infant had better access to her bottle. “But, when you already work a stressful job, hearing crying all of the time during your off hours is somewhat overwhelming. I’m new to this. I know parenting is a learning curve, but it’s still a lot to deal with.”

“How much sleep do you get?” Sansa sat beside her sister and watched as Hélène drank her milk.

“None,” Arya stated. “Unless she’s with Francisco—then I sleep like a baby.”

“I bet you do.” Sansa lightly touched Arya’s knee. “So, how was work?”

Two months after Arya gave birth, she returned to work. As of now, she’d be back at work for three full months.

Exaggeratedly, Arya groaned. “Stressful. I mean, I’m happy to be there and back in action, but being at work comes with a different brand of bullshit than everyday life.”

“Arya,” Sansa admonished, and then pointed to the infant. “Little ears.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “A different brand of crap—are you happy?”

“Very,” Sansa said. “Like what?”

“Office politics,” she provided without elaboration. “I really don’t give a fuc—fudge about moving up in the ranks or “looking good” to higher ranking officials, but other officers and some of my bosses do,” she explained. “Because of this, it’s sometimes hard for me to do my job to the best of my ability. There are times where I’m forced to let cases go or even not pursue them at all. They care about percentages and what makes them look good rather than actually investigating or carrying out justice. This doesn’t always happen, but it happens enough. And when it does, it’s times like that that makes me want to quit. Why be a police officer if I can’t do my job?”

Suckling noises filled the room as Arya rubbed Hélène’s back.

“Wow,” Sansa said in a shocked tone. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I wish I was.” Hélène finished the bottle and put her mouth on Arya’s breast for more, which made Arya giggle. “It’s not every police department, but unfortunately, I work in one of the ones that are like that.” In the past, Arya tried not to think about it, she tried not to complain about her job because she loved certain aspects of it. But, it was really wearing her thin.

Arya pinched the infant’s cheek and Hélène smiled briefly before making noises of frustration. She was still hungry. Sansa could read the tiredness in her younger sister’s face.

“It gets better,” she provided for comfort.

“She’s not the one I’m worried about.”

Sansa had nothing for her.

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FOUR MONTHS LATER

As Arya was about to twist the doorknob, the front door opened. She was greeted to the sight of Polly.
“Hi, Ms. Arya,” she said quietly as the young girl gave her a small smile and a quick hug. Polly didn’t give Arya a chance to say hi back before running off.

Polly’s circle of trust now included Arya, which brought the older woman a sense of relief she didn’t expect to feel. She had no idea how important it was to have Polly’s trust until it was given. But, of course, it was nowhere near the trust she displayed towards Gendry who she had started calling dad. Despite this development, Arya didn’t wish for Polly to call her mom anytime soon. It just felt wrong because Polly had a mom even though the woman was deceased. Yes, she had a dad as well, but the man had never been involved in her life.

From what Gendry told her, Polly’s psychologist mentioned that it was important o Polly to see Gendry as her father. He had been there as a safety net during two of the most traumatic times during her life. He was her connection to the past and anchor for the future.

Arya unbuckled Hélène from the baby car seat and looked for her walker. Once she found it, she sat the little girl in it.

“Hey, Arya,” Gendry greeted, and then kissed her. “Polly told me that you were here.”

“Yes, I literally just got here,” she explained.

“Either way, it’s good to see you,” he whispered into her ear as he pulled her close.

“Well,” she began. “Get used to seeing a lot more of me.”

Gendry narrowed his eyes. “You did it?”

“Yes,” she said. “I handed my resignation letter in today.”

Arya tried to bit back her tears as Gendry hugged her tightly. She quit her job. It’d been her dream job every since she was a little girl and she left. Yes, she could’ve transferred, but she didn’t want to bother putting up with the same crap. Not every station was the same, but Gods, sometimes it was hard to tell when a person is on the outside looking in.

Despite the uncertainty about what was going to come next, surprisingly, Arya found herself calm and unafraid. In fact, she looked forward to whatever new opportunities presented itself.

Chapter End Notes

No one has to like my story, but before someone criticizes it, the least he or she can do is be knowledgeable about what they are criticizing me for and/or give the story some time. I'm hearing criticisms of my story that either have been addressed or will be addressed. This is a WIP not a story given to the reader in it's entirety.
"It’s my longwinded way of saying you’re not alone in this.” Gendry said in response to Arya’s befuddled expression. “It may be your career, but you can lean on me for support if and when you need it. And that goes for anything else we encounter in life: I’ll always be here and supportive of you. Always.”

“Oh,” Catelyn cooed. “You’re so adorable—yes, you are.”

Hélène giggled at her grandmother’s attention. Her face was smothered with kisses, which only made her giggle louder.

With amusement, Arya stared at her mother and daughter. Hélène was a happy baby, whom she was grateful for, but the infant definitely had her moments. Of course that was normal, but it didn’t mean she couldn’t be worn out by those particular moments. As any parent did, she loved to see her daughter laugh and have fun.

Catelyn and Arya sat on the floor and played with Hélène.

When Arya first told her mother she was pregnant, she was surprised at the response. Catelyn was shocked, but there wasn’t any judgment. Concerns were expressed about having a baby by one man and dating another, but overall, that’s where it stopped. Arya expected fireworks of the bad variety. She expected her mother to lecture her about making bad decisions and how children needed the proper structure to develop properly. Arya expected disappointment and constant arguments surrounding her decision (and lifestyle).

But, Arya didn’t expect for her actions to remain unquestioned and for everything to remain peaceful between her and her mother.

FLASH BACK: Arya’s Baby Shower

“You’re late,” Catelyn admonished. “Good thing the baby shower won’t start without the mother.”

Arya groaned, “Mom, it’s two o’clock—the party doesn’t start until three.”

“Arya, your sister and I put a lot of work and effort into this shower,” she began. “And it’ll all be for naught if you don’t like it. After you get dressed, I need you look over the preparations and games and see if you like them.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Arya yawned. “I told you, I trust you and Sansa. You two are anal when it comes to planning.”

Catelyn grabbed Arya and directed her towards the bathroom. “Which is why we need you to go over the preparations and games and see if you like them.” She turned on the shower and grabbed some towels out of the cabinet. “You’re clothes will be on the bed when you finish.”
Before Arya had a chance to answer, Catelyn was out of the bathroom. Slowly, as the mother to be undressed, she groaned, as the thought of what her mother possibly picked out for her. After Arya stepped into the shower, she turned the hot water to its highest temperature. It was going to be a long day; she needed to take a nice, long shower to get through it. Hot showers relaxed her.

After Arya got out of the shower, she dried off first, and then quickly brushed her teeth. Once she finished, the moved onto blow-drying her hair.

Her mother lightly knocked on the door. “Arya, are you finished,” she asked through the door.

“I’m just blow-drying my hair,” Arya answered.

Catelyn opened the door and looked at her daughter. “That takes up too much time: let it air dry, it’ll be fine.”

“Whatever you say, mom,” Arya said as she followed her mom out of the bathroom.

“All right,” Catelyn began. “Sansa and I picked out some outfits that we thought you might like. We went for a dressy casual look.”

Arya was expecting dresses, but she saw 4-5 different pairs of maternity jeans with dressy shirts and a few pairs of heels. The maternity jeans looked like regular jeans minus the stretch material. Arya paired some skinny jeans with a blue sleeveless dress shirt. The material was sheer like, but not see through and some black open toed four-inch heels. After Arya found out she was pregnant, she tended to stay away from heels, but it’s not like she’d be walking around much. Her shirt wasn’t tucked and Catelyn added a gold chain for some pizazz.

Catelyn pulled out a chair in front of a vanity mirror.

“Sit,” she commanded as she patted on the back of the chair. Arya obeyed as Catelyn picked up a brush off of the counter. Carefully, she brushed her youngest daughter’s hair. “I’m so proud of you,” she beamed.

“Really,” Arya was astonished. “I thought you’d be disappointed.”

Catelyn frowned. “Why?”

“For starters, I’m carrying a bastard child and we know your feelings about bastards,” she explained.

“Arya,” Catelyn sounded offended. “That was different and you know it. You have no idea the position your father put me in back then. You only ever experienced that situation from the perspective of the younger half sibling who loved her brother dearly NOT from the wife who’s husband brought home a bastard son and wouldn’t tell his wife anything more than that. My reaction may not have seemed proper and right to you, but you’ve never had to experience that.”

With practiced hands, Catelyn parted a piece of Arya’s hair, and then gathered some strands to braid.

“You don’t know what it’s like to worry,” she continued. “To wonder if your husband loves his bastard son more than the kids you two have created together. You don’t know what it’s like to wonder if this other person is going to come into the picture again and be a threat and/or cause trouble for your family.” Catelyn parted the other side of her hair and braided that side as well. “Even though Gendry is in the know in many ways that I wasn’t, he has his insecurities as well no matter how small they may be.” Catelyn brought Arya’s braids together and twisted them into a bun.

“Finished…even though I was wrong in retrospect, you’re father did raise Jon as his own and never told me until years later—after Jon had left.”
In embarrassment, Arya’s cheeks flush.

“Besides, I’m not disappointed in you,” Catelyn reassured. “You’re a smart, driven, and a loyal young woman. You not only stand up for yourself, but what you believe to be right. How can any mother, let alone parent, be disappointed in that? Having a kid out of wedlock is the least of my concern.”

Arya wasn’t expecting that reaction.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Catelyn replied as she took two wine glasses off of the nightstand that Arya hadn’t noticed until now. Her mother then took a bottle out of a bag and poured two glasses. “I brought the wine to calm your nerves—I know how you feel about having attention on you and Hélène usually gets really active around this time.”

For some unknown reason, it surprised Arya that her mother noticed these things about her. Although their relationship had grown tremendously over the years, it still surprised Arya that her mother paid so much attention. Catelyn was far more observant than her daughter gave her credit for.

As Arya took the glass she asked, “Isn’t it bad to drink while pregnant?”

Catelyn chuckled. “There’s nothing wrong with a little wine here and there,” she explained. “I drank wine during all of my pregnancies and you and your brothers and sister turned out just fine. A glass every now and then is fine—no one is telling you to get…what is it… wasted every day.”

A smirk appeared on Arya’s lips as she sipped the wine. “Wasted, mom? Where’d you hear that from?”

“Just because I’m a mother doesn’t mean I’m out of date,” Catelyn mischievous smiled, and then sipped her wine.

“I see.” The two women sat on the bed with their backs lying against the headboard.

“Robb wasn’t a preemie,” she revealed.

Arya slowly turned her head to face her mother. “Huh?”

“Robb was born on time,” she rephrased as she emphasized the last two words.

Realization dawned on Arya. “You didn’t get pregnant on your honeymoon?”

“No,” she admitted. “It was a shotgun marriage. I have no doubt that we would’ve gotten married eventually, but Robb sped things along.”

“Wow,” Arya said as she took another sip of her drink. “What else don’t I know about you? I’d assumed that you saved it for marriage.”

Catelyn put her face in her hands and laughed. Tears streamed down her face as she firmly wiped under her eyes. For a moment, she calmed down before laughing into Arya’s shoulder.

“Well, that WAS the plan,” Catelyn said. “I wasn’t frigid; I was once young and full of hormones…. I still am.”

“I don’t want to hear that, mom,” Arya said in disgust.

“Brandon had died unexpectedly and, as you know, your dad and I grew close,” she explained. “The need to be held and comforted was just overwhelming.”
“You two got carried away,” Arya guessed.

“Not initially,” she clarified. “It was just supposed to be one time, but one time turned into two, two into three, and so on. Next thing I knew, I was pregnant.” Wide eyed, Arya stared at her mother. “I’m not disappointed in you…now, my father’s reaction to my unexpected pregnancy—that was disappointment.”

Catelyn took a gulp of wine.

“Even though I was the oldest, I was his little girl,” her mom whispered. “I couldn’t do any wrong in his eyes, until I got pregnant. Then, he only spoke to me when necessary like telling me that I was marrying your father. He said, ‘Cat, you are not going to tarnish the Tully name.’” A stray tear fell down Catelyn’s face. Arya hugged her mom. Gently, Catelyn squeezed Arya’s hand. “You’re a great daughter, Arya; there’s nothing to be disappointed about.” She got up, took Arya’s glass, and placed both glasses on the nightstand. “We need to go downstairs and have you double check on everything.”

END OF FLASHBACK

“Mom,” Arya said.

“Hmm,” Catelyn replied as she widely grinned at her granddaughter.

Unexpectedly, she hugged her mother. “Thank you.”

With a knowing look, her mother said, “You’re welcome.”

Catelyn and Arya were spending the day together as Ned and Gendry went to finalize their deal with Melisandre and Stannis. At first, Stannis was reluctant to listen to what Ned had to say until he remembered that Ned was an honorable man. Once his word was given, he followed through on what he promised.

From what Ned told Catelyn and Arya, the deal that he’d worked out was that Gendry could out of his deal if he gave up all claims to Baratheon Industries and wouldn’t make any claim on it in the future, which both Stannis and Gendry wholeheartedly agreed upon. Gendry would be given a lump sum payment. Stannis and Melisandre were prohibited from contacting him for any reason. There were other issues to discuss and work out, but Gendry was mostly satisfied with the agreed upon contract so far.

“So, how’s the job search going,” Catelyn asked as she waved a toy in front of Hélène.

“I’ve decided to go the private security route,” she said.

Her mother briefly looked at her. “Like a body guard?”

“No, not exactly,” Arya smiled at her daughter when the infant grabbed her finger. “I do the logistics: research, planning, and implementing, so that the body guards can properly do their jobs. It’s not as rewarding as police work, but it’s something.”

“That’s great, honey,”

Arya kissed Hélène on the forehead.

“I suppose so,” she stated, before going into the living room to check on Polly as the little girl watched TV.
Gendry handed Arya a beer, and then pulled up a chair and sat beside her. He twisted off his own cap and placed it on the table before taking a big gulp. Carefully, leaned back into his chair and took a deep breath.

Today was Polly’s birthday—or had been, but technically still was—he didn’t know how to phrase it.

For the longest, Polly’s birthday was an abstract concept as in a day that people celebrate each year. Gendry realized that the day would come, but the closer it got, the more her birthday became real for him. To be honest, Gendry didn’t really celebrate his own birthday and Arya wasn’t big on celebrating hers as well. Well, that wasn’t true, she wanted to celebrate with close friends and family. He, on the other hand, just didn’t care for it. All his birthdays ever did was remind him that he was an orphan and poor.

So, really, he had nothing to draw from pertaining to throwing kid’s birthday parties or any kind of birthday party.

Deep down, Gendry knew that even if he threw the best birthday party of all time, that Polly wouldn’t be completely happy; her mom was gone. He might’ve not had birthday parties growing up, but one thing he did wish for every birthday when he was little was for his mom to come back. There was no reason to believe Polly was going to be any different.

Although Arya had had birthday parties of her own as a child, she was just as lost as he was. They had the basics down, but they wanted to get the essence of throwing a kids party correct. So, they asked the input of all of her siblings, their spouses or significant others, as well as her parents. Feeling confident with all that they were told and advised, Gendry and Arya went about planning Polly’s birthday party. They invited her old friends and new friends (as well provided transportation for those who needed it); made sure to feature her favorite cartoons and had her favorite foods; got all of the right games and complimentary accessories of enjoyment. They weren’t half assing Polly’s birthday without her mom. Despite both of Arya’s parents still being alive, she understood the weight of making sure Poppy enjoyed herself as much as possible. They weren’t trying to make the young girl forget her mother existed, but rather, provide her with a sense of security and normalcy after losing her mother, and then her grandfather.

When Gendry was on his way out the door earlier that morning he remembered Arya asking where he was taking Polly. It was agreed that the house would be decorated the day of and that Gendry would take Polly out as it happened so that she’d be surprised when she came home. As Gendry was getting ready to leave the house, Arya asked him where he was taking Polly:

“To see her mum,” Gendry declared. “It’s the only thing I ever wanted on my birthday.”

Arya grabbed his hand and squeezed gently.

“Polly is really lucky to have you,” she said, softly. “And I know that she’d be happy to see her mom.”

It’s what he’d planned on. Visiting Ruby was the first thing that came to his mind when he and Arya discussed on where he’d take Polly. She hadn’t visited her mom since the day she was buried and Gendry wanted to visit Ruby himself. He often wondered what he’d missed—what troubled her that suicide was the only way out.

Gendry bought Poppy ice cream and parked his car a block away from the cemetery.
“Polly,” he said, as he turned to face the young girl in the backseat. Polly happily licked her ice cream. “Yes, dad.”

“When I was around your age—just a few months older, in fact—I lost my mom,” he explained. “I was put into foster care and I couldn’t visit her. I don’t know how much of a difference it would’ve made growing up, but I know that she loved me and life was pretty hard when she left.”

The girl stopped licking her ice cream. “I didn’t know you lost your mom just like me,” she said.

Gendry nodded. “I did.”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized.

Gendry shook his head. “It’s not your fault, but thanks.” He took a deep breath. “But, all this is to say, I don’t want to prevent you from seeing your mom. Your mom loved you and I know you love your mom a lot. And I probably should’ve done this sooner, but I brought you here to see her.”

At this, Polly’s eyes became watery.

“Really,” excitement colored her voice.

“Yeah, really,” Gendry confirmed.

Polly started to cry.

“Sweetheart,” Gendry said, as he unbuckled his seatbelt to reach in the back and calm her down.

“I miss her so much,” she hiccupped.

“I know you do.” Gendry wiped her face. After Polly’s sniffling began to die down, Gendry said, “Let’s go buy your mom some flowers before we see her, okay?”

“Okay,” Polly agreed.

They bought Ruby pink tulips, her favorite flower and color.

Polly sat the flowers on her mother’s grave, and then chatted incessantly about school, her friends, Gendry, Arya, and even Hélène. Not once did she mention the first few months after her mother’s death.

Gendry sat his own set of flowers on her grave and said a few words to her before taking Polly to see her grandfather. Polly was also happy to see him. He was glad to see Polly coping well with her loses. Personally, he didn’t know if he would’ve fared as well at her age.

As Gendry approached his car, he saw Arya parked behind him.

Curiously, he walked to her car.

“Who’s decorating the house,” he mouthed as Polly waved at Arya and said hello.

Arya waved back at her. “My mom and Sansa,” she replied. “You know they are way more knowledgeable about that sort of thing that I am.”

Gendry nodded in agreement.
“Did you want to visit Ruby’s grave with us,” he asked. “We just got through seeing her, but we can go back in you want.”

“No,” Arya shook her head. “I—I don’t want to. It’ll feel kind of weird. I didn’t know Ruby. And, actually, I’ve been here for a while; I left shortly after you.”

“Why didn’t you join us?”

“I felt liked I’d be intruding,” she admitted. “I know you don’t feel that way, but Ruby was Polly’s mom and you ex-girlfriend. Although I could serve as support, I would’ve still felt like an intruder. I just wanted you two to have this experience for yourselves,” she explained.

“That’s thoughtful.”

“I have my moments,” Arya shrugged.

“So, what are you doing here,” he asked.

“You’ll find out once you and Polly get in the car,” she said, cryptically.

Gendry was tempted to argue with her, but decided against it. Instead, he got Polly’s car seat out of his car and buckled her into the back seat of Arya’s car next to Hélène, who was peacefully asleep.

“Are we going to be long,” Gendry asked, as he put on his seat belt. “I don’t want to get ticketed.”

“No,” she answered. “We’ll be back shortly.”

Without further ado, Arya started her car and pulled out of the cemetery. They drove for about ten minutes before Arya turned, and then pulled into another cemetery.

Gendry gave Arya a questioning glance.

She simply stared at him and got out the car. Arya picked up Hélène from her seat, and then pulled some flowers out of the trunk. Gendry unbuckled Polly and followed Arya.

Arya looked around for a moment before spotting a man who waved at her. She went to him and they followed worker as he navigated through the cemetery. A moment later, they approached an unmarked grave.

Wordlessly, Arya handed him the flowers.

“Who is this?”

“Your mom,” Arya answered.

Involuntarily, Gendry covered his mouth.

“My mum,” he repeated.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

Polly’s hand slid from Gendry’s as he fell to his knees and placed the flowers on his mother’s grave. For a moment, he stared at the grave as he tried to process the situation. He was visiting his mom for the first time.

When he was younger, it rained the day she died. They were unable to bury her at that moment, so
they said her final words inside a chapel on the grounds. Even then, he was still too young to remember where her funeral had been held and no one ever took him back too see her. As he got older, Gendry never had the time to find her.

Violent sobs wrecked his body as he fell to his hands, and then rested on his elbows.

He felt warm, comforting hands on his back.

“How did you find her?” Gendry stroked the ground above where she was buried, and then looked at his girlfriend.

“I called around,” she said.

Remorsefully, Gendry said, “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Gendry, don’t,” Arya whispered. “You’ve been through a lot and it’s not like you’ve really had the time up until now.”

“Thank you,” he said, as he looked at Arya before staring at the grass again.

“You’re welcome.” Arya pulled Gendry into her arms and placed a kiss on his forehead. “I know it’s Polly’s birthday, but I wanted to fulfill your only wish growing up.”

At the mention of Polly, Gendry looked up to see her holding Hélène. She was holding the baby as securely as possible. He then looked back at Arya, and then cupped her face. Tears glistened in his eyes as he searched for the words to articulate what he was feeling. There were none. Passionately, he kissed Arya, and then pulled her into a hug.

As Gendry stared into the night sky, he thought about their visits to the cemeteries. He thought about life and relationships; beginnings and ends. He thought about what it all meant.

He took another sip of his beer.

“When I first came to Wholistic Core, I started having nightmares,” Gendry admitted.

“Wha—huh,” Arya looked at Gendry as if he had two heads.

He laughed.

“The dark freaked me out,” he explained.

“You were afraid of the dark as a kid.” Arya seemed intrigued by this.

“No, it freaked me out,” he repeated. “You’ve lived in Winterfell most of your life and went camping and shit—you were used to the sky being pitch black. Before Wholistic Core, all I ever knew was Flea Bottom. Even when it was night there, even when you turned out the lights, it was never dark or completely dark. So, coming to Wholistic Core and being in complete, utter darkness at night—so dark that I couldn’t even see my own hand, I wasn’t used to it and it unnerved me. And the silence… I’d never been somewhere before that was sooo quiet.”

“Really?” When they were younger, Arya viewed Gendry as brave and unshakable. She took the cigarette from Gendry and flicked off the ashes. “I couldn’t tell; it just seemed like nothing could get under your skin back then…. even now.”

“I was fine around others,” he explained. “It was just when I was in my bed at night and everyone was asleep.” He finished his beer. “And when I closed my eyes, my unease was even more
heightened: I was lost in the wilderness running for miles and miles without any source of light. I was alone—like I always feared I would be.”

Light fingers trailed down Gendry’s forearm as Arya then entwined their fingers together and lovingly squeezed his hand.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Arya placed a firm kiss on his lips. “I would’ve been your nightlight.”

At this, Gendry smiled.

“I know you would’ve been,” he replied, and then squeezed her thigh. “I don’t know…you know how guarded I was—how I can be. And I thought my fears were childish and that I needed to deal with it on my own.”

“How did you deal with it?”

“Stargazing,” he said.

Arya looked at the sky, and then Gendry. She raised an eyebrow.

“I spent my first few weeks being fearful of the darkness because I wasn’t used to it,” he began. “But, one night I realized that it was the first time I saw the stars. Flea Bottom has a ton of light pollution so stars were just something I heard about and never saw. Then, I actually started looking at the sky rather than away from it and that’s when I understood that my fears were misplaced. I hated Flea Bottom, but it was all I had ever known and there was comfort in that. But, I didn’t know how to fit in at Wholistic Core or how long I’d even stay. And once I realize that I could see the stars—that I had an opportunity that I’d never have experienced at home, I realized that however long that experience lasted, I needed to make the best of it.”

In no way was Arya ignorant that Wholistic Core provided a platform for Gendry to excel in the world when the odds had been stacked against him, but she never thought what he took from it personally. Or what it was like being taken out of his environment and placed into something totally foreign from him. It was weird to her that he’d be freaked out by the darkness, but then again, she’d been bothered by the light at night and the constant noises whether it was traffic, talking, and police sirens.

It was funny how that worked: the constant presence of something or, lack thereof, either provided comfort or disturbed the person depending on which environment they were raised.

“It was the first time I heard crickets and owls and shit,” he grinned. “Like wolves howling. And I saw the moon reflect off of the water—I’d never thought that I’d see something like that.” He looked at his hands as he rubbed them together, then at Arya. “I want Polly to have that: a life outside of Flea Bottom. I want her to be happy and not jaded like so many there are.” He exhaled. “And I want you to be happy.”

Arya was taken aback by the abrupt change in topic. “I am happy.”

“I’m not referring to us and the life we’ve built, I’m talking about work,” Gendry explained. “You aren’t happy there.”

“I’m—I’m…” Arya rubbed her temples. “I’m content.”

“No, you’re restless,” Gendry contradicted. “You think I haven’t noticed, that I don’t hear it in your voice or see it on your face. You’re not happy there.”
“And,” she countered. “Many people aren’t happy with their jobs and they still do it.”

“But, you aren’t those people,” he argued. “You don’t have to be in private security. You have the money to take a break and actually find something that not only suits you, but make you happy as well.”

“I know I have the money to quit my job and ‘find myself’,” Arya said. “But I don’t want to be that rich kid or, better yet, rich adult who always quits their job and depends on their parents money all of the time.”

“That’s not what’s happening here,” Gendry said. “You quit your first job because it was an unbearable work environment and this job makes you miserable because it’s not mentally stimulating. Just because you were lucky to have more than most doesn’t mean you should feel bad about it. It’s not like you’re throwing your money around carelessly. At least you’ve decided to do something with yourself rather than party all of the time and do drugs—you’re being a productive member of society. If most people had the money that you were born into, they WOULD take the time out to see what career was right for them. Don’t feel bad because you were born into a privileged life.”

Shock colored Arya’s face.

“Are you feeling okay,” she said with faux concern, as felt Gendry’s forehead.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Gendry removed her hand. “I know I’m the last person you’d expect to hear that from, but that doesn’t make it any less true. Besides, considering that I’m in a committed relationship with you and I’m met and become friends with some rich people, I can’t exactly hold that same venom I felt when I was younger. People change and grow.” A wide grin was plastered on Arya’s face. “Your family members are good, decent people. And Willas. Margaery is very manipulative, but her heart’s usually in the right place.” Arya wiggled her eyebrows. “Whatever. Anyway, what’s going on at work?”

Arya’s shoulders dropped.

“I thought I’d be happier in private security because it has it’s similarities to police work, without the office politics.” Tiredly, she rubbed her eyes. “But, it’s not what I expected. It’s a decent job: nice pay and benefits, steadier schedule, safer, which is only a benefit because I don’t always have to be on guard, but at the same time, I don’t want to plan out logistics for high profiled criminals and dictators. It makes me feel gross no matter how well they pay it. I feel like I’m contradicting everything I stand for and disappointing the girl I once was.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” Gendry looked at their entwined hands and brought Arya’s hand up to his mouth and kissed the back of it. “If it’s not right for you, it’s just not right. It’s not uncommon for people to switch careers rather it be for more money or because it just wasn’t a good fit. The trick is knowing when it’s time to leave. Don’t force yourself to stay if it’s not for the right reasons.”

Arya laughed. “You’re such an enabler, Gendry.”

“No,” he smiled. “I’m supportive.”

“Whatever you say.”

Gendry looked back up to the sky. “When I got over my fear of the darkness...I read a lot of books about stars, the universe, galaxies, and shit,” he informed. Arya looked at Gendry curiously. “There’s a Theory that we’re all made of star dust.”
“Really?”

“Yeah,” Gendry shook his head. “And atoms are the building blocks of everything. But, I wonder what made atoms, you know?” He spoke slowly as he looked up to the sky. “Or, how the universe is the infinite place where’s there isn’t an up or down—left or right. There’s not an end. How could there not be an end? But, according to scientists, the universe, like time, or because of it, is liner, so it must have a beginning and an end. But, how did the universe’s origins originate…. how did we originate? And what comes after the end? Nothingness?”

Arya wore a blank expression as she stared at Gendry.

“You’re making my head hurt.”

Gendry chuckled.

“I know, it makes my head hurt,” Gendry agreed. “The idea that there could be different galaxies and more stars than grains of sand and how small the Earth really is in comparison to everything, which means that we are smaller than a speck of dust, relatively speaking.”

“Gendry, where is this leading,” Arya asked. Tiredness crept in her voice as she rested her head on his shoulder. “Or are you just…just doing some late night philosophical chit chatting?”

“I remember telling you once that we were dealing with a lot, despite only being together for a few months and you know what you said to me?”

Arya nodded.

“That we’ve been together for years.”

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “And we have—even before we knew each other. I don’t mean to get all sentimental and shit, but we’re like the stars and we’re like the universe: you’re apart of much me as I am with you, and no matter how complex or how much it makes our head hurt at times, it’s fulfilling and exactly where we belong. We are where we are meant to be. You’ve spent years looking for someone you could be yourself with and I spent years looking for a home—now that we’ve found one another, it’s time to explore our universe. We’ve dealt with the dark matter and avoided the black holes; let’s focus on the light years.

“It’s my longwinded way of saying you’re not alone in this.” Gendry said in response to Arya’s befuddled expression. “It may be your career, but you can lean on me for support if and when you need it. And that goes for anything else we encounter in life: I’ll always be here and supportive of you. Always.”

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“Ms. Arya, come play dress up with us,” Polly begged excitedly, as she pulled on Arya’s arm and pointed to Sansa.

Sansa looked up and smiled at Arya as her own daughter Hope put make up on her face.

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t be much fun,” Arya explained. “I never played dress up when I was a little girl.”


At this, Sansa got up from her chair and walked over to Arya. “You’re not joining us?” Based on her
older sister’s tone, Arya knew that Sansa wasn’t really asking her if she wasn’t joining, but why she wasn’t joining.

“Sansa,” Arya exhaled. “You know I’m not good with the girly stuff—that’s why you’re here. And I want to spend time with you. But, Polly is and I know I’m not going to be any fun.”

“Only because you don’t want to be,” Sansa argued. “Arya, kids don’t care how good you are at something as long as you’re having fun. That’s why she loves Gendry so much. Polly doesn’t care if you’re good at playing dress up; she just wants to spend time with you. She lives with you and she knows that Gendry loves you and Gods know she crazy about him, she just wants to bond more.”

“It sounds so simple when you say it like that.”

Sansa clapped her hands together. “That’s because it is,” she stated. “What were you going to do when Hélène got older?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I’ve been taking it was one day at a time really.”

“Well, you can get a bit of a head start with Polly,” Sansa said. “And it’s not like you haven’t played with her before.”

“Yeah, but we play hide and seek and board games.”

Sansa looked at her sister, and then Polly before grabbing Arya’s hand. “Being a parent means learning new games or playing games that you wouldn’t ordinarily play under normal circumstances. It’ll be fine.”

“Fine,” Arya sighed. “Let me go check on Hélène.”

Hélène had been put down for a nap a few minutes earlier and Arya just wanted to make sure her daughter was sleeping well. After she saw that everything was fine, Arya re-joined the others.

It wasn’t often that Arya spent time alone with Polly, but that was more due to circumstance than anything else. She had work, Polly had school, and Gendry was usually around, so they hadn’t had much time alone together. Arya supposed the same could be argued for Hélène’s interaction with Gendry. In today’s case, Gendry was at work, Polly had a day off from school, and Arya became recently unemployed…for the second time.

As easy as it’d be to read into how often Arya spent time alone with Polly or Gendry with Hélène, the circumstance was far from intentional. Sure, they spent time with family and friends, but Gendry and Arya spent a lot of time at home as well, which is why the kids rarely spent one on one time with either Arya or Gendry. Then there is the fact that Polly didn’t have any family to visit where as Hélène visited her father for days at a time.

“So, if you’re the princess and Sansa is the queen,” Arya asked, as she stood next to Polly. “Who am I going to be?”

Polly jumped in excitement as Arya’s possible participation eclipsed her question. “You’re playing with us?”

“Yes,” Arya confirmed.

Unexpectedly, Polly hugged Arya.

Caught off guard, Arya stood frozen for a second. Although she and Polly had a good relationship,
they still hadn’t graduated to physical displays of affection like hugs. Awkwardly, Arya hugged the young girl back.

“Thank you,” she said, graciously. Hurriedly, she went to her closet and pulled out some toy armor and a toy sword. With a questioning glance, Arya looked at the items she was handed. “You’re in the Queensguard.”

“Queensguard?”

Polly nodded in yes. “You can’t be in the Kingsguard—you’re a girl.”

Arya laughed, and then shook her head in agreement. “I can’t disagree there.”

“So, why am I a soldier and not a queen like Sansa or a princess like you,” the older woman asked, curiously.

“Because you used to be a cop,” she said. “And cops are tough, fearless, and brave; it’s almost like being a soldier.” Polly was silent for a moment. “Queens are too, but in a different way.”

At this, Arya paused.

Queens are strong too.

Just in a different way.

Arya spent most of her life trying to reject her femininity as if it was a weakness, but at a young age, Polly realized that femininity was just as strong as masculinity. She appreciated both sides without trying to complicate what it meant to be either one. Arya doubted that the young girl even thought that deep about her words, but that didn’t make her words any less true. Polly’s words weren’t profound and she wasn’t a precocious child, she simply saw life through a lens that wasn’t corrupted by society.

“Yes…they are,” Arya said, softly.

Next time, she’d be a queen.

After Sansa left, Arya and Polly straightened up the house. Arya wasn’t one for cleaning, she’d made Gendry do that, but she was the one without a job, so she had to chip in somewhere for the time being. It didn’t feel right for Gendry to come home from work, and then clean the house as well. They still split the cooking duties because it was one of the things they enjoyed doing together.

While Arya, Polly, and Hélène watched cartoons, the doorbell rang.

“Right on time, as usual,” Arya mumbled.

When she opened the door, the sight of Francisco greeted Arya. She inquired about his day, which Francisco eagerly filled her in on. He followed her as Arya walked to the living room.

Excitedly, Hélène babbled at the sight of her dad. Arya watched as father and daughter warmly greeted one another before making their way back to the front door.

“The department isn’t the same without you,” Francisco said before he placed a kiss on Hélène’s nose.

Arya wrapped her arms around her body as she leaned against the doorframe.
“Believe me, I miss it.” She stared at her daughter and smiled.

“I’m not going to try and convince you to come back,” he said. “We’ve already had that conversation, but know that your presence is greatly missed. Not just as a cop, but as a fellow officer.”

“Thank you,” Arya said gratefully.

“So, what are you going to do now that you’ve quit your private security job,” he inquired.

Arya shrugged. “No clue,” she admitted. “I’ve been looking and…” The brunette lifted her hands in defeat.

“You’ll find something,” he said, confidently. “These things take time.”

Arya grinned. “You know, patience was never my strong point.”

Francisco didn’t disagree.

“But, persistence and stubbornness is,” he countered. “It’s your nature to keep pursuing whatever it is you are after until you get what you want. You want a career that you are passionate about—you’ll find it, as simple as that.”

“I guess so,” she replied.

“You and Gendry have anything special planned tonight?” Francisco wiggled his eyebrows as he changed subjects. Hélène reached out to Arya. Since Arya wasn’t going to see her daughter for a few days, she grabbed the young girl and held her close.

“Like what,” Arya rhetorically asked. “I don’t know people think that every time Hélène leaves the house that Gendry and I are having a romantic night or we’re just having sex all day every day.”

To be honest, that was the last thing Arya wanted to do. Yes, she loved having sex with Gendry, but really, she just wanted to rest. Being a parent was time consuming and, sometimes, quietness and rest was just as satisfying as sex. It was nice to have a moment to oneself after becoming a parent, which was basically signing over your rights to never have a moment alone again.

Gendry understood that.

He understood Arya’s need to be alone and enjoy her brief moments of solitude. There were times where being a parent felt overwhelming; that she felt that she wasn’t cut out to be a mother and she needed time and space.

But, Arya’s time alone didn’t happen every time Hélène visited Francisco. It was really once every three or four months, which allowed Arya to decompress.

Tonight, Gendry was out with friends while she and Polly spent more time together. Mycah was on his way with the food—they were having taco night—and they’d play games and watch movies. Usually, Gendry would be in the house with her, Polly, and Hélène, but Arya forced him to spend time with his friends. Every since he became Polly’s guardian, Gendry didn’t go out; he wanted to establish a bond with her and making sure she felt at home with them.

Arya argued that, although Polly should be his number one priority, his life shouldn’t revolve around her. She reasoned that Polly had acclimated well in her new living environment and that enough time had passed that he was allowed to enjoy himself without feeling as if he abandoned the young girl.
Reluctantly, Gendry agreed.

Part of his reluctance was rooted in the fact that he’d be away from home until late at night. He and some friends were going to a boxing match and it was not only time consuming, but out of the way to come back home and change. Gendry was just decided to change at a friend’s house and leave from there.

Arya understood his reluctance, but she wanted Gendry to have some fun that didn’t revolve around kiddie toys and parenting.

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“I’ve missed you,” Gendry whispered in her ear, and then tenderly kissed her forehead.

Arya kissed him on the mouth, and said, “I’ve missed you too now let me get back to bed.”

Gendry chuckled.

“Did Polly have a hard time getting to bed,” he asked, as the girl in question slept beside Arya.

Arya turned her head to look at Polly. “Uh…no,” she denied. “She just wanted to sleep in the bed with me; she said she’d sleep in her bed tomorrow. I think she just missed you is all.”

“And I’d be the first person she saw when she woke up,” he surmised.

Arya grunted in agreement as she pulled the cover tighter around her body.

Gendry rest a hand on her hip as his fingertips grazed the exposed area of her skin. He sat in thought as he absentmindedly caressed Arya’s hip.

“What’s on your mind,” Arya mumbled. She was greeted with silence, which prompted Arya to open her eyes and look at her boyfriend. Gendry seemed to be lost in thought. “Gendry,” she said a little louder.

“Yeah,” he answered.

Arya maneuvered so she could prop her head on her hand and look at him. “What are you thinking about?”

“I…I—“ Gendry stopped, and then tried to gather his thoughts. He opened his mouth again before he laughed at his loss of words. “I love you.”

“You were thinking about how much you love me,” she asked. Arya raised an eyebrow as she grinned at him.


“Your love for me leaves you speechless,” she teased.

“No, the thought of me spending my life with you leaves me speechless,” he contradicted.

Arya narrowed her eyes, as she comprehended what Gendry was saying.

“Were you…are you…”

Gendry slid off of the bed and got down on one knee. “Will you—“
“Yes,” Arya said, before Gendry could fully ask.

Gendry laughed.

“Never change,” he said in an amused tone.

“You say that now,” Arya warned, as she and Gendry leaned in to kiss one another.

Arya opened her mouth to give Gendry better access as he grabbed her head and inserted his tongue into her mouth. She grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer and Gendry softly moaned. Reluctantly, they broke apart.

They softly panted as they looked at one another. “Sure, they are some parts we may need to change about ourselves,” he stated, and grazed his thumb over where his heart was. “But, the essential part of you, the core part, is what drew me to you—it’s what made me fall in love. It’s why I’m still in love. That’s never going to change.”

~*~*~*~

3 WEEKS LATER

As Arya walked out of the courtroom, she checked her watch. She was early for her lunch with her brothers and sister.

One of the previous cases Arya was involved with had gone to trial and she summoned to testify about her involvement as well as give her professional opinion. It felt weird to see some of her former co-workers again so up close and personal. She’d seen them from time to time as they did their jobs, but it was always in passing. There were a few people she kept in touch with besides the obvious, Francisco.

In a state of relief, Arya inhaled deeply, and then exhaled.

“Arya,” a familiar voice said.

Inwardly, Arya laughed.

Of all of the people she could’ve run into, it had to be him…as if she could forget his voice.

“Aegon,” she said, as she turned to him. “Hey, how are you?”

Aegon looked as handsome as he did the day she first met him. It was almost as if he hadn’t aged a day. He gave her his usual dazzling smile and he took her in.

He shrugged. “I’m doing pretty well, how are you?”

“I can’t complain,” she answered, ambiguously.

“Of course you can,” he stated. “You always found a way to back then.”

In shock, Arya’s jaw dropped. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t mean that as an insult,” he backtracked as he held up his hands. “One of the endearing things about you for me when we were together was your passion for criticizing things that displeased you.”

“There’s a big difference between passionate criticism and complaining,” Arya clarified. “For
someone who argues for a living and interprets complicated texts, I’d expect you to know the intricacies of words and its usage.”

Aegon grinned at her.

“Still the same old Arya,” he commented.

Arya smiled, and then shrugged. “I am who I am.”

“You say that as if there was anything wrong with you.” And there it was, the old, charming Aegon. The one who had a way with words and knew how to warm her insides. Only this time, his charms were sweet, but did nothing for her. She didn’t doubt the sincerity of his words, but she wasn’t the same person she was then.

“No, I say that because I’ve always been accepting of who I am,” she stated. As she spoke to Aegon, she got a text message. “Excuse me for a moment.”

Sansa sent her and their brothers a text saying that she’d be a little late. Arya was tempted to ask her why, but decided against it because Sansa was still coming, so she put the phone in her pocket.

Arya faced her attention back to Aegon.

“So…you’re engaged?”

Arya nodded yes.

She figured that he saw her ring when she took her phone out of her pocket. For most of their conversation, her hands had been hidden from Aegon because she had her arms folded across her chest, which obscured his view of the ring.

“You believe you’re ready for marriage this time around,” he inquired.

Arya took a deep breath. “Well, to be fair,” she began. “I thought I was ready until it came to try on dresses when I was engaged to you. But, this time around, I do believe I’ll actually make it down the aisle this time.”

“Have you found what you’re looking for?”

At his question, Arya gave his words some thoughts. Her life from the moment she broke up with Aegon up to that very moment raced through her mind. Meeting Gendry again, momentarily losing her friendship with Ned, understanding herself and striving to become a better person, quitting the force, and becoming a mom just to name a few things.

“Yeah,” she said without hesitation. “Yeah, I have.”

“I just…” Aegon exhaled. “I just don’t understand what went wrong between us.” Aegon sounded just as confused as he looked. “I don’t want you to think I’m still hung up on you, because I’m not, but we had something good and we were happy and engaged, and then we weren’t. And I don’t know what I missed or did wrong. I honestly thought that you were happy.”

“I was,” Arya answered honestly. “But, at the time, I didn’t understand why I couldn’t commit to you, but I do now. Aegon, you didn’t miss anything or do anything wrong, but I wasn’t ready for marriage; I still had some growing to do.” Arya could see Aegon turn her words over in his head. “I
didn’t realize it at the time, but I had to stop putting myself first. Subconsciously, I couldn’t marry you because I couldn’t truly commit to you. I didn’t know how to be selfless. I don’t think I was intentionally a selfish person, but there was a part of me that could be very self centered.” At her explanation, Aegon softened. “But, don’t think for a second that I didn’t care about you or even love you because I did. We wouldn’t have made it as far we did if I didn’t. You were my first mature relationship and I had somewhat learned how to be with someone without controlling every aspect of it. I learned a lot, but ultimately, I just wasn’t ready.”

“But, if you knew then what you know now?”

“We’d be married,” she stated.

“And it’s too late now,” he replied.

“Far too late,” she agreed.

Aegon gave her a big smile. “I wish you well, Arya,” he said, sincerely.

“Thank you,” she replied. Aegon pulled her into a hug, and then he squeezed her hand after they broke apart. “I wish you well too.”

Arya arrived five minutes before her lunch with her siblings was scheduled to start. Robb, Rickon, and Bran were already there. Bran chewed on a piece of bread as Robb and Rickon had an animated about a conversation about football.

“Hey, losers,” Arya greeted as she sat

“How old are you again,” Robb questioned.

Arya made a face at him, and then stuck out her tongue.

A waiter appeared beside the table and the siblings took turns ordering drinks, but informed the man that they were waiting for two other people. As Arya ordered, Robb studied his youngest sister. Even when she was an infant, Arya had a personality—a rebellious spirit even—that became more defined, as she got older. Growing up, he often wondered what Arya would be like when she became an adult. She was so defiant and wanted things her way. She was smart and loved to read, but also enjoyed playing sports and videogames.

But, she was so damn misunderstood growing up.

Because of this, Arya developed a hard shell to protect in order herself, which also resulted in her secretive nature.

How Arya’s life turned out surprised him.

Nothing was wrong with her, but he was certain about certain things back then that aren’t (still) true today. Robb was sure that she wasn’t going to married—he thought she’d just be in a long-term relationship; that she wouldn’t have a child; she’d retire as a cop; and or that her fiery personality would mellow so soon. But, here she was: engaged with a child and a toned down personality. And, well, she’s no longer a cop.

“So, what’s going on with the job hunt,” Robb inquired.

Arya shrugged. “Still searching.”
“Nothing has appealed to you yet?” The eldest Stark leaned back in his seat and folded his arms.

Another shrug.

“I never wanted to be anything other than a cop,” Arya explained. “That’s the only thing I ever saw myself as, so it’s going to take some time to find what’s right for me.”

Rickon sipped his beverage, and then turned to Arya.

“Baratheon Industries is hiring,” he informed. “They’ve mostly cleared house since Stannis took over after Robert died. There are some open security positions as well as positions that will train you if you test well.”

Although Ned and Robert’s friendship took a major hit after the Arya and Joffrey situation, Ned still cared about the boisterous man. So, after learning of Melisandre’s prophetic vision and her plan, he inquired after Robert’s health. Ned constantly told Robert to take care of his health to which he was waived off with claims that he was worrying too much.

But, Robert eventually listened and went to his doctors. He had high blood pressure, diabetes, and a variety of other health complications and, despite his doctors’ reassurance that some of his conditions could be improved, Robert brushed them off and said his habits were too ingrained in him to change now.

Without naming whom, Ned said that someone foresaw his death and Robert chuckled at what he called non-sense.

That was over a year ago after Ned first found out about Stannis’ plan to take over the family company.

A few months ago, Robert and another driver who were both drunk driving killed one another when their cars collided.

Gendry and Arya didn’t attend the funeral.

Melisandre’s plan was mostly successful. Stannis was in control of the company and now the most powerful man in Westeros. But, the Lannisters wouldn’t be deterred from taking the company back. Despite paternity tests proving that Robert wasn’t the biological father to the children he “helped” raised, their attorney argued that Robert was sterile and knew that the kids wasn’t his, but raised them as his own anyway. He went further to argue that even though none of the kids were his, despite the lack of blood ties since Robert raised them as if they, they were entitled to the company and not his brother, whom he had a very acrimonious relationship with.

Several character witnesses testified that it was not in Robert’s character to be so benevolent in such a case and that he wasn’t sterile. One of the testimonies came from Ned who explained that Robert was under the impression all of his kids with Cersei were his own biological children. He even brought to light the conversation they had about how none of the kids looked like him.

The judge and jury were swayed by Ned’s words, but what squashed the Lannister’s case was the revelation that Robert was rumored to have fathered many bastard children, but that they had proof of this in one case. Stannis’ lawyer handed over the DNA sample, but the judge demanded to see this person and get another test to make sure the results were authentic, despite their claims of Gendry wanting anonymity. Ned convinced Gendry to be used as evidence in the case, so that they could get it over with. To protect Gendry’s identity, the judge and Gendry met in secret. The medical staff drew his blood shortly before the judge arrived to their meeting. The judge had been given pictures
and, without a doubt, upon first glance, he knew that Gendry was Robert’s biological son. The blood test later proved what his eyes had seen and he inquired about Gendry’s interests in the company, but Gendry adamantly denied wanting any part of the Baratheon Company and name. Shortly after this, the judge shared the information with the jury, which was the nail in the coffin for the Lannisters.

Game over: Stannis had won.

Robb, Bran, and Arya all looked at Rickon at the ridiculous suggestion.

“What,” he asked, defensively.

“Seriously, Rickon,” Bran questioned. “I’m pretty sure Arya wants out of policing, security, or anything similar to it. And, besides Gendry, who wasn’t raised by the Baratheons at all, and Shireen, I’m pretty sure she wants nothing to do with them in any capacity. I’m not even sure Stannis would want her there as well because of the deal they cut with Gendry; it would seem as if Gendry was trying to undermine the terms of their agreement.”

Rickon looked as if he never thought about it like that. “Oh…my bad. It’s just that…you know that Stannis is Shireen’s dad and she works there. I’m always hearing about hiring and shit from either her or Stannis whenever he is around. Sorry, Arya.”

“It’s no big deal,” she brushed off.

Arya’s secretive nature made it easy to withhold certain details from people, especially when necessary. Although Arya disapproved of Stannis cheating on his wife, whether or not Mrs. Baratheon knew or approved, she couldn’t tell Rickon about the complete nature of Stannis’ relationship with Melisandre. Arya wouldn’t dare do that to her brother. Because either he had to tell Shireen or keep it a secret from her, which both could have very big negative consequences for his relationship. Shireen adored her dad and, if she were to find out the truth, Arya didn’t want it coming from her brother, which came from her (his sister) because Gendry, who is Shireen’s cousin, used to f*cked her father’s mistress.

It just sounded all f*cked up when Arya really thought about it.

And Shireen liked Melisandre as well, who treated her better than her own mother. Arya wouldn’t call Melisandre a second mother or anything, but Shireen got approval from her father’s mistress and not from her own mother. Arya didn’t think Melisandre was trying to gain favor or anything, because she doubted that the redheaded woman wanted to be Stannis’ wife and a step mother, but rather, she honestly liked Shireen.

When Jon and Sansa arrived, the siblings ordered their food and caught up with one another. Sansa was quiet and only spoke when spoken to. Whenever she smiled, it never reached her eyes, which were so dull and melancholy that they were resembled Stark gray and not Tully blue. Stark gray could be a bright and vivid gray, but not the way Sansa wore them.

Arya and the other siblings, minus Sansa of course, agreed that she’d be the one to talk to the eldest Stark girl. It wasn’t because Arya was a female, but rather, every since their relationship started improving years ago, Sansa seemed to open up to Arya more than the others.

In order to lower Sansa’s guard, Arya took her shopping. They went to all of the places Sansa loved and checked out some new stores. For a moment, Sansa seemed to cheer up before Arya inquired her about melancholy mood.

Sansa stopped unpacking her new clothes and covered her face. Arya heard some sniffling.
“Sansa,” Arya said, worriedly. “What’s wrong?”

She went to comfort her sister as the older woman wiped her eyes.

“Willas and I are getting a divorce,” she choked out.

Arya’s stomach dropped.

“Oh my Gods,” she stated. “Oh my Gods,” she repeated in disbelief. “I—I thought that everything was perfect between you two. I didn’t even know that things were bad.”

As Sansa sat on her bed, Arya sat next to her.

“They aren’t,” she clarified.

Arya looked confused.” Then, why…”

“Because we are two friends who have a child together and not two people who are in love and want to be together,” she explained. “Willas and I aren’t like you and Gendry: we aren’t in love and we don’t have the desire to be with each other like married people usually do or start out as.”

“But, didn’t you two originally feel that way,” Arya pointed out.

“That’s what we thought,” Sansa sniffled. “But, then we really thought about the beginning of our relationship and why we started to date. People always said we looked so good together and asked why we weren’t dating. After dating Joffrey, a guy like Willas is very appealing especially because he was my friend and, for him, people were always talking about what a good wife and mother I’d be. We both based relationship on what other people thought and not how we actually felt about each other. The reason we lasted as long as we did is because of our friendship and how much we cared—care—about one another, but it’s not really a marriage.”

Arya hugged her sister tightly, which made her cry even harder.

“Sansa,” Arya said in a comforting tone. “You two don’t have to get divorced right away? There is always separation. You could try that and see how you feel then?”

“We are separated,” she admitted. “I didn’t tell the family because I was ashamed and embarrassed.” Harshly, she rubbed her hands together as she told Arya the truth. “The only thing that people thought I’d be good at was marriage and I failed at that. I mean, that was why Willas dated me, ‘Oh, Sansa would be a great mom and wife’ and look at us now…I’d thought I’d be married once and have all of my kids by one man.”

“Sometimes we don’t always get it right the first time,” Arya reasoned.

“But, mom did,” Sansa shot back.

“Only because Uncle Brandon died,” Arya refuted. “Mom would’ve got it wrong and she told me herself years ago. She got it right because of a tragic accident. Because Uncle Brandon miscalculated his jump and hit his head on a rock after jumping into the ocean off of a cliff.” Arya squeezed Sansa’s hand. ”Hell, I ALMOST got it wrong because I was about to get married before I was ready to. And I know it didn’t happen, but it was very close.”

“I just wanted to get married and be a mom,” Sansa said tearfully. “And I didn’t—I don’t like being alone, which was one of the reason I dated and married Willas. And, we I think about my reasons for being with him, it makes me scared of when I date again. Will I just jump into another relationship,
get married, have a kid and divorce all over?"

Emphatically, Arya shook her head.

“Sansa, you can’t think like that,” she argued. “Since you know these things about yourself, the best thing to do is to take time getting to enjoy yourself—be alone. There’s nothing wrong with being single. I think, growing up, we both got caught up in ideas and what we thought the world was, rather than understanding it for what it is: a place where you know the past, but you make your own path. Mom was a stay at home mom because she wanted to be, but she had other interest outside of being a wife and a mother and she always has. You’re a great person, Sansa: smart, funny, and you can do almost anything you put your mind to, but you seem to define yourself by your marriage and motherhood. I used to define myself by my anti-femininity and doing things on my terms. One you break free of rigid definition of what it means to be those things, you can learn how to be you. And I think you are trying, but you’re scared: you’re leaving the familiar to embrace the unknown. And because you know you want more out of marriage and aren’t settling is why it will be better the second time around.”

Sansa kissed Arya on the cheek and hugged her. “Thank you, little sis.”

“Anytime,” Arya said genuinely. “And I’ll be right by your side when you decide to tell the family… how are you and Willas going to do that?”

“We haven’t talked about that yet, but we want to do it soon,” Sansa answered.

“Until then,” Arya gesture as if her mouth was being zipped shut.

“Thank you.” Sansa wiped her face as Arya grabbed some tissues and gave it to her.

After Arya left Sansa’s, she decided to visit her parents. She hadn’t spent any time with them in a few days and she knew that they’d love to see her. When she got to her house, she found her mother on the phone detailing plans for a fundraiser that she was organizing. Catelyn gave her daughter a kiss, and then went back to writing notes on the ideas being exchanged between her and whomever she was talking to.

As she made her way to her dad’s office, she heard laughing.

Arya knocked on the door and was told to come in.

“Hey, dad,” she greeted, and then looked at the man who was sitting across from him. “Hello, Yoren.”

“Hello, Ms. Arya Stark or is it soon to be Waters?” Yoren raised an eyebrow and grinned at her knowingly.

Arya smiled.

“I was born a Stark and I’ll die a Stark; Gendry’s taking my last name,” she said.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Yoren replied, and then puffed his cigar.

“So, what do I owe this visit to,” Ned asked his daughter.

Arya walked into the office and sat beside Yoren. She looked at the open cigar box and took one of her own. As she put it into her mouth, Yoren lit it for her.
“Nothing,” she answered. “Just wanted to visit you and mom. I know I haven’t lived here in months, but it feels weird not to have you two around all the time.”

Ned chuckled. “Yeah…since you left, the house has felt like an empty nest at times. Takes some getting used to.”

Arya blew rings at her father.

“To alleviate your anxiety, I’ll visit more often since you and mom miss me so much,” Arya joked. “I know life is unbearable without me.”

Ned shook his head. “For most, kids mellow out and the time you used to want to spend alone, you want to spend with your spouse instead, especially when they move out,” Ned said.

“Eww,” Arya scrunched her face, as she understood what her father was implying. “So, basically, I’m missed, but not that much.”

“Exactly. I’d love to see you more, but make sure you call first,“ he warned.

“Gotcha.” Arya then turned to Yoren. “So, what are you doing in our neck of the woods? Or is that need to know only?”

Arya puffed her cigar and looked at Yoren expectantly.

“Despite some oversight on our part concerning two previous wards of ours,” Yoren narrowed his eyes at Arya. “Your father wants to make an investment that will allow Wholistic Core to add a new location in Winterfell.”

“Really,” Arya looked at Yoren then her dad.

Yoren nodded yes. “We’ve been talking about it for years. But, in order for the organization to remain successful, we need to expand and that includes more locations. Winterfell is a prime location because of its proximity to King’s Landing, wilderness, overall size, as well as its city life/culture. We’ve looked at many places, but Winterfell is definitely the best place to build a new complex.”

“Wow…that sounds amazing,” said Arya enthusiastically. “So, is everything a go?”

“We haven’t signed any papers yet,” Ned said. “But, it looks to be.”

Yoren turned to face Arya. “If everything goes well, which I expect it to, we’re going to need to hire a dean to foresee the young adults down here,” he explained. “And from what your father has explained to me, you’re in search of a new job.”

“Uhh…I don’t know what to say,” Arya stared at Yoren unbelievingly. “It sounds like a great offer, but I’m nowhere near qualified for a position like that.”

“Many of our workers don’t have degrees or jobs that aligned with a career at Wholistic Core, but if the show the passion and desire to be there, we are more than willing provide them with whatever training is necessary for them to succeed. Gendry wasn’t qualified when we hired him, but he showed character and willingness to learn, although I know that position isn’t as important as the one I’m offering; the sentiment is still the same. Wholistic Core doesn’t just offer positions to anyone.” At this, Arya thought about the kind of people they employed and realized that Wholistic Core only hired who they thought we qualified or took chances on those they believed embodied their values. “I don’t make this offer lightly. But, once Ned told me that you were no longer a cop, I instantly saw the compatibility of you as a dean for us in Winterfell. You’ve been a ward of Winterfell and made a
noticeable transformation under us even though you weren’t as much as a troublemaker as believed by others. You showed empathy, maintained secrecy in touchy situations such as with Gendry and Hot Pie’s struggles in literacy, and then took the initiative to teach them yourselves. Your time as a cop and your reasons for leaving does make you qualified to understand the intricacies of the mind and troubled youth. You know who the real criminals are and you can also be a deterrent to bad behavior. Arya, I can’t promise you that this job will be fulfilling, but I believe it has potential to be if you let it.”

Intently, Arya listened to Yoren as he laid out the reasons he believed in her and it made her want to say yes as he spoke. Wholistic Core was the first place where she felt home and completely accepted before she started to become more accountable for herself. Arya could see herself excelling there, despite her small fear of failing.

“If I were to take the job, when would I start?”

“As soon as possible, preferably,” Yoren said. “We have to train you, so you can be prepared to when the Winterfell location opens. But, we are not unreasonable; we’ll give you the necessary time to sort out everything first.”

“Wait…doesn’t this job entail me relocating,” Arya questioned. “Headquarters is out of state, which means I either have to move away from my daughter or I have to take her away from her father.”

Yoren didn’t deny her conclusion.

“Yes,” he agreed. “This is only temporary, but if you cannot do it, I understand, especially because your daughter is so young. But, Arya, it’ll only be a year to a year and a half at worst. You can always visit your daughter during that time or have her visit you. But, remember, the end goal is you being the dean in Winterfell—it’s not a permanent relocation.”

Sure, parenting was hard and had its drawbacks, but being away from her daughter that long even if it was only temporary? The thought drove her insane and the fact that it could be a reality.

But, as Yoren said, it wasn’t permanent. There were parents who lived in different states and had great relationships with their kids. Or parents who served in war and it worked for them. There are many scenarios where the parents were far away where it worked. They felt anxiety being away from their kids, but they were able to juggle the distance and being a parent, such as singers and movie stars. Of course her job wouldn’t be as glamorous, but it would be just as fulfilling.

As good as this opportunity sounded, Arya had other people to think about beside herself. Although she was absolutely certain Gendry would follow her anywhere if they didn’t have Polly, the same cannot be said since the little girl entered their lives. Arya didn’t resent her, but she knew that Gendry was very responsible about her and took her emotional well being very seriously. Gendry didn’t need the money, but he enjoyed his job in Winterfell as a mechanic and Arya didn’t want to take that away from him.

Then there was Polly.

Arya had no doubt that the schooling system near Wholistic Core was great, but Polly wasn’t that far removed from the tragic death of her mother and the subsequent death of her grandfather. Moving her away from King’s Landing gave her a fresh start, but moving too far away her original home would probably disrupt the progress she’d made since living with them. Arya knew that if she were hesitant to move Polly away, Gendry would be even more anxious about doing so.

“Can you give me some time?”
“Of course,” Yoren stated. “It’s no pressure to answer at this exact moment, but if you are interested, we really need to get on training you. I sincerely hope you do accept our offer, in which we can then discuss the terms of your contract and its benefits.”

“We’ll see what happens,” Arya responded.

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Arya arrived home around seven found Gendry channel surfing.

Tiredly, she sat down next to him and laid her head on his shoulder and she snuggled close to his body. Gendry wrapped an arm around her, and then kissed a forehead.

“How was your day?”

For a moment, Arya gave her answer some thought. “Eventful.”

“Care to elaborate,” Gendry prodded after Arya’s continued silence.

Arya maneuvered her head to look at Gendry. “Well, for starters, I bumped into Aegon after my testimony.”

“Oh really?” Gendry’s expression was curious, but not jealous. “How did that turn out?”

Involuntarily, Arya’s hand sought out Gendry’s as she intertwined her fingers with his, and then leaned her head back on his shoulder.

“We said hi and he asked what went wrong with us,” she summarized. “Aegon said he loved me as I was and I explained that I wasn’t ready for marriage when we were together. I think that whatever he may still feel for me, he understands that we’ve had our time and there won’t be a second time around.” Gendry slowly trailed a finger down Arya’s arm to her hand, which held his own. “And, as you know, I had lunch with Bran and pack.”

“How was that?”

“How it always is: we talk, joke, laugh—wash, rinse, repeat.” Arya enjoyed spending time and eating with her siblings, she always has. When they were younger, it was a bit difficult because they all were learning themselves. But, as they got older and understand one another better, communication got easier and better. “But, Sansa was quiet and so I took her shopping and we talked. Turns out, she and Willas are getting a divorce.”


“I know, right,” Arya agreed.

“So happened—what went wrong?”

“Nothing,” Arya shrugged. “But, they both realized that they were really two friends who got married and not two people who were in love and they both want that,” Arya explained. “They’ve been separated for a while, I don’t know how long, but the separation is what cemented for them that it’d be better for them to divorce rather than stay together. Sansa has her fears about the single life, but that’s to be expected.”

“Wow, that whole situation is just so out of left field,” Gendry said in shock.

“Is it,” Arya agreed again. “But, besides me, you are the only other person who knows…well, I
don’t know if Willas has told anyone, but they are preparing to tell the family on their own. And I know you won’t tell anyone, but still.”

Gendry nodded. “Got it; discretion is the upmost importance: her secret is safe with me.” Carefully, he picked up Arya’s legs and rested them in his lap. As he rubbed her legs, he asked, “Anything else?”

“Yeah,” she said, “I got a job offer.”

TBC…

Chapter End Notes

There is an inconsistency that I will rectify with Polly's name. I originally called her Poppy and, somewhere along the way, changed it to Polly. By the time I realized this, I liked the name Polly better.
Always

Chapter Summary

“As if you don’t love it of it, Waters,” Arya scoffed.

“I do,” he didn’t disagree. “Every part of it; every part of you.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Here,” Yoren said, as he shoved a cup of coffee in her hand. Arya gave an uncertain look at the cup before she sampled the beverage. “Mmm,” she moaned in shock. “This is—this is exactly how I make mine.”

“That was the point.” Yoren sat down at his desk, and then logged onto his computer. “Leslie wants me to hold your hand, walk you through this position step by step, and feel out where you are,” he explained, not looking at her. “But, I want to throw you in the deep end and let you swim on your own.”

“And they say age mellows people,” Arya quipped, and then took the seat on the opposite side of Yoren’s desk.

Although Yoren gave her a pointed glare, Arya saw the slight upward curve of his lips.

“They say a lot of things,” Yoren retorted, as he turned to face her. “Why do you think Wholistic Core is so successful?”

Arya sipped her coffee as she gave his question some thought. “Wholistic Core is a supportive community that seeks to understand, not judge. It treats their wards like young adults and not children. You all aren’t just true to your values, you embody them.”

“It’s much simpler than that,” Yoren said. He looked at his own cup of coffee and turned it in his hands as he examined the cup. Carefully, he sat it down. “Half decaf, half regular with seven creams and seven sugars and three pumps of French vanilla.”

“How did you know that,” Arya asked in a sweet voice. She patted her pockets as if she was looking for something. “Let me see if I have a gold star on me,” she joked.

“Fuck gold stars,” Yoren said seriously as he glared at her. “If you’re going to reward me, you better do it right and get some fucking cookies.”

Arya laughed out loud. “Damn,” she said and pumped her fist in disappointment at the mistake. “I won’t make that mistake again.”

“I’m holding you to your word,” he said. Yoren then reached into his drawer and pulled out a zip bloc bag filled with chocolate cookies. Slowly, he took one out and bit into it. As he chewed, he gave the bag to Arya.
“I appreciate your vote of confidence.” Arya bit into her cookie. “But, I thought one crawled before they walked and doggy paddled before they swam?”

“With that being said,” Yoren said, as he ignored her remark. “After some thought, both are extreme to an extent. One coddles you, which contradicts the values of Wholistic Core; the other forces you to learn at an accelerated pace without regard to comfort, capability, and comprehension. So, I’m going to let you decide.”

“Really,” Arya raised an eyebrow as she sipped her coffee. It sounded to good to be true. There was always a trick or some catch.

“Yes,” he replied. Yoren leaned back into his chair and laced his fingers together behind his head. “Tell me the significance of the coffee I gave you.” He pointed to her cup, and then sipped his own coffee. At Arya’s befuddled expression, he said, “Your answer will determine how I should go about the next step in your training.”

There it was! Arya inwardly smirked as she looked at the older man.

“Umm…” Arya looked at her coffee, and then at Yoren. “You know what I like,” she joked. Yoren wasn’t amused and Arya gave her answer serious thought. “It says that you are observant,” she began. “It’s not similar to what I drink—it’s exactly what I drink: half decaf, half regular with the right amount of sugars, creams, and additional flavors. Sometimes I take my coffee different, but this is my favorite combination.” She then looked at Yoren. “But, of course, this isn’t just about you noticing how I take my coffee. The larger picture here is that you are always watching, you notice everything. Maybe you don’t know the details, but you have an idea of what’s going on—more than an idea, a basic knowledge. You can’t be successful at the position you hold in a job like this if you’re even a little bit divorced from what happens here and with your wards.”

For a moment, Yoren said and did nothing. He simply stared at Arya with an unreadable expression.

“Why test you on coffee and not rules and procedures,” he inquired.

Arya finished her coffee. “Because, here, the little things are what matter. Sure, this place needs structure and shit, but it can’t work without the young adults. And it won’t work if they d we care or understand them. It’s easy to test people on shit they studied for, but when you’re dealing with young adults, they don’t care about those things. That’s not what gets through to them; it’s the listening and the guidance that shows you care. Coffee is out of the leftfield, but small shit like that matters.”

“But, why.” Yoren shrugged. “Why does the small shit matter? What has noticing the small shit done for you? Clearly, I didn’t notice shit if you almost had sex with Gendry under my watch!”

At the mention of her youthful indiscretion with Gendry, Arya throat tightened. She didn’t expect Yoren to forget about what happened or that it went unnoticed while she was their ward, but didn’t expect for it to be brought up regarding her training. Although they had a great relationship both during her time as their ward and after she took the job offer, Yoren hadn’t completely forgiven Arya for that night.

Arya knew that Yoren cared about her as if she was his own daughter, but he had a much deeper connection with Gendry, despite their being less communication between the two. Since both he and Gendry were from Flea’s Bottom, Yoren felt the need to protect him and look out for Gendry’s best interests. But, much more than that, Arya had pieced together through various conversations with Yoren and her father over the past few months that Gendry reminded Yoren of his deceased brother. Neither of them flat out said it, but Arya was an observant young woman. They had similar personalities and backgrounds, but Gendry had the opportunity to get out and his brother didn’t.
Eventually, he got caught up with the wrong people and was murdered.

Gendry had a taste of a better life, but if he had slept with Arya, it would’ve been snatched away from him and he would’ve rotted in prison. A good chunk of his life would’ve been in a jail cell.

Although it seemed as if Yoren placed the sole blame of that night on Arya, she knew he didn’t. But, for a person who cared about Gendry as much as Arya did, she pushed an issue that could’ve destroyed his life. Gendry knew that he was supposed to stay away, but for a guy who grew up without anything good going for him, lying with Arya was a temptation he’d eventually gave into.

“Yes, Yoren, you overlooked a horny fifteen year old trying to get her best friend to fuck her,” Arya admitted. “I don’t want to understate or downplay it, but you also slapped some sense into me, okay! Because I just saw Gendry as my friend who I wanted to pop my cherry so goddamn bad that it never occurred to me how much serious trouble he could get into.” Arya harshly rubbed her face in frustration. “Hindsight is twenty-twenty. You guys didn’t want to jump the gun and fuck up our development—it showed that you cared about our wellbeing and long-term progress. You noticed shit that most people wouldn’t have given a second glance. And you didn’t want to overreact and believed that I’d make mature decisions because you believed in me. And when I wasn’t being that person, you—you—you gave him shit to do to try and kept him away from me. You weren’t being passive; you actually tried to do something even though you didn’t know the worst had almost happened. And, when your plan didn’t work, you addressed the issue with me. You made ME accountable for my actions. I didn’t understand it then, but as an adult, that is one of the most important things I’ve ever learned. Earlier, you asked why Wholistic Core is so successful? And it’s because when you strip it down, you all teach your wards how to successfully function as an adult in the world or, at least, give the necessary tools to succeed. It was that small shit that helped me understand my mother better and repair my relationship with my sister. And realize my part when shit that I don’t like happens.”

Slowly, Yoren clapped, and then stood up.

“Bravo, bravo,” he said.

Arya looked at him as if he was crazy.

Yoren laughed, and then reached into his desk and pulled out a box. He opened it and Arya saw that it was a box of cigars. He handed her one and took one for himself before lighting both of them.

The older man perched on the edge of he desk on her left side.

“The core part of Wholistic Core—the essential part,” Yoren began after he exhaled the smoke. “Is to prepare you for the real world. Although Leslie believes in you, she doesn’t know you like I do. I want to throw you in not to see if you’d sink or swim, it’s because I know you’ll swim. You refuse to fail. More than that, you’re an active learning. You love the hands on shit, always have. It’d be a waste of your time and mine if I held your hand through this next step. You’ve taken all of the training, passed all of the tests, and followed me as if you were my shadow for the past few months. What else can I do without coddling you?”

Arya puffed her cigar. “So, what? You’re giving me the reigns—100% control.”

“Fuck, no!” Yoren laughed. “I’ve been here forever and this job still stresses me out,” he admitted. “As you’ve seen, it’s a lot of shit to do: meetings with faculty, discussing/implementing student affairs, actually building and maintaining relationships with designated wards, meetings with board members, parents, and so forth. I believe in you, but I’m not trying to kill you,” he explained. “From now on, you’re my second in command; although you defer to me, you can act independently of me.
Starting today, twice a week, I want you to lead. I’ll send out an e-mail telling people the days they should go to you. On the days you are in charge, you’ll be allowed to ask me three questions. I hold the right to not answer a question, but once you’ve asked three questions, you’re on your own, so you better ask wisely.”

Arya flicked her cigar and narrowed her eyes at Yoren. “Your outrage was never about that night with Gendry, was it?”

“No; it hasn’t been for a while,” he admitted. Arya felt a change in tone as Yoren leaned back in his chair. “I’m far from perfect and, generally, a hard ass, but I’m damn good at my job.” A beat passed as Yoren gathered his thoughts. “I expect some of my wards to disappoint me—you’ll see, when you work with young adults for so long, you get a knack for picking up their behavioral patterns. Every once and a while, someone do something that will shock the hell out of you, but more times than not, they’re predictable—the outbursts, the defiance, the stubbornness…it’s par for the course.

“When I found out about you and Gendry, it shocked the hell out of me.” Intently, Arya stared at her former dean now supervisor. In all the time they’ve known one another, they’ve never had serious conversations such as this one. He spoke to her like an equal and not someone he had to watch over/supervise. “For a long time, I placed most of the blame on you, which was unfair of me, I know, I just…” He groaned, and then harshly rubbed his face. “I expected too much of you. Although you were very mature at that age, you were still a teen. You were still experiencing new, but foreign feelings, which excited you. It was unfair of me to hold you completely accountable and not Gendry and it was also unfair of me to make you responsible for not only your behavior, but his as well by only addressing you about the inappropriate behavior that went on back then. I know you were the persistent one, but it wasn’t right of me to not bring the issue up with him as too.”

At his admittance, Arya’s throat tightened. Back when she was a ward at Wholistic Core and at the barbeque, it never occurred to ask him why hadn’t he addressed Gendry. Although Gendry did deter her efforts to sleep with him, Yoren should have spoken to him rather than just occupying his time. But, she shouldered the blame because she believed it would’ve been solely her fault if Gendry got in trouble.

“For a long time I was angry with you,” he admitted. “But, Leslie knocked some sense into me. She asked me why did I hold you so accountable for something you and Gendry almost did? And, truth be told, we’re all equally responsible for what almost happened back then. You, me, and Gendry.” Arya tried to interject, but Yoren continued to speak. “No, I was—we were. I didn’t want to admit it, but Leslie told me the hard truth: I wasn’t just angry with you because of your Lolita act, I was angry because I failed you. I made a slight miscalculation that could’ve led to disastrous results. And no matter how much I try to rationalize the restraint Gendry held, he’s still responsible for his own actions. Even then, I still find myself letting him off the hook and letting you shoulder most of the blame.”

“Yoren, you didn’t fail me,” Arya denied. “Not even a little bit.”

“No, I did,” he stressed. “There were three reasons why I didn’t want to split you up: 1. As you already mentioned and as I mentioned to your parents a while back, I believed that separating you two would be detrimental to the both of you, which I still stand by 2. I had a soft spot for the two of you and wanted to believe that you and Gendry would never do such a thing and 3. The two of you were used as prime examples of our philosophies to paying parents. Do you honestly think that the people like the Baratheons want their money being spent on people like Gendry?” Yoren raised an eyebrow. “Not even a little fucking bit, especially around kids like you—their rich and privileged kids. But, you and Gendry bolstered the credibility of allowing underprivileged kids into the camp. This prevented them from saying shit and trying to deny underprivileged kids in the same programs
as their precious ones. But, if you two had sex and that somehow got back to them; it would’ve been a shit storm and screwed over the other kids. So, a part of me was looking out for your well-being because I cared about you two, but the other part was of me was protecting the program.

“Either way, I should’ve spoke to the two of you sooner and not just you. I shouldn’t have made you responsible for Gendry’s actions and I should’ve spoke to him about how he was endangering his own freedom for something that could’ve send him to prison and ruined his already bleak prospects. Furthermore, I should’ve addressed that general maturity doesn’t always or even mostly equate to sexual maturity. Not once did I ask you if you were ready for that type of relationship and if you needed someone to talk to. So, perhaps I didn’t fail you generally, but I definitely failed you at that moment. I made that moment all about Gendry potentially going to jail and protecting my own agenda rather than seeing to your emotional well being as well.”

Although a part of Arya wanted to be mad at Yoren due to the facts he laid out; she wasn’t. For her, it was water under the bridge. Not because she didn’t care, but because she’d learned to stop seeing life in black and white—that even though she had a right to be upset, it was better for her to forgive and move on. People made mistakes. Hell, she’d made a fair share herself and she couldn’t find it in herself to be upset with her former dean/current supervisor. Despite his double agenda, ultimately, he’d looked out for her well being back then and believed in her. Yoren even called out her parents about the circumstances that led to her attending Wholstic Core.

Since Arya eventually understood her parents’ rationale during that time, even though they dropped the ball in how they dealt with her, she couldn’t muster up anger at Yoren. She was too old to have that sort of commitment to anger since Yoren’s decision not only benefitted her and Gendry, but other people, more specifically, underprivileged youth who benefited from the program. He did the “wrong” thing for the right reasons even though it could’ve been handled better.

“Yoren, you can’t beat yourself up about the past,” Arya finally said. “It…it doesn’t solve anything.”

“I’m not beating myself over the past,” he clarified. “I’m...I’m apologizing for putting all that responsibility on you and making shoulder more blame than you were responsible for. A long winded apology, but an apology nonetheless.”

Arya looked at her hands, and then back at Yoren. “Yoren, I’m a Stark,” she stated. “Politics landed me in King’s Landing; politics landed me in Wholistic Core; politics have controlled my life, but at the same time, it gave me a lot of privilege that others will never have.” Intently, Yoren stared at her. “It’s nothing new to me, but the difference between the politicking you did back then and what I was used to dealing with is that you did it for the well being of others. My parents did it because of petty classism shit. I mean, they were trying to look out for me, but if I was poor, I’d be in jail or poorer than I was to being with.” Arya shrugged. “You just wanted to make a difference in other people’s lives and was in a precarious position.”

“It’s no excuse—“

“Are you sure you aren’t beating yourself up over the past, “Arya chuckled. “The summer before I was sent to Wholistic Core—the summer my family and I moved to King’s Landing, I was upset with my dad.” There was a far away look in her eyes as she recalled the memory. “Joffrey started some shit with my friend and I hit him so he could leave Mycah alone,” she explained. “Because I was a Stark,” she said mockingly. “They wouldn’t punish me—they’d leave that to my parents. So, Robert got Mycah’s dad fired.”

Yoren frowned at this.

“I know.” Arya nodded. “Everyone knew that it was bullshit, but you don’t hit ‘royalty’ and get
away with it. Someone had to pay. Back then; I couldn’t understand why my dad allowed that to happen, but he told me that being an adult meant making hard decisions even if it hurts you. That life wasn’t that simple and even if I hated the decision, he was the one who had to make it. That it was the best decision he could make in that situation because, sometimes, drastic decisions were the ones that maintained peace.” Arya stared Yoren in the eyes. “To this day, I still don’t agree with Mycah’s father being fired, but my dad’s hand was forced. And, maybe you could’ve made a different, better decision, but you did the best you could in that situation—you were the one who made that decision and you are the one who has to live with it. I can’t hate you for looking out for me all while trying to make a difference in others lives.”

“That’s very…insightful of you,” he remarked. It was clear that Arya’s statement impressed him.

Arya finished her now cold coffee, and then stood up as she put out her cigar. As turned to leave, she stopped. A pensive look flittered across her face, and then she said:

“Yoren, one of the other reasons the small shit matters is because, sometimes, a seemingly insignificant event can teach you a major lesson.” Arya bit her lip. “It keeps you honest and teaches you can’t always pick and choose what to pay attention to and what you to discard.”

“I told Leslie you were a strong swimmer,” he quipped. “I’m tempted to throw you in the deep end right now.”

Yoren and Arya smiled at each other.

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“Bye mommy,” Hélène waved at the computer screen as the two ended the conversation. Mother and daughter blew kisses at each other before the connection ended.

With regularity, Arya and Gendry called and video chatted one another. When they had quick conversations or spoke late at night, they conversed on the phone. But, when they had longer conversations, it was through video. It was comforting to see one another’s face and it made Hélène and Polly feel as if she wasn’t away.

Gendry and the kids were watching a movie when the doorbell rang. In confusion, Gendry looked at his watch and tried to think of who would visit him this late. It definitely wasn’t Arya. Although a surprise visit would be something she’d do, he knew for a fact that she was still out of town.

Of course, one of her siblings might be dropping by unexpectedly, but Gendry doubted that as well. Although his relationship with Arya’s parents was better, they still had some kinks to work out and they wouldn’t drop by without calling first.

“Keep an eye on Hélène for me, okay,” he said to Polly as the young girl nodded at his words.

Gendry looked through the window and saw Francisco on the porch.

In confusion, he frowned before he opened the door.

A few hours before, Francisco dropped Hélène off for the weekend. Although he had primary custody while Arya temporarily relocated, once a month, Gendry watched her for a weekend. This allowed Francisco to have a social life all while someone he trusted took care of his daughter. When Hélène was with Gendry, he didn’t even consider it babysitting. Before Arya left, Gendry was equally responsible and took care of Hélène as well. He knew her quirks and medical history. He also knew how to make her laugh and how to successfully put her to bed.
If Francisco was a proud man, he could’ve kept Gendry away from Hélène, but Gendry’s relationship with his daughter didn’t threaten Francisco’s relationship with her. Gendry was just an additional and positive parental figure in her life.

Besides, the situation would be best if everyone involved had a positive relationship with one another. Not only that, Gendry adored Hélène and treated her incredibly well; Francisco knew this because of how positively the young girl reacted him whenever she saw him. Francisco also knew that not only did Gendry miss her, but Polly did as well. Polly was affectionate and protective of her “little sister” even though they didn’t share any blood bonds.

Ultimately, the veteran cop understood that Gendry wasn’t going anywhere and he didn’t want him to either. Gendry would make a great stepfather to Hélène and he made Arya happy, which he’d always said even before they had a child together. His sentiments hadn’t changed due to them now being co-parents.

“Hey man, what’s up?” Gendry gestured for Francisco to come in as he stepped aside.

“My plans fell through,” he admitted, as he took off his jacket and hung it up in the close.

Gendry nodded, and then chuckled. “So, you came by to hang with me and the girls?”

“Something like that.” The two men walked into the kitchen and Gendry handed a beer to Francisco, and then grabbed another for himself. After he took a long swig, Francisco said, “How about I watch the kids and you go out?”

“What,” Gendry said, incredulously.

“Come on, Gendry,” the other man began. “You go to work OR parent. It’s admirable that you love being a dad, but there is nothing wrong with doing something away from the kids. I love my little girl, but I enjoy spending time with my friends as well; I don’t want to worry about what she’s getting into when I’m not with her. Take a breather—it won’t kill you to spend some time away from them.”

Gendry side-eyed him. “Did Arya put you up to this?”

“No,” he denied. “But, she confirmed that it’s like pulling teeth to get you out of the house.”

Francisco laughed, and then sipped his beer again.

“Even if I wanted to go out, it’s too late.” Gendry shrugged and munched on some chips.

“It’s never too late,” Francisco, said.

“Then why are you here,” Gendry countered, and then grinned.

Francisco stole some chips out of the bowl before he answered, “I said that my plans fell through not that I was unable to make new plans. Gendry, I promise you that if you don’t find some friends to hang out with—and I know you have friends—I’ll go through your phone and make plans for you.”

“You’re even pushier than Arya on the subject and I’m not even engaged to you.”

“Yeah well, she has a soft spot for you,” Francisco quipped. “I don’t—I’m not defenseless against those baby blues.”

Gendry laughed.
“Francisco, I apprec—“

“Look Gendry,” the cop interrupted. “Going out once every blue moon isn’t going to hurt you, all right. I know it seems weird that I care so much, but man; you treat my daughter well, Arya glows when she’s around you and, overall, you’re a good dude. Go out and do something for yourself—it’s not going to kill you.”

Gendry sighed. “Fine.”

He called a few people and they made plans. Quickly, Gendry scribbled down instructions for Francisco to follow. The other man didn’t need instructions of how to care for his own daughter, but he’d never watched Polly before. Although the two never spent time alone together, outside of the Starks, she was most familiar with him.

After having a small conversation with Polly and making sure she’d be fine with him leaving for a few hours, Gendry made his way to the door.

“Have fun,” Francisco quipped as he closed the door behind him.

Gendry nodded.

It’d be hard, but he’d try.

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THREE WEEKS LATER
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“Gendry Waters,” a familiar voice called out. “Talk about seeing a ghost.”

“Hey, Freddie!” Gendry grabbed the woman’s hand and gave it a quick shake, and then pulled her in for a quick hug.

“Hey to you, too.” Freddie softly hit him on the chest. “I didn’t expect you back around the old stomping grounds.”

“Well, I’m here.” He shrugged and smiled as he hands slid into his pockets.

“Yeah, but only to see Arya,” Francine said in baby talk as she spoke to Hélène. “He didn’t come to visit us.” Francine made a funny face and the small child laughed.

“One: don’t talk to her like that and two: I’ve been busy,” Gendry said as he ruffled Polly’s hair.

“I can see,” Francine said, suggestively.

Gendry didn’t correct her.

It was Gendry and the kids’ turn to see Arya after she visited them months prior. This was only their second time seeing each other face to face since she left for training. Arya was supposed to pick them up from the airport, but there was a last minute meeting she had to shadow and Francine was sent instead. The slightly older woman jumped at the chance to pick at Gendry and the kids. It had been years since she spoke and last saw Gendry; they’d grown close during his brief stint as a camp counselor.

“Wait, you know, Arya,” Freddie asked.

Francine snorted. “Before Gendry worked here, he attended the camp and Arya was in his group;
“You never told me you attended Wholistic Core.” Freddie grinned at him.

“It just never came up,” he replied. Although partially true, back then, it was a topic Gendry didn’t like discussing due to the nature of his relationship with Arya at the time. His feelings and their behavior confused him. She’d been forbidden fruit and he almost gave in and took a bite—to feel and taste her.

“What never came up?” Another counselor Lauren walked into.

“That Gendry attended the Core before he worked here,” Francine filled Lauren in.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “I heard about him, but we didn’t meet until after he started working here.”

Gendry sat on the couch beside Polly. Tiredly, the girl rested her head on his shoulder.

“Yeah, you heard about how me and Arya crushed those team work workshops,” he bragged. “And our record still hasn’t been broken.”

“More like: there were suspicions that you two were close for other reasons, which is why you two worked so well together.” Lauren made a hole with her thumb and pointer finger, and then poked at it back and forth with her other pointer finger.

Gendry clenched his jaw. “That didn’t happen.”

“But, yet, you’re so defensive.” Lauren lightly tapped her chin with her forefinger.

“Because it almost happened,” Francine revealed as she continued making faces at Hélène. “You can thank Arya and Gendry for the random dorm check-ins we have to do now.”

“But, that wasn’t implemented until long after they left,” Lauren replied.

“Only because Yoren found out long after they left,” Francine supplied.

Lauren raised an eyebrow. “Gendry, you naughty boy.”

“Shut up.” Gendry rolled his eyes. “Like you’ve never snuck around or did some shit you weren’t supposed to.”

“I have, but my co-workers have never paid for my sins.”

Gendry smiled and shook his head. “Well, I’m sorry. Happy now?”

“Immensely.” She smiled back, and then back tracked, “You know what, I’m not—you came just to visit Arya and not me too. I know you two were close and almost did the horizontal tango, but this hurts; you’ve never come to visit me and I used to be your mentor: I thought we were friends.”

Despite the small rant, Gendry knew Lauren wasn’t upset, but curious. Her smile was genuine as she sat next to Gendry and his daughter.

“It’s like we stopped being important once he left,” Freddie chimed in as she sat on the couch next to Lauren. “Seems like he still carries a torch for Arya.”

“Considering that we’re engaged, seems is a huge understatement,” Arya remarked as she walked into the room. She leaned down and kissed Gendry, and then slowly broke apart from him. “I can’t
wait until training ends,” she mumbled in his ear tiredly, and then placed a kiss on a sleeping Polly’s head.

Excitedly, Hélène squealed at seeing her mother and Arya scooped her up and away from Francine. “Hey you,” Arya smiled at her daughter. “Hey…” Arya smothered kisses on Hélène’s face as the young girl’s giggling intensified.

Francine laughed, and then said to Lauren, “You were saying?”

“Point stands,” Lauren said stubbornly, and then looked at Gendry. He fondly shook his head as he laughed under his breath.

Arya nodded to Lauren as she looked at Gendry. “What she going on about?”

“Beats me.” He shrugged, and then stole a glance at Lauren who shook her head as she chuckled. “It’s nice seeing you again, Gendry,” Lauren said, after she checked her watch. “But, my break is over, so I have to go, but we’ll catch up later. ‘kay?”

Gendry nodded. “Yeah, sure,” he agreed.

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“Gods, I feel old,” Gendry mumbled as he looked at the campers.

“You are old,” Arya quipped as she chuckled at her fiancée, and added, “We’re both old, you’re just… older.”

Gendry rolled his eyes as he cut up Polly’s food. The young girl fidgeted she tentatively picked at her food with her fingers.

“I’m almost finished, impatient one.” Gendry warmly laughed, and then smiled at Polly. “There… done.”

Gendry slid the plate in front of his daughter and she eagerly dug into the plate.

Lost in thought, Gendry stared at his own plate as he ate.

Arya in leaned close to Gendry, tapped his armed, and asked, “Hey…what’s up?”

“Uhh…” Gendry picked at his plate for a moment. “Nothing. Nothing’s wrong.” Thoughtfully, he stared at Arya before a full-blown grin blossomed on his face. “You made the right decision.”

In reaction, Gendry’s infectious grin spread to Arya as she sported a wide grin herself. “About what?”

“This.” His tone was matter of fact as he gestured to the place around them. “This,” he repeated again.

Slowly, she nodded. “I agree.” Arya raised an eyebrow as she rested her head on her hand as she stared intently at Gendry. “It feels right in a way being a cop longer did and being a security consultant never did. There’s not any doubt or restlessness; I’m…happy. This is where I belong.” She squeezed his hand. “Thank you for being supportive not just with the job, but you know… everything.”

Arya’s voice was filled with appreciation and tenderness as she spoke.
“Like I said before,” Gendry began. “You’re my family; there’s no need to thank me.”

“Still,” she persisted. “Thank you.”

For a moment, they stared at each other in silence. Ever so slightly, smiles spread across their faces.

Their moment was interrupted Hélène called her mother. Arya turned to her daughter and looked at the little girl’s face, and then chuckled. There was food all over her face as she excitedly grinned at her mom. Arya shook her head and got the baby wipes out of her bag. Unsuccessfully, she tried to clean her daughter’s face as the young one moved around as if they were playing a game.

Gendry sniggered.

“Ha ha,” Arya said. After she successfully wiped Hélène’s face, she spoke, “Mom said the reason she’s so good with Hélène is because she’s had experience.”


Arya pursed her lips, and then bit it. “Yea, she said Hélène’s an ‘Arya-lite’, so this is a cake walk for her.”

Gendry laughed into his arms.

Arya tried to suppress a grin as she said, “Shut up.”

“She only said it out of love,” Gendry said between in his breaks of laughter.

“And you’re only laughing out of love?” Arya raised an eyebrow at her fiancée.

“Of course.” Knowingly, he looked at her as he tried to bite back laughter. “Hélène’s well-behaved, but it would’ve been surprising if she hadn’t inherited some of your…charming characteristics.”

“As if you don’t love it of it, Waters,” Arya scoffed.

“I do,” he didn’t disagree. “Every part of it; every part of you.”

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Languidly, Arya swam in the water as the moon lit up the sky.

“This is like the first time I’ve relaxed in…a long time,” she admitted.

“Well, that’s what we’re here for.” Gently, Gendry grabbed Arya and pulled her into his arms.

“Thank Gods for that,” she mumbled, and then rested her head in the crook of his neck. “There was that one break when I visited you and the girls. Even though I enjoy this, it’s been a lot all at once, you know?” Gendry gave her a curious look. “As you know, the training’s was accelerated and intense so I can be prepared when the other location opens. So, I’m taking on more work at one time than the usual training regiment.”

Tenderly, Gendry killed Arya’s collarbone. “Is the workload sustainable,” he questioned. “Do you need to slow down? I know you want this job and to complete training as soon as possible, but don’t overextend yourself.”

“I’m not,” Arya assured. “I’m a little tired, but I thrive under pressure. You know that.”
“Okay. Just promised me you’ll know when to stop if you ever need to.”

At Gendry’s genuine concern, Arya’s heart tightened.

Gendry wasn’t perfect, but there wasn’t much more that could be asked of him. He was understanding, patient, loyal, supportive, and so much more.

When she was younger, she didn’t fully grasp what family meant to him other than the fact that he didn’t have any. She understood that it was tragic to be alone and that he had to constantly fend for himself, but through having that cruel bitch of a teacher called life, Gendry learned to redefine family. Family wasn’t always blood, but those who loved you unconditionally, who didn’t turn their back on you, who cared about you, and who loved you for you. They supported you and home was wherever they were. They accepted you as you were.

There were many dysfunctional families, but since Gendry could choose him family, he wanted something—someone who added to his life and, in his mind, Arya was that. Although they were both difficult people, they understood one another. They got one another.

Mistakes were to be made, but they were young and could sort through what family meant to them.

Because what Arya also knew was that, for Gendry, although he had sexual yearnings and was in love with her, family didn’t necessarily indicate something sexual pertaining to her. Regardless of their romantic and sexual status, Arya would always be his family. Arya’s importance to him surpassed elementary definitions of family and love. His love wasn’t dependent on her reciprocation or what he could get out of it, but rather, how she made him feel: valuable; like he mattered.

And that was only a piece of it.

Gods, she would never say it out loud or even in her vows, but Gendry truly did teach her how to love. She always saw love is something you felt for your family because they were family or because you cared about a person, but she didn’t understand the complexities of love—that sometimes it required selflessness and other times it required selfishness.

It’d appear that a person with no family or true friends until he reached adulthood would have difficult with such a concept, but Gendry didn’t. Since he wasn’t so jaded by life and actively sought meaning relationships, Gendry understanding that love wasn’t just a word, but a verb. And, although love could be unconditional, you could still love a person and let them go. On the flipside, a loved one was allowed to make a mistake and could be forgiven. But, love and the relationships that came with them were about the boundaries and expectations set and once Gendry verbalized his thoughts, his lines were drawn.

Gendry could be an emotional person, but he wasn’t a half-assed kind of person. Despite her pregnancy, if Gendry was going to write her out of his life completely, they had to give their relationship an honest try. Hélène had been conceived during their split, he couldn’t find it in himself to hold it against Arya; he just as easily could’ve been in her place.

But, again, it goes back to love and what it meant to Gendry. Gendry loved Arya completely and they’d went through much and he’d went through too much individually to let a child stand in the way of a woman who made him utterly happy.

Happiness didn’t come overnight and love was hard work and, as long as the other person gave the same effort—romantic other otherwise—Gendry had no problem investing the relationship.

Deeply, Arya kiss Gendry as she pulled his close.
“But, what if someone catches us,” Gendry asked in faux concern.

Arya smiled into his shoulder as her legs gripped his hips.

“It’s getting late,” he remarked. “Let’s go relieve Lauren.”

Lauren volunteered to watch the girls to allow Arya and Gendry some alone time. The two left around nine, which was shortly after the girls had been put to bed, and were coming in a quarter after midnight.

“Thanks for watching them, Lauren,” Arya said gratefully.

“It was nothing,” Lauren waved off. “Babysitting sleeping kids is the easiest babysitting you can have. Besides, they slept peacefully the entire time and didn’t wake up once.”

“That’s good,” Gendry commented as he made his way to their shared bedroom.

Because of her position, Arya got her own cabin, which was bigger than the campers cabins and had two moderately sized rooms. The bed was big enough for the two girls to share, but they made a pallet on the floor and fell asleep after their pillow fight with Gendry and Arya.

The girls still slept peacefully and the two adults took a quick shower before they fell into bed and was dead to the world in no time.

Four in the morning, Gendry woke stroking his cock as she intently looked at him.

“If we don’t find the time now, we’ll never have it once they wake up,” she reasoned.

Gendry softly chuckled, and then rolled over so that he was positioned on top of her.

They passionately exchanged kisses as they ridded one each other of their clothes. Their movements were frantic and clothes flew everywhere, teeth collided, and fingers intertwined.

Gendry inserted a hand between Arya’s legs and firmly rubbed. Starved for his touch, she arched her back and moaned into his arm. It took him quick work to get her wet as he smoothly slid into her and bit his tongue to cum on the spot.

Gods, he missed her so much.

Arya wrapped her legs around his waist as she was conflicted between nice and slow or hard and fast, but Gendry decided for her as he rocked his at a languid pace. She was practically losing her mind, but then decided it was a nice way to go if this was her end.

Pants and the sound of slapping skin filled the air as the two got reacquainted with each other.

Gods, he was so hard and she was so wet—this was heaven, she knew it.

Arya spread leg wider and Gendry grabbed each one just under the knee and held them against the bed.

“Fuck,” she choked out. “Fuck, Gendry… go deeper, please go deeper,” she begged. Desperation filled her voice as she urged her lover to give her all his length. Obliging her, Gendry made sure Arya felt every inch of his cock as he slammed in and out of her.

“Ah,” she cried in pleasure as her nails dug into his back. “Please…”
Gendry increased the pace and intensity as a silent cry escaped Arya before she bit into his hand, but Gendry didn’t feel it. The way Arya felt around his cock was magnificent and he could die at any moment. It’d been so long—so, so long.

~*~*~*~*

Of course, her homecoming was a big affair: her parents through a party and invited close friends and family.

Surprisingly, Arya enjoyed herself.

She was glad to be home, but didn’t think she miss them as much as did and at all, for that matter. Before she left and while she was gone, she was primarily focused on Hélène and Gendry, but once she returned, it was great to see her parents, siblings, and friends.

It highlighted to her just had much she had grown and was removed from her teenage self. As much as there were part of Arya was still the same, she didn’t really miss much of anyone when she left home for Wholistic Core. It was part anger and part youth that she’d taken her relationships for granted. But, it was also privilege and accessibility.

When she was young, Arya didn’t measure distance by its physicality, but rather, the depth of her relationship with any given person and if she was able to contact or see them. Yes, her parent sent her away, but she knew that if she wanted to see and/or speak to someone, she could. She was so used to always having things readily available than she never fully appreciated having them in the first place. It was there and it didn’t occur to her that it could easily be taken away just as it easily always existed for her. A small piece of her knew it, which was why she was upset about how Jon broke the news of joining the army, but that was because it was unexpected. She’d only react to major things and didn’t know to how to appreciate the small things.

Now that she was older, she appreciated her loved ones in a way she never comprehended as a youth.

It was a revelation to her.

For a fact, she knew that it had to do with Gendry and Hélène. Subconsciously, her relationships with them made her explore her relationships with others.

“Repeat that again,” Arya said as she rubbed her ear. “You’re dating who?”

“Arya, you heard me the other ten times I said it,” Sansa complained. She was slightly annoyed, but a smile played on her lips.

“Yeah, and I believe I misheard you ten times,” she retorted.

Sansa smacked her lips as she rolled her eyes. “Arya, for the last time, and I promise you, I’m not repeating this again: I’m dating Sandor.”

“But, why?” Arya was genuinely confused. “What could you two possibly have in common?”

“More than you think,” Sansa responded. “And, Arya, whether or not you like him, I like him a lot.”

“I don’t dislike him,” Arya defended. “I just don’t understand it.”

Sansa folded her arms. “It’s not for you to understand just be supportive.” Quickly, her eyes scanned the backyard. “I plan to introduce him to mom and dad.”
“Hold on, it’s that serious?” Arya sipped her beer as she looked at her sister. “Has he met Hope?”

“Yeah.” Sansa nodded. “They get along really well. And Willas knows about Sandor, but it’s awkward as to be expected.”

“Would’ve been shocking if it wasn’t.” Arya looked at the ground, and then back at her sister. “Well, I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, Arya, that means a lot, especially considering…” Sansa vaguely gestured. “Your history with him.”

“You always did know how to put things so eloquently,” Arya remarked.

“Whatever.” Sansa waved at her sister as she walked away.

Arya found Hot Pie by the food making sure that everything was okay. He and Mycah went into business together and catered Arya’s homecoming party to advertise their food.

“Hey, Hot Pie,” Arya said in his ear.

Hot Pie jumped. “Hey, Arya!” Strong arms pulled her into a bear hug, and then let her go a moment later. As he spoke, he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his forehead, “I’ve been looking for you all evening.”

“I know I’ve been looking for you too.” When Arya arrived, Hot Pie was at the store picking up miscellaneous items. When he arrived, she’d gotten lost in the various people trying to catch up with her. Most of the time, they asked other people were the other person was and, when they found the location, they’d just missed one another.

“I’m proud of you, Arry,” Hot Pie said genuinely.

“Thank you; I’m proud of you too,” he parroted. “From what I hear, everyone’s raving about the food.”

“Tell me about it,” Mycah good-naturedly complained, “They keep trying to hustle the recipes out of me.”

“Hey,” Arya said into her oldest friend’s chest as he pulled her into a hug.

“Hey to you too,” he responded. “People are eating the food quicker than we can put it down and I’m almost out of business cards.”

The three of them caught up as Arya told her about her training firsthand and the guys told her how their start up business was going so far. Hot Pie’s girlfriend was also at he party as a guest and helping out as well and she eventually joined their conversation.

They explained how much help her dad and Gendry has been to them as they stared up and eventually opened their business. They networked with various people and even made a plan to take classes/go back to school so that they had a better understanding how what it took to run a business. At the point, her dad was helping guide them into they could stand on their own two legs. It was part him believing in their vision, wanting to help out in the community, especially small businesses, as well as lingering guilt about what happened with Mycah all those years ago.

“Arya,” someone called out.
Arya looked for the familiar voice and saw her ex boyfriend Ned approach her. They spoke at length earlier and she smiled at him as he walked to her.

“Hey,” she said.

Every since they ran into each other late into her pregnancy, they’ve regularly contacted each other. They hadn’t completely rebuilt their relationship, but it was just about there.

“Hey, I’m about to leave.” He hugged her and gave her a kiss on the check. “And I waited to say bye before I left.”

“Well, thanks for dropping by.” She tightened her arms around Ned. “And don’t think I forgot about that mystery girl you’re supposed to introduce me to.”

“I didn’t think you forgot; I just hoped you had.”

Arya grinned as she pushed Ned against his chest. “Well, that’s never gonna happen, especially with you walking around all starry eyed and shit.”

“Whatsoever,” Ned dismissed. “I’m leaving and I’ll talk to you later.”

“Just make sure I’m the first to know when you all get engaged,” she said. “Which will be in about…” Arya pretended to check her watch. “Less than a month.”

“Bye, Arya.” Ned rolled his eyes as he said bye to a few other people before leaving.

Arya got back to her conversation with the other three people as she kept one eye on her daughter who’d been with Gendry most of the day. Since it was her party, everyone wanted to hug and kiss her as well as take up a lot of her time. Gendry knew that it’d made Hélène uncomfortable and volunteered to watch her.

They were in the pool as Gendry held Hélène close to his chest as he watched Polly swim. He’d been giving her swimming lessons every since they came back from Wholistic Core because he felt it was an important thing to learn and she could see that Gendry enjoy being a dad and teaching things to both Polly and Hélène, although; he actively tried not to overstep his bounds with Hélène.

Francisco dropped by earlier in the day, but had to work so he didn’t stay around for longer after saying hello to Arya and his daughter.

Her conversation with Hot Pie and co ended and Arya made her way over to the pool.

“Are you ready to pull you hair out,” Gendry teased.

He held Hélène by her hands as spun her in a wide, slow circle around her. Hélène giggled, and then looked to her mother in excitement.

Arya slipped off her shoes and rolled up her pants. She sat on the edge of the pool and let her feet dangle as Gendry moved Hélène through the water over to Arya. Arya grabbed her daughter’s hands, and then slightly dipped her into the water repeatedly and Hélène’s giggles intensified.

In response, Arya smiled.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Polly playing with the other kids. The young girl really came a long way since she originally moved in with them. She was still shy, but Arya believed that that was in her nature. But, she smiled much more and had a healthy appetite as well. She knew Gendry was
relieved because of how hard he worked to stable her life. When Arya thought of how Gendry handled everything, she was proud of him. She knew he’d take his responsibilities seriously, but he truly did right by Polly and her family. Polly’s emotional health and happiness were incredibly important to Gendry.

As Gendry grabbed the edge of the pool and lift himself up, Arya said, “Hey…”

“Huh?” He looked at her as he turned to sit.

Arya leaned over and kissed him. “I love you.”

~*~*~*~

A YEAR LATER

“I’m glad you said yes to our job offer,” Leslie excitedly stated as she hooked an arm with Arya. “When Yoren suggested you, I was open to the idea because I knew you had so much to offer, but you’ve truly exceeded my expectations for you and I had high hopes for you to begin with.”

Yoren grunted. “That’s because you underestimated Arya to begin with.”

“Clearly,” Leslie agreed. “I hear nothing but great remarks about you and how well you work with the wards.”

“I try,” Arya said. “It’s not easy, but it is rewarding.”

“That’s good to know.” Leslie looked at Arya, and then Yoren. “Yoren told me I was coddling you during your train—make the final decision. You’re thriving here and I’m happy to see it’s working out.” She looked at her watch and audibly sighed. “Nice catching up with you and congrats.” Leslie gestured to Arya’s wedding band as well as swollen belly.

“Thanks.”

Silently, Yoren and Arya stared at each other.

After a beat, Arya broke the silence, “Don’t you have to join Leslie?”

“Yeah,” he replied before it became silent again. For a moment, he assessed her, and then spoke, “I’m not the friendliest person by any means as you know well enough, but you can if you need anyone to talk to, you can call me.”

Surprised, Arya smiled.

“Don’t look so shocked,” he admonished. “You already know I have a soft spot for you and your… husband.”

Arya laughed.

“And,” he trailed off as he reached into a bag. “I got you something.”

He handed her a box that and Arya took it and then playfully shook it.

“Stop before you break it,” Yoren warned.

“What is it?”
“Open it,” he instructed.

Arya did as told and pulled a cup out. She handed Yoren the box to read what it said. “Dean of Winterfell.” Warmly, she looked at her mentor and smiled. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” he brushed off. “You’ve been here a year and have been kicking ass.”

“I had a kick ass mentor.”

“Damn right you did.” Yoren spotted a familiar dark haired, blue-eyed guy. Gendry volunteered for the camp on and off to offer additional training and help out for other miscellaneous situations. “If Gendry’s ever interested in coming back, you should definitely persuade him. He may not be a social butterfly, but the kids really connected to him even though he didn’t exactly connect to them.”

“I’ll put out some feelers and see what he’s thinking,” Arya promised.

Yoren nodded as he watched campers pile in. He then looked over at Leslie as she spoke to some higher up administration officials. “I gotta get going, but…we’ll talk.”

“Okay.”

“And…congrats.” He made the similar gesture that Leslie did earlier.

“Thanks.”

Arya looked for Gendry so that they could grab lunch together. She checked her office, the employee’s break room, and the recreation room before asking a random camp counselor if they’ve seen him. They pointed to one of the paths and said he was with a kid.

As Arya approached, she slowed down and her steps became deliberate as she heard tones of what sounded to be a serious conversation.

“Traci-Lynn, I know that this environment is totally foreign to you, but we can’t help you unless you allow us to,” he explained to the young woman. “You have to be open and receptive to us.”

The young woman scoffed. “And why should I be,” she questioned. “So, you and the other rich people can pay yourself on the ass about helping the poor. You guys see us as some charity case that you can write off come tax season. Why should I take this bullshit serious?”

Arya could visualize Gendry’s face right now. He was most likely stunned and a little outraged.

“What? Are you going to give some ‘we’re all the same deep down’ spiel?”

“No,” he denied. “We both come from the same place, but unlike you, I never knew my parents. Just like you, I never went to school past the seventh grade level, just like you I ate the bare minimum every night, just like you I didn’t trust reach people because the difference between them and us is privilege.” He ran a hand through his hair and sighed deeply. “Their parents can pay for them to go to an exclusive camp that focuses on their well being, where as we just win a lottery for this place to what is basically a voucher. They are properly educated and even advanced in some areas. They know how to do simply shit like swim and eat for pleasure.” Gendry looked at Traci-Lynn, and then at the ground. “All we ever knew how to do was eat so we wouldn’t starve, so—so that we could have energy for the next day. Never enjoyment. We had to endure a lot of fucked up shit just to seat where are at this exact moment just to have this specific conversation. I know you have a lot of anger
and rage, but this right here: Wholistic Core, it’s an opportunity. It’s an opportunity that you need to recognize before you let it slip through your fingers. Because this program didn’t just change my life, it saved it. My life mattered to them, they believed in me and I don’t know where I’d be without that.”

Wordlessly, Traci-Lynn stared at Gendry.

“But, your last name is Stark,” she commented.

“I took my wife’s last name,” he explained. “But, I’m from Flea Bottom too. I know this is all weird and different and you have every right to resent the hand you were dealt, but don’t rob yourself of the opportunity to improve your life. I’m serious when I say I was just like you when I came here. But, when I graduated the program, I obtained my GED, worked here for a little bit, and was even able to go to college. How many people back at Flea’s Bottom can say that?”

“It’s just…all these rich kids here just take shit for granted. They don’t know what it’s like to struggle.”

“I know,” Gendry agreed. “But, don’t let that get in the way of your journey. As you know, Arya used to be a ward here—that’s actually how we met. And some of the rich kids here can be stuck up, but others can be really cool if you allow yourself the opportunity to get to know them. Their privilege makes it hard to understand your experiences, but don’t immediately write them off. Before I even liked Arya, she was a great friend to me. She was the one who tutored me when she found out I had some literacy issues. Besides our friend Hot Pie, who she tutored as well, she never told anyone the camp just found out on their own. She was a very privileged person, but an amazing friend as well. If I immediately dismissed her because of where she came from, my life would be drastically different and not just because we’re married. Like I said, she was and still is my best friend. So, just stick with this and I promise you won’t regret it.”

Traci-Lynn nodded and said, “Okay.”

“And if you ever need anyone to talk to, you can either come to me or Arya, understand?”

“Yea.”

And, damn, in that moment, Arya knew that as each day passed she loved every part of it, every part of Gendry.

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As soon as they walked in the doors, Catelyn swept the girls away in record time as she and Sansa chatted about some charity event.

“What I would’ve give for a cold beer,” Arya said longingly as she gazed at her brother’s beer.

Jon laughed, “Well, you don’t have that long left.”

Arya glared. “If you’re not including breastfeeding.”

“Oh, I forgot about that,” he said.

“That much is clear.” Arya sipped her punch and checked messages on her phone. “Where’s Ygritte?”

Jon raised his hands up in resignation. “I don’t know. She’s been everywhere all night; I’m done
trying to find her. When I see her, I see her.”

Arya laughed.

Jon’s face got serious. “I know I’m no longer number one as your favorite person, but I’ll always be your favorite brother,” he stated factually. “And I just want you to know, I’m proud of you. You know I’ve always loved you and I always will, but there were parts of you I didn’t understand that I somewhat do now. And I’m not proud of you because you’re married with kids now; I’m proud of you because you’ve grown into a remarkable woman overall.”

Arya hit Jon against the chest. “You can’t say that to me while I’m pregnant, you know I get emotional,” she chastised.

“The point remains,” he said unwaveringly. “You’re remarkable and I couldn’t always see you for who you were at times, but you were smart and right about many things I couldn’t admit at the time.”

Arya hugged her brother tightly.

In her mind, regardless of what tests said, Job would always be her brother.

Later on, she watched at her brothers, Gendry, and Sandor played tag football with Sansa and her mom and dad. Arya was very tempted to jump out of her seat and join them, but her mobility was severely shot and she wouldn’t risk it.

The kids ran on the other side of the yard as Ygritte and the other adults played with them.

Gendry took a breather and sat beside her as the guys started a new game without him.

“You don’t want to go join them,” Arya asked as she adjusted her sunglasses.

“Naw, I just want to spend some time with you,” he replied.

Arya smiled. “We spend time together all of the time,” she said. “We live together and rarely go out if we can help it. Surely, you want to interact with people other than me and the kids.”

“Ehh….no,” he said definitively.

Arya chuckled. “In cases where couples spend all of their time together, they usually get tired of one another,” she pointed out.

“Are you tired of me?”

“No.”

“Then why would I be tired of you,” he questioned. “Sure, we spend a lot of time together, but when you love someone, you’re never tired of their presence. And I love you…a lot—a lot, a lot.” He grinned at her. “Every part of you. There’s no one I’d rather spend my time with—even when I was younger.”

“After all this time?” Arya raised an eyebrow.

Gendry’s expression turned serious as he said, “Always.”

Chapter End Notes
Thanks to everyone who stuck with me on this.

I haven't forgotten about the other story, I was just stuck on finishing this one and had writer's block for a year. :(  

Hope y'all enjoyed the ride. :)

End Notes

I took out the tags for Jaqen, Ned, and Aegon because I felt that it is misleading for those who ship and may confuse/steer away any potential readers. Although, Arya does have a relationship in various capacities, I no longer feel that they are significant enough to warrant their own tags as pairing. But, I did tag them as individuals.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!