The Red and the White

by Ceolwen

Summary

Ned Stark's death leaves his family broken by grief and despair. Arya Stark, an aspiring photographer, attempts to rebuild her life by interning with a reclusive photographer famous for his images of war and destruction. AU: tremendously so.
Chapter One

It was dark, and it was late. The summer sun had set, but the light was still on in her room. Four months ago, someone would have come upstairs and hurried the girl into bed, tucking her in, turning off the light, and wishing her pleasant dreams. Four months ago, the girl's 'beauty sleep' would have been important. Making sure she went to bed at a reasonable hour would have been important. But that was four months ago. Now, it was all anyone could do to get up in the morning – no one slept well anyway.

The girl had her laptop on and open, and was sitting at her desk looking intently at a web page, as if it were a maths problem needing to be solved. A soft knock sounded at the door.

'Come in, Robb,' the girl said. Her second-favourite brother's face appeared in the doorway. He slipped into the room, closing the door after him.

'What are you doing?' he asked her, but gently. Not like her mother would. Her mother seemed to have no gentleness left in her these days.

'Ahh,' she replied. 'I am trying to figure out how to get into this internship programme.'

'What's the issue? Why not just submit an application?' He asked.

Footsteps sounded on the stairway, and the door opened without any pause for knocking.

'Arya! Do you have my silver bracelet?' Sansa cried, looking around. 'God, your room is disgusting.' With patience at odds with her sixteen years, Arya replied, 'No, I do not have your bracelet, and I believe you know I wouldn't wear your stupid bracelet anyway. Try Rickon's room.' Their youngest brother seemed to have a penchant for playing pirate these days, and would plunder his siblings' rooms to create treasure chests composed of costume jewelry, cutlery, and various electronics.

Sansa whirled around and left abruptly, not wishing to provoke a confrontation while Robb was there. Alone, she might have happily bullied Arya, but Robb was older and didn't suffer that sort of nonsense.

Robb smiled. 'Your room really is...'

'Schizophrenic?' she supplied.

'Yeah, that covers it.' They smiled. For Arya's room, in the garret of the house, benefited much from its sloping walls and interesting nooks and crannies. A fireplace roared to life when she needed it: the central oil-fired heating didn't quite extend up this far, and in winter, the stone walls of the house sucked away the warm, replacing it with the damp. Mother and daughter, in an epic battle of wills, had each attempted to assert their own aesthetic style within the room, resulting in a standoff. White, shabby chic furniture and sweet florals competed with martial arts heroes and heavy metal antiheroes. Every day, Arya made it a point of honour to pick off a small piece of wallpaper. When the hole left by her ministrations became apparent, another poster would go up to cover it. Legend had it that a medieval king had been imprisoned in that very room: it wasn't supposed to be pretty.

On one of Arya's nice white dressers, which had been fashioned rather recently, but had been endowed with the requisite dents and scrapes to make it old-looking, there lay a heavy-looking, black
canvas bag with leather trim. It looked as though it had seen some wear, and under Arya's care it had gone grey with dust.

'You haven't touched Da's camera,' Robb said softly, reproachfully.

'Right, well...' Arya's voice died as she thought of her father. Neither of them could speak for a second, but Arya returned to the web page. 'See, I thought this would get me into it.'

'What's the problem, then?' Robb asked.

'Well, it's just that he has so many criteria, and I don't fit any of them,' Arya said, dejectedly. 'I have to be eighteen, I have to be located in London, I have to have a brilliant portfolio of work, and then there's the weird one: I have to be a boy.'

'A boy?' Robb said, surprised. 'How can he do that? In this day and age?'

'I know, but he is who he is, and he can make his own rules, I guess.' Arya responded. 'The worst of it is that I want to go and work for and learn loads about photography from a full-on sexist.'

'I'm rather curious now: does he want his interns to go into war zones with him or summat? Does he like young boys' said Robb. 'But you know, Arya, you could get in. As a boy. You look like – OOOF,' Robb stopped, as Arya punched him in the stomach.

'Look,' she cried. 'I know I'm not like Sansa, fantasising night and day about boys, nail varnish, and whether my hair is glossy enough, but I'm still a girl! I'm just not an airhead.'

Robb reached down and hugged his little sister. 'I know all of this, and yes, Sansa reminds me of a 1950s housewife. A total Stepford wife in training. Google it,' he sighed, as she shot a blank look up at him.

'But the fact remains that you're the sporty one, you're the one who always wears jeans and climbs trees, and you have four brothers: well, five including Theon. If you can't act like a guy, no one can.' Wisely, Robb left off what was on the tip of his tongue to say, which was that Arya was not yet 'woman-shaped.'

Arya, who had been preparing to take great umbrage at Robb's words, began to find them sensible. 'Maybe I should, you know? I mean, if he had offered anything else – a normal workshop or class. Something I could take as ME, then I would go and do that. But there's nothing. He never teaches, and the internship programme doesn't come up very often.'

Robb gathered Arya's hair into a ponytail and waggled it in front of her face until she laughed. 'You'd have to cut your hair, you know.'

'Yeah, first thing I thought of. OK, I'm gonna ask Jon.'

'You do that, little sister. I bet he'll agree. Say hi for me, and don't stay up too late.' With that, Robb gave her a quick hug and left to find his own bed.

Jon, her eldest brother, was the furthest from her in both age and blood, for he was 24 and only her half-brother. But they were closest. Each saw in the other the slight outcast, the misfit, the one who didn't quite fall into perfect step as the other Starks did, seemingly effortlessly. Physically, they resembled each other more than they resembled the other Starks: both having dark hair in a sea of blonde-red.

Jon was her trusted confidant: he defended her against her mother, and she, in turn, would defend
him against her mother's retaliation. Everyone saw that Catelyn Stark did not quite love Jon as much as the children she herself bore. Everyone saw that her anger, when turned on Jon, was slightly more vicious. He received slightly less of every good thing from her, and slightly less credit, or benefit of the doubt, and so forth. But his siblings took that and gave him slightly more of everything to compensate. He was the leader, and all his half-brothers and half-sisters gave to him the best they had.

He always had time for Arya. Sometimes she'd send text messages to him in the middle of the night, and he would shake himself out of the blear of sleep in order to respond to her.

'How's work,' she texted, lying in her bed.

'Same old same old,' he responded.

'That old guy retire and give you his job yet?'

'Patience... what's up, anyway?'

Arya sent him the url to the internship programme, and Jon fired back almost immediately, with 'this is amazing! He never takes interns or apprentices!'

'Look at the fine print.'

'Hmm. I assume u have a plan?'

'Honestly, I was talking to Robb, and he came up w/ the idea of disguising myself as a boy. Seems half-cocked, doesn't it? I wanted to talk to u. Robb says hi btw.'

'Hallo to Robb. Yeah, it sounds nutty but u could pull it off. ur not Sansa, who would be shocked and appalled, not to mention incapable.'

'Yeah, she'd be rubbish, wouldn't she?' Arya giggled as she imagined it.

'Complete rubbish. So, use my address. Portfolio?'

'I only have pics I've taken of you all.'

'And Da, no?'

'Yeah, I have those. But I don’t think I can use them.' Arya was thankful, not for the first time, for the emotionless quality of texting.

'You have to use them.'

Arya bid Jon good night, and lay in her bed. The single tear that had fallen when Jon mentioned the photographs she had taken of their father had fast become a trickle, and soon she was sobbing earnestly into her pillow. She viciously blew her nose on a corner of the bedspread: its green leafy background with embroidered bold red roses in stark bas-relief. She hated it.

Sleep overtook Arya, and with sleep came dreams. She dreamed of the photographer, his face blurred and unfathomable, for no matter where she looked on his site and the internet as a whole, she could not find his face. The photos she’d taken of her father had fast become a trickle, and soon she was sobbing earnestly into her pillow. She viciously blew her nose on a corner of the bedspread: its green leafy background with embroidered bold red roses in stark bas-relief. She hated it.

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soon the floor contained far more images than she could possibly gather to her, and no matter how she tried to clutch her father's picture to her heart, it would fall away from her to rest on the floor.
Chapter Two

If you wish to apply to this internship programme, you must be male, between the ages of 18-24, and reside currently in London.

Submit your statement of intent and a portfolio of not more than twelve photographs, which must be uncropped and unedited, as a zip file archive to the following dropbox: jhwire (slash) dropbox dot net. Only electronic submissions to this dropbox will be accepted.

For further details, telephone 020 7946 0129 or email info at jhwire dot co dot uk.

Arya awoke from a fitful sleep, where her dreams had fled, replaced by an endless looping argument: at once she resolved to apply, but seconds later, she had given the whole scheme up. But the wellspring of hope flared again, and she resolved again to apply. And on. And on.

'You must be male.' The first criterion. Not an insurmountable one, she mused. Her brothers were quite correct about her tomboyishness. She was lean and rather small, and hadn't yet shed all the androgynous features of childhood.

'Submit your statement of intent.' Well, that was easy enough. Photography was her passion: instilled in her by her father, who had spared every moment of time to trapse Northumberland, often with one, two, or a few more of his children with him. Touched by sadness were her happy recollections of feeling the chill from the ground as he crouched-and she crouched along with him-to photograph the secret moss kingdom. Or that barely-breathing silence when they spotted deer. No words, no movement. Arya and her father shared this struggle: to watch them, but never capture them, or capture them, with that tiny click of the camera, and lose them. Who would break first? Her father, with his great big telephoto lens trained on them, the echo of the shutter almost like a gunshot in that silence, ricocheting across the moor, or Arya? Her rangefinder was nearly silent. The results were the same: the deer would startle and leap away no matter who pulled the trigger first.

'And a portfolio of not more than twelve photographs.' She had a portfolio. Jon, who was incredibly adept at all forms of technological wizardry, had set her up with a negative scanner the year before, so the fact that she preferred to use a film camera did not set her back.

'Reside currently in London.' Well, Jon would help her out there.

Arya went over to the dresser and opened the black canvas bag. She took the camera out for the first time in four months. Feeling its leather case, scuffed in places. Needle, she thought, fondly. Her father's gift to her. Weeks of her sticking the camera in everyone's faces resulted in everyone, even the dogs avoiding her. 'Stop bloody needling people with it,' he'd finally told her, exasperated. A film canister lay in an inner pocket. She took that out, put it in the pocket of her jeans, and went downstairs for breakfast.

Does this mean I've decided? she wondered.

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Arya had gravitated to the garrett mostly because, even as a small child, she'd found the story of the mad king held prisoner there impossible to resist. Now, as a sixteen-year-old, she found her space to be a welcome respite from the bustling, humming house. Being a child of a large family has its perks, since one almost always could find someone with whom to play games or sports, but the din
occasionally drove one to madness.

She could hear the sound of open warfare in the kitchen rising up from the stairway. At once, she was grateful, since she was unlikely to be noticed, questioned, or harangued by her mother, though she still ran the risk of being co-opted into some task or other, the worst of which was watching Rickon (and that wasn't too bad).

Entering into the kitchen was like entering the fever-pitch of battle.

'Have you lost your mind?' Catelyn Stark roared, as Arya slunk in and sat at the table. Her other siblings were watching the combatants as if it were a Wimbledon final. Even the dogs were watching, although they were more interested in waiting for opportunities to steal or beg food whilst their humans were otherwise engaged. Toast was ready – she began to spread an obscene amount of jam on it.

'But Joffrey's going to London all this summer,' Sansa whined. 'I won't see him at all unless I go too.'

'You want to go to London to do what? Chase some boy?'

'I can stay with Jon. I'll be no trouble. And besides, the Baratheons have invited me,' Sansa retorted smugly.

'But I'm staying with Jon this summer,' Arya interjected. Robb looked at her with pity.

'What?' Catelyn and Sansa exclaimed in unison.

'Well, there's this workshop I want to take.' A slight white lie. 'And Jon already said I could stay with him.' Robb just smiled at Arya.

Catelyn's voice was icy as she spoke. 'And when were you going to tell me? Or even...ask me?'

'I only decided yesterday,' Arya defended. *I guess this means I am applying.*

'What is this workshop?' Catelyn asked.

'I can't stay here all summer without Joffrey,' Sansa waded in again. 'Jon has enough room. I can go too.'

Ignoring her, Catelyn asked Arya again, pointedly. 'What is this workshop?'

'It's a photography course,' Arya said. Catelyn knew that Arya had all but given up photography when her father died, and for all she did not share Arya's passion, she knew the girl had some talent. A ghost of a smile made it to her face, and Catelyn was pacified.

'You can both go. However, Jon has a roommate now, so you two will have to share a room.' Catelyn made up her mind, as was usual for her, instantly.

Agh. Ecstasy and agony for both girls at their mother's pronouncement. However, co-operating with the enemy is occasionally warranted for the greater good. The sisters smiled falsely at each other, and then at their mother.

'Arya, did you want to go get that haircut now or later,' asked Robb, innocently. She kicked him under the table, but maintained her look of serene happiness. 'Later's fine, Robb.'
Back in her room, Arya designed a workshop poster and printed it after Robb, who contributed a rather bold logo to the cause, reviewed it. *After all, if I'm going to a workshop, there has to be a workshop to go to.* They were both satisfied: they used Jon's practically unknown business fax number as the telephone number for the workshop organisers (after all, who uses a fax machine anymore?) A gmail account was set up and a WordPress site implemented to make the ruse even more airtight.

'You know,' Robb said, looking at their work. 'I pity mum.'

Arya just grinned.

'I mean, that generation just has no idea how to deal with technology, and they have no clue how easy it is to use technology against them,' he continued. 'Except for your spelling mistakes, it's perfect.'

'Good I have you to correct my spelling, then,' she smiled. Robb went downstairs, taking a copy of the workshop notice with him. He would leave it, as they planned, ever so casually on the kitchen table for their mum to see.

Arya went into her darkroom, once a storage room under the eaves of the house, careful to lock it behind her. Younger siblings, and a couple times an older one, had taught her to take no chances. She pulled out the canister of film she had taken from her bag earlier that day. *It was time,* she reflected. Even without the possibility of this internship, it was time to see these images.

Developer, stop bath, fixer. As per the rules, she did not alter the photographs when she ran them through the enlarger. No dodging, burning, or cropping. Just as they were.

Her breath caught in her throat. There was Brandon, the second youngest, asleep in a wheelchair, clad in only in a hospital gown. Fine dark lashes framing his eyes. Fragile. He had been comatose for days, and had woken up demanding to know why his legs weren't working, where his dad was, what had happened. Hysteria had exhausted him.

Her mother, in another shot. Eyes rimmed red with grief. *She looks like she's gone insane,* Arya thought. Sansa holding Rickon, both of them blank and uncomprehending. Jon, turned away from the camera, broad shoulders, arms wrapped around himself in some desperate need to give himself comfort.

Robb, his arms around Catelyn. Theon, tears tracking down his face.

And finally, the one Arya didn't want to see, but could not unsee.

*My father.*

Ned Stark, his life slipping away. Facing Arya's camera moments before he died. Struggling to gain breath enough to keep breathing, knowing that he could not. A moment between them.

To watch him, but never capture him, or capture him, with that tiny click of the camera, and lose him.

Her rangefinder was nearly silent.

*Click.*

And he was gone.
An interminable wait

Chapter Three

It was done. Her statement written, and a group of twelve photographs, digitized from the negatives, had been placed within a folder entitled 'My family'. The entire application had become just a couple hundred megabytes of data: megabytes which might help change the course of Arya's life.

Harry_Stark was zipped and uploaded to the JHWire dropbox. The moment the green checkbox appeared, signalling the success of the upload, Arya began to have second thoughts. First, there was the deception. She would have to transform herself into a boy within a few weeks in order to fool one of the greatest living photojournalists. He was someone who saw things; who was used to finding information and nosing around cover-ups and conflicts. He was someone who provided hyper-real documentation of the world at large. The notion that she wouldn't be sniffed out within a second was almost ludicrous.

There would be some sort of competition; of that she was sure. And she didn't want to get sent home in the first round; disqualified due to some silly technicality. 'Contestant discovered to be a girl and sent home, humiliated.' Arya watched Pop Idol along with the rest of Britain: no one remembered the talent of the people who got sent home each week. Viewers only remembered the losers' mistakes.

Plus, it was so unfathomably weird. Why did he just want males to intern? Bad experience with women? Ugh. What if he is some ugly old tosser with terrible breath who feels up the women, and the only way he can stop himself is to avoid them entirely, like a monk? Or what if he's a pedophile?

Arya stopped herself from going further. If he were a dirty old man, well, she wouldn't be sat there, would she? She'd up and run.

Despite it being a quarter of midnight when she submitted her application, Arya opened her email (well, Harry Stark's email) and began to refresh it quite obsessively, before finally tearing herself away, satisfied she would not be receiving an instant response. Soft scratching sounded at her door. She opened it, and her dog, Nymeria, padded in and vaulted onto the bed.

'Oh, Nymeria...Oh God, I can't take you with me, can I? If I get in?' The dog softly whined, as if she understood, and lay down to receive Arya's ear scratches. Arya's misgivings grew.

Some years ago, all the Stark children, who were mad for dogs, were given a litter of orphaned puppies. Six puppies for seven children. They all remembered that fight: Catelyn and Ned Stark generally did not intervene in their children's affairs, allowing them sovereignty, enjoining them to order their own lives, but when Rickon, then only five, began howling when his older brothers decided to give Theon the pup Rickon had chosen, they had no choice but to declare martial law in the family. Rickon's crying eventually ceased, to resume when anyone came near his puppy. Robb and Jon nearly came to blows since Jon felt he wasn't truly part of the family, and Robb's response to that self-deprecation was to storm and rail at Jon. Imperiously suggesting to Arya that she 'do the right thing' and give her puppy to Theon, Sansa slapped her sister during the course of the dispute (and received a bloody nose for her troubles).

It turned out that Catelyn and Ned thought Sansa would prefer a daintier dog, so they assumed she'd opt out. 'But Lady is dainty,' Sansa complained. The tension was broken: everyone found it hilarious that Sansa didn't quite see the fact that the delicate little Lady would grow to hulking proportions within a year.
In the end, it was Theon who resolved the dispute. Always a quiet boy, the Stark's foster child spoke up. 'Really, I'd rather have a cat.'

Arya slept that night, cuddled into Nymeria. No need for a blanket: the dogs had really grown wolflike. They were loyal, shed immense hunks of fur nearly at all times of the year, and ate. A lot. They enjoyed howling on occasion, chasing small animals (other than Theon's cat Irony, who enjoyed the dubious benefit of their great huge tongues licking him at odd hours), and it was more than one Stark child who felt grateful for their lives: for accommodating parents and a home which accommodated seven children and six dogs.

Four dogs now, she thought sadly, burrowing even more into Nymeria. Sansa had been beside herself when Ned Stark, a year or so ago, had buried her Lady. No one knew how it had happened, but the dog had been shot on their own land. And when Jon had moved to London two years ago, he took his dog, Ghost, with him. London, he had reported, was not ideal for a dog of Ghost's size, but Ghost did not do well when he was not by Jon's side.

For a week, Arya checked her email compulsively. Too crabby and irritable to do things with her friends in the village, she roamed around the moor with Nymeria and took many pictures (none of which was any good). At first, she constructed a whole world of what her life would be like in London, where she would go to school (another detail which she had wholly forgotten in her pursuit of the internship), how it would be living with Jon.

She wondered how she'd get along with Jon's roommate, Sam, whom she'd never met. And she developed an oh-so-casual introduction for the parties Jon was sure to have. 'Yeah, well, I work for JHWire. Yeah, that's right. Him.' By the time Wednesday rolled around, she had mastered that bit of nonchalance, a cool and collected facade, and she had determined that she would be sipping campari and orange at these parties.

Of course, Sam would fancy her like mad, and she would have to let him down gently. That conversation went something like this:

'It's me. No, it's not you. Sam, you're great. All these girls want you, and you want me to be your girlfriend. That's brilliant. But no, I can't. You know I work for JHWire...I could be rushing off any moment to the middle east.'

By late Thursday, notes of doubt began creeping into her innermost thoughts. Jon wouldn't have time for her. He'd have girls over all the time: girls like Sansa, all giggles and bubblegum and flirtiness or serious nerd librarian girls who knew who Jean-Paul Sartre was and could quote him in the original French. Sansa would be the nonchalant one at parties, impressing everyone there just by being pretty, as she sipped her campari and orange.

By mid-morning Friday, Arya began stripping the bark from tree branches methodically and ferociously, as she played out yet another scenario. Sansa and Sam murmuring in Jon's kitchen, Sam's rippling abs somehow visible under his tight t-shirt. 'Arya? You think I like Arya? I was just using her to get close to you, Sansa.' The email would arrive for her then, informing her she'd been cut from the internship programme.

It was Arya, that suffering and dejected martyr, who returned to the house around noon on Friday. After eating lunch at the communal table, and no one caring to speak to her, she returned to her room. Each step up the stairs found her crafting the rejection letter that was inevitably winging its way forth to her. The one line that scoffed at her abilities, the one that found her choice of subject matter deeply inappropriate. The one line that told her she couldn't possibly succeed, being a stupid, ugly girl of only sixteen, from some Northumberland backwater, who probably couldn't get a boyfriend even if she'd wanted one.
Yeah, that was it. That would lie in wait for her in her inbox. Best be prepared, she thought.

Though Arya had given the writer who crafted such a horrible rejection letter some pretensions of a psychic nature, it was she herself who had the gift, such as it was. For there was an email waiting for her, or rather, waiting for Harry Stark.

It was terse almost to the point of rudeness. No acknowledgments. Just:

Harry,

You've been selected to attend an interview, which will be held at the JHWire studios on Monday, 25 June. Bring your gear: there will be a practical component preceding the interview.

The address followed.

Shite! That's Monday.

Arya quickly texted Jon and shouted down the stairs for Robb.

Jon replied quickly (was the man glued to his iPhone?) and said it was no problem.

'Tho I didn't expect Sansa, too.'

'She'll b spending all her time w/ Baratheons.'

'Still chasing Joff?'

'Yeah'

'K. I don't have time to chaperone her tho.'

It made Arya swell a bit with pride. She might have been younger, and tomboyish, but she was the sensible one, and her older brothers knew it. Sansa was the one that needed watching. Arya was the one that you could pal around with.

Robb came into her room. Arya pointed to the screen, eyes alight and happy.

'That's brilliant, Arya! I knew you'd make it.'

'It's just the pre-selection, but I hope I have a chance.'

'You'll get in no problem. How many interns is he taking, anyway?'

'I've no idea. One, at least?'

'K. Let's go tell Mum that the workshop will start on Monday.'

Having Robb tell their mother that Arya needed to be in London by the weekend was the smartest course of action. Sansa linked arms with Arya, in a rare show of sisterly affection (however false), to show her assent to the plan. Catelyn, just happy to see agreement and harmony, and unwilling to look deeper, readily agreed. Farming two of the children off to Jon would mean that she had more time for the business, her younger children, and the ever more remote Theon, their de facto foster child, who grew more unhappy as time progressed. Their idyllic Northumberland life, easy by most standards, had been ravaged four months ago, changed irrevocably within mere seconds.
Chapter 4

It was harder than she thought to leave. Arya was tied to Winterfell in a number of ways. It was her father's home, and his father's, and his grandfather's. All the way back to 1066 or something. Probably before that. But there’d been Starks in that corner of Northumberland for aeons.

The 20th century had changed their lifestyle greatly. No longer did they want to be the upper crust; the Starks just wanted to use what they’d been handed down and provide a good life for themselves and their children. Nor could they be the indolent lords of the manor anymore: taxes and death duties meant more and more estates were handed over to the National Trust. No one could afford to keep mouldering old castles anymore.

But Winterfell wasn’t a castle; it was just a sprawling medieval stone house. Part barn, part bakery: all repurposed into a home for a large family. When Ned Stark had looked to Ireland for his bride, it was a shocking matter: Starks since the Restoration had been committed in equal measure to Protestantism and to not producing enormous families. Catelyn Tully changed all that. The house was big, primogeniture was done with, and they had enough money to raise a large family comfortably and start them in the world. Of course, Ned Stark had no thoughts whatsoever of marrying an Irishwomen and bringing a stranger into the rather insular fold in which he lived. His first wife had died, leaving him alone with a small boy. Allowing himself to be captivated by Catelyn Tully's fine blue eyes and wide easy smile, he found it a rather attractive option to bring her home and free himself from the (shameful and tasteless) meat market in which he’d found himself. In the months following Ned's first wife's death, all the villagers and those in the surrounding countryside would pay him condolence calls; the women would bring food for the new widower, and they’d bring their daughters, too. As if she could be so easily replaced. The men, at least, had the grace to look embarrassed at their wives’ scheming. Bringing Catelyn Tully home stopped that, at least.

Arya loved it. Winterfell was home, her family. Her father. She felt him most closely there. Sansa always desired the urban, while Arya loved the semi-wilderness they were in.

Yet, as they were aboard the train heading south, the topography changing from the familiar to the unfamiliar, Arya felt at the growing itch of excitement. Sure, she’d been to London. Several times. But never to live. She wondered if she’d return to Northumberland, to Winterfell, for the start of school. Or would she be in London, or would she be somewhere else entirely?

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Not all was bliss. She had the misfortune to share the train car with Sansa, who was at her simpering best. Across from them was none other than the object of Sansa’s affections, Joffrey Baratheon.

A hasty plan had been made between Joffrey's mum and Catelyn that would see Joff and the girls travel down together, chaperoned by none other than the dour Scot who was Joff's bodyguard, Sandor Clegane. Joffrey's mum and his younger siblings would follow a bit later.

The Baratheons were richer than Croesus. They spent some part of the year on a ridiculously large country estate somewhat near to Winterfell, and the rest of the year in London. When they weren’t off to Ibiza. Arya remembered Robert Baratheon as a huge, barrel-chested man. Drunk off his can most of the time, but one of Ned Stark's best friends from childhood. He died, too, mused Arya. Joffrey hasn't got a father, either.

Some years ago, when Joffrey was just a little boy, someone had attempted to kidnap him. The
Baratheon wealth was well-known, and they kept a high profile. Ever since, Cersei Baratheon had gone slightly mental with respect to her children's safety, and hired the hulking ex-army Clegane to mind Joffrey at all times.

Sansa was in seventh heaven. Joffrey looked none too pleased at her chattering. And Sandor Clegane, well, he took up too much space. Though she'd met him before, Arya had never really addressed the fact that the man she'd seen outside would simply not fit inside. One side of his face was covered in burns. He did not talk about it. In fact, he did not talk much at all. A couple times, he excused himself and went out of the compartment, to return bringing with him a whiff of alcohol. Arya figured he was entitled to drink: she reasoned that if her job was minding a spoiled, whinging child like Joff, she'd hit the bottle, too.

Sansa did not notice any of this, since she was attempting to engage Joffrey on what currently were his favourite bands, and hence, what she herself should be listening to. Joffrey was insinuating that she probably couldn't understand the style of music he preferred, and so shouldn't even attempt to listen to it.

_That's not fair_, Arya thought. _Sansa is smart and she did loads better than I in school._

_She's just lost her mind temporarily_, she concluded.

Joffrey lost patience with Sansa and called her an airhead.

'That's enough,' Sandor Clegane said, looking sharply at Joffrey. His voice sounded rough, like it hadn't been used in forever.

Nearly four hours on a train where the only remotely sympathetic person is a very large, very scary-looking, slightly drunk man whom you don't know very well can take it out of a person. Arya was grateful to arrive at Charing Cross and even more grateful to arrive at Jon's house.

Jon's house happened to be fairly attractive, but it was rather clear that a couple of blokes were living there. While there were no empty containers from takeaways, the whole kitchen area did smell rather like chicken biryani. He was there to meet them and show them their room. Every necessary convenience was there for them, and he'd gone to the trouble of getting bunk beds from IKEA so they could share the room. Of course, he hadn't had time to assemble them, so the girls got to work.

'Want help with that?' A strangers' voice sounded behind them.

'Who are you?' Arya asked, seeing a youngish man. Quite overweight and sporting a neckbeard, he looked harmless enough.

'I'm Sam Tarly,' he explained. 'Jon's roommate.' Arya grinned, remembering her fantasy of needing to let Sam down gently...and blushed as she reminded herself of that fantasy's sequel: Sansa 'stealing' Sam. 'Come in. Help would be brilliant. Thanks.'

Sam was good at this, and good at keeping the peace between the girls, and soon they had beds. The chicken biryani smell had gotten stronger, and as the girls went downstairs, it was clear that Jon had revisited his favourite Indian takeaway and gotten them an early dinner.

'Sansa, I hope you're not still a vegetarian,' Jon said, as they tucked in. She shot him a withering glance.

'Do you have plans for tonight?' Jon asked. Both girls and Sam shook their heads. 'Then let's go to this.'
Jon produced a newspaper, his finger pointing to an event listing. It was a photography exhibition. Arya smiled, and then she caught sight of one of the photographers' names. 'It's HIM,' she cried. 'Can we go? Really?' Jon smiled and nodded.

An hour later, everyone was impatiently waiting for Sansa to finish curling her eyelashes and straightening her hair. When she was done, they all scrambled into a waiting cab. Arya, of course, took Needle with her.

The gallery was starkly modern. There were tons of people there, and Arya realised that Jon had got them all tickets to the opening night. There was a lot to look at. The photographs were all very good. Icons of the early 21st century. She soon fell away from the others, whose appreciation was somewhat more mechanical. Look for 20 seconds, move to the next. Look. Move. She was more sporadic. She looked long at the photographs that interested her. She spent no time on those that didn't. Sometimes, someone in the crowd would catch her eye, and she'd take that person's picture. There were a lot of people who looked exactly the same: tight jeans, platform pumps, shapeless gossamer tops and horn-rimmed glasses. Smears of bright lipstick. All with the faux-bored look. The smiles were contemptuous, not of the art, but of each other. A room full of people who didn't like each other. She didn't bother taking pictures of those people.

Most people gathered in the central area to hear the gallery director speak.

Arya found herself in a nearly-empty room with three photographs. Printed large. There was a long, tufted leather bench, as if an invitation to sit and contemplate. She sat, and contemplated. One, a soldier, his face filled with fear. US army, perhaps Canadian. Firing a rocket launcher: helicopters swarming over him. The next, an Afghan woman, lazily, almost provocatively leaning up against a stone wall baked by the sun. Swathed in bright fabric that covered her every inch, yet which managed to display her soft curves. Finally, a Taliban fighter. Heavily veiled in white; only slits of eyes visible. Eyes that told a deep story: resentment, anger, pride.

Arya exhaled.

'Do you like them?' a man asked, smiling at her. She'd not noticed when he had sat down beside her. Leather jacket. Jeans. White v-necked t-shirt. The hollow of his throat placed within the vee. Unplaceable European accent. Handsome.

'Like them?' she frowned. 'They each tell a story. Some of these others don't.'

'Yes, that is true.' He smiled still. It was a good smile: crinkling up to his blue eyes. Slender. Fine-featured. Always smiling.

'He's very talented,' she continued.

'Is he?' he asked. He turned to her, and she saw that his hair was odd. Reddish, but on one side, shocks of white in places. He smelled good. She blushed.

Her hand moved, surreptitiously, to Needle's shutter release. She shifted her legs a bit.

'Yes, I think so,' said Arya, her utterance drowning out the soft click of the rangefinder. She caught sight of Jon at the entrance to the room looking at her quizzically, and she rose abruptly.

'I have to go,' she said, and skittered off.

'Lovely girl,' he said quietly, but she heard.
The house was still and quiet that night. Everyone was tired. Jon had taken Ghost out for a walk, and Sam had watched a bit of telly before heading off to bed. They’d phoned their mum and everyone talked to her for a while, even Sam. Which was weird. The girls lay in their bunks, conscious of the fact that they were far too old for these sleeping arrangements, but enjoying the novelty nonetheless.

Her mind was reeling as she stared up at the ceiling. The encounter with the stranger at the exhibition had left her exhilarated, but it had become surreal. His face, was it really like that? His hair was odd. Did I make it up? Am I remembering this correctly? The photo she had surreptitiously taken was trapped in Needle. The Leica would hold it safe, but Arya longed to get the film developed.

Arya spoke into the darkness. 'Sansa, are you still awake?' She knew full well Sansa was awake, since she could hear the soft vibrations of Sansa's phone. Must be tweeting or chatting or something, she thought. Ugh. Probably Joffrey, since Sansa has zero friends now.

'Yeah.'

'Can I ask you a question?'

'Sure.'

'What's it like to be in love?'

'Why? Arya, is there someone you like?' Sansa asked, her voice starting to do that excited squeaky thing, which irritated absolutely everyone.

'Just curious. I've never felt for anyone what you feel for Joffrey.'

Sansa's laugh sounded thin and brittle. 'Sorry, for a moment I thought maybe you'd met someone. Maybe at the exhibition. Or maybe something with Sandor on the train.'

_Sandor, is it now?_ thought Arya.

'No! Ew. Sandor Clegane? Joff's babysitter? God, Sansa, what do you take me for? He must be thirty-five or summat. And no. No!' Arya spoke her denial vehemently.

'Don't make fun of Mr Clegane. He was injured in a fire when he was just a little boy.'

_Mr Clegane, is it now? A little boy?_ It was impossible to imagine that great hulking silent Scot as a little boy. _How does Sansa know all this?_

Neither spoke for a bit.

'It's good. It's like feeling a rush. You're uncertain, but you can't take your eyes off the person. It doesn't matter who they are. You feel breathless,' Sansa continued, breaking the silence.

As Arya began to doze off, she thought of how the breath caught in her throat when the man next to
her at the exhibition began speaking to her. Within a crowd, themselves alone. The sudden awareness of a man. So that's what it's like. And I ran away from it. Ruefully, she thought about Jon's plan for the next day, for tomorrow afternoon, she would become a boy. Arya might have caught his eye, but Harry wouldn't. And, of course, I'll never see him again.

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Theon's cat would cry out for food, and when he'd feed her, she'd turn up her nose at the food. A more strident feline contrarian had never been seen: hence, he named her Irony. Theon himself grew positively sarcastic as he entered his teenage years, and, as a young man, he was cynical and sardonic, enjoying the human drama that unfolded naturally as a consequence of being in a large family. He got along well with everyone, generally, especially Robb, since they were about the same age, but often became morose and withdrawn.

Had he borne witness to them, Theon would have been genuinely entertained by the events that unfolded Saturday morning. Arya, mopish, flopped onto various chairs in the house awaiting execution-by-hairstylist. By 10:00, Jon had had enough of her, gave her £60 and sent her to the store with Sam for some basic essentials. Jon, of course, was working, week-end or no. IT start-ups took a lot of time.

Arya and Sam walked to Sainsbury's, which, although close, was not well-known to Sam and Jon, except for the off-licence, to which Sam veered. Arya found the photo-processing department and dropped off the film from the night before and ordered prints.

Arya grabbed a trolley and went to buy things for dinner: the supermarket a bit of a novelty to one used more to a farm garden and village shops, and parents to be in charge of it all. Parent, she amended, grimly. Guided by Jon's rather deficient list, she went forth, adding things to the trolley. Some veg. It's not like the boys have seen anything green in months. French radishes caught her eye, their delicate white tips deepening to fuchsia at their roots. She put them in, feeling the first pangs of homesickness. They'd never grown these radishes in the garden at Winterfell: just sturdy English ones with tough skins.

She paused by the apples, unsure. Choosing ones that weren't too pretty, for Arya intrinsically distrusted prettiness, she began to fill the bag. Reaching out for one, she was startled as another hand snuck under hers and nicked it. She whipped around to look.

Still smiling. It was him again. The man from yesterday. His odd hair tousled, as if he'd just woken up from a deep sleep. In a ditch.

Arya blushed to the roots of her hair, much like her fancy French radishes. Oh God.

London's a big place. This cannot be a coincidence, can it? thought Arya.

'This is fate, lovely girl,' he said happily, as if answering her thought.

Is he stalking me? Is he some sort of creepy predator?

'Such a very interesting coincidence,' he continued, gently, as if sensing how flustered she was. His smile was open. Genuine. Not the smile of a psychotic. Or perhaps he was one of those psychotics that make you think he's not a psychotic by virtue of the fact that he seems so decent and friendly and normal.

There is a kind of fear that is felt by young women, especially. The beautiful fear that is caused by being wanted. (Or thinking that they are wanted). Of course, if they do not acknowledge that they
themselves want what they think is offered, the fear dissipates. A girl feels this beautiful fear because the prospect of making fantasy into reality involves the inexpressible, the unknown, the uncertain. But it is a fear to relish; it is the pooling of desire in the breath and the body. Arya had already admitted to herself that there was a response in her: a response which had been awakened by a man who had spoken to her for mere moments, a man's handsome smiling face, a man's smell. And so, this man made her feel that prickle of fear mixed with nascent carnal longing.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'N-no one, really,' she responded, backing the trolley away.

He said nothing, but smiled, bit into the apple, and tossed it in her trolley as she wheeled frantically away. Not looking at him. Not looking at him. It was the next best thing to the earth swallowing her up. Ah, the irony. Wanting nothing more than to get closer, yet running. Again.

Arya had attended to the rest of the shopping, her half-expectation of seeing the man again each time she'd turned a corner had not come to fruition, leaving her partially relieved, partially disappointed. By the time she found Sam, she was very nearly back to normal. She had rationalised the entire encounter away. The man was just surprised to see her again, and was being friendly to a kid. A kid soon to be a boy. Or he was just flirting: the kind of empty flirting that a lot of people do to entertain themselves. (Her mind flitted to her parents’ friend Petyr, who had mastered that impressively coquetitious flirting style, and used it often on her mother).

'A half-eaten apple? Arya, were you that hungry?’ Sam reproached her, gingerly putting the apple on the conveyor. 'Five apples,' he said to the check-out girl.

Arya snatched the bitten apple. She placed her mouth on the bitten part, the part of her that would have heartily condemned Sansa for similar Joffrey-related actions wincing in disgust. Sucking out the juice of the apple, its sweetness on her tongue made sweeter by the fact that he had had his mouth there, she allowed herself just the tiniest thought of his mouth moving on hers to sneak in and embed itself under her skin.

They picked up the photos and negatives at the film lab, and headed back to Jon's.

In the minutes before lunch, Arya clambered up to her top bunk to give herself a modicum of privacy, and withdrew the photos from her jacket pocket. There were a few good ones. She forced herself to look at them in order. She’d taken pictures of her family, of Sam, of a few interesting looking people. Even of a pair of shoes that she knew Sansa would like. And then the last picture; framed embarrassingly poorly, and perhaps a bit too soft, but containing the entirety of a man's face all the same.

She felt happy, as she left later with Jon to get her hair cut. Fate had allowed her to see this man twice, but her own ingenuity had allowed her this artefact that enabled her to see him whenever she wanted.

That was enough.
Chapter Six

Jon was blunt. It was something Arya liked, ordinarily.

'I'm worried about Sansa,' he said.

'Why?' Arya asked. I know why.

'She's changed so much in a year.'

'Haven't we all?' Grief had changed them terribly.

'I know...it's just different with her.'

'Yeah,' Arya agreed. Sansa had changed. The whole Joffrey business had made her into someone different. Always naive and a bit of a dreamer, Sansa seemed to have lost her mind with respect to Joffrey, who didn't really seem to like her that much, though his mother seemed to throw them together a lot. She'd withdrawn from a lot of things; family, friends, and her school work suffered somewhat. She seemed aimless.

'Keep an eye on her, would you?' Jon asked.

'Yeah, 'course.'

'And you,' Jon trailed off. 'Who was that bloke you were sat next to on Friday, just before we left?'

'Oh,' Arya exclaimed, startled. 'I've no idea who he was.'

'And what were you talking about?' Jon pressed her.

'N-nothing, really. The photos. The ones in that room,' she responded.

'You ran away from him so quickly. I wondered if anything had happened. If he had done anything to you.'

'Nothing happened,' she said softly. Jon looked at her sharply. 'Did you want something to happen?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' she scoffed, her hand unconsciously going to her jacket pocket, where lay the photo she'd taken of him.

Jon cleared his throat. Oh my God. Is he going to give me The Talk? thought Arya, cringing.

'I know it's not my place to say this, but...' Jon began. Oh God, he is giving me The Talk. The protective older brother: there is nothing better for a young girl, who may bask in his attention and fear nothing from bullies, creeps, and spiders. And there is nothing worse for a young woman, who has grown to depend on that attention, attention which gradually dissipates as other girls hold their interest more than little sisters do, without corresponding decline in the possessiveness and protectiveness. And Arya, lucky girl, had three of these.

'Jon! I spoke to a stranger at an art show and that's it. That's all it was. I don't know who he is, I'm unlikely to see him again, and he's much too old for me. Practically middle-aged. Probably married with four children and gay to boot.'
Jon laughed. The tension was broken. 'Nice,' he said. 'I'm just looking out for you. I know you have a good head on those scrawny shoulders, and there are some weirdos out there.'

'He wasn't a weirdo,' Arya retorted, defending her stranger. 'He was a nice guy,' she said. Guiltily, she thought about how she'd eaten the apple.

Catelyn and Ned Stark had never really imparted any moral judgments about sexuality onto their children. There were no prohibitions against sex, not any that Arya had ever heard. They were, at heart, a farm family. The animals on the farm had sex naturally. Her parents had certainly managed to produce five of their own children naturally. If she were the snooping kind of child, (which she was), she would have known that her parents were the ones who supplied the boys with the prophylactics which might be found in dressers. It wasn't spoken about, and nothing was overt, but she knew that Theon got around quite a bit, even sleeping with some of Arya's school friends (much to her chagrin). Jon had an on-again, off-again girlfriend, a wild Aussie who looked a little too much like Sansa and who was always banging on about environmental issues. Robb was a bit more of a mystery, but he was always the most discreet, in all things.

Even Sansa had a sex life, as unappealing a thought that was: a few months ago, Arya had come home to an empty house, (she was sent home from school with a stomachache) and gone to her room. Sansa's room was below hers, and concupiscent moaning, obviously Sansa's, in rutting chorus with baritone groaning (she didn't think Joff had it in him!) drove her to headphones and loud, loud music.

Chances are Rickon'll grow up and have sex before I will, Arya thought, grimly. Not that I want to, she thought, as she remembered the man's playful, inviting smile. For even as there was no outright prohibition, no rulebook, she knew that there was no way she could ever have any sort of relationship with such a man. What would they do? Hold hands as he drove her to college? Either she would have to miss out on her youth, or he'd have to live his over again. Of course, the knowledge of its impossibility made it a sweeter fantasy.

Jon put his arm around her shoulders as they arrived at their destination. 'I'm just looking out for you,' he said again.

'I know,' she said.

--

The sign read 'Aemon Targaryen's Armenian Barbershop'

Arya looked up at Jon. 'An Armenian barbershop?'

'It's the best place!'

She frowned, looking dubiously at Jon's hair, which was a mess. It looked crappy. The barbershop looked crappy. Wood paneling from aeons ago. Pictures, some ancient, which Jon explained were all Aemon's extended family. More modern ones: a picture of two siblings. Their graduation picture. Both had platinum blonde hair...obvious dye-jobs. The girl was beautiful; the boy looked like a right tosser. Arya wondered if Aemon had dyed their hair himself, or if his stylistic talent, such as it was, extended to this younger generation.

The man himself was elderly, skin paper-thin, and nearly blind, yet he let none of that stop him in the relentless pursuit of sharp gentlemen's haircuts. He really only knew the one style, but that was fine enough.
'Aemon, this is my sister, Arya.'

She took an immediate liking to the old man. They explained that Arya would be playing the part of a boy for the next few months, and she'd need to look and act the part impeccably.

She sat in the chair, sipping apple tea, and her thick chestnut hair (*my only pretty feature*) fell in heaps and hunks. Jon was next, and she watched as the elderly barber gave him a haircut eerily similar to hers. Though the hair was only one component of her femininity, it seemed an important one, she reflected as she looked at herself in the mirror. Dark, long lashes framed eyes made out of flint; Northern eyes. Her father's eyes. Bushy eyebrows. *God, what girl has bushy eyebrows at my age?* she thought. Pale skin. A boyish physique. But it's the stance and the attitude that makes a boy. She thought of Robb, and Jon, and Theon. Settled her posture more like theirs. The way that guys walk as if with knowledge that their power lies both in their shoulders and between their legs. In Aemon's mirror, she transformed herself. Jon was shocked as he stepped out of the barber chair.

'My sister, the method actor!'

She cracked, and smiled like a girl.

Jon paid, and Aemon saw them to the door. He patted Arya's hand, and whispered something into her ear. She laughed.

Later, Jon asked her what Aemon had said to her. Blushing furiously, she said, 'He told me not to shave.'

It was with that in mind that Jon stepped into the chemist's on his afternoon walk with Ghost, and returned, handing Arya a bag with a tension bandage. 'What is this?' she asked. He looked at her, then down at her chest.

'Ah,' she said. 'I didn't think it was...'

'Well, it is,' he interrupted, and they laughed.

Sansa Stark walked into Jon's house, accompanied by Joffrey and his ever-faithful minder, Sandor Clegane.

She saw a stranger on the couch. A boy, playing video games.

'Who the hell are you?' she cried, 'And what are you doing in my brother's house?'

'Ooooh, you must be SAHN-sa,' the boy said, drawing out the first syllable of her name and giving her a lingering once-over. 'You're well fit, aincha, love?'

Sansa stepped back, backing right into Sandor Clegane, who steadied her with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

'Who ARE you? How dare you talk to me that way?'

The 'boy' grabbed his crotch and dissolved into helpless giggles, revealing herself with a 'ta-da.' Joffrey pushed past them and made for the kitchen.

Sandor rolled his eyes. Sansa raised her hand to the large mitt still resting on her shoulder. At her light touch, his hand slipped from where it had been resting. Almost tenderly.

*Did I see that correctly?* Arya wondered.
They all got a little drunk that night. Except for Sandor Clegane, who was sat in a chair nursing a beer and paying more attention to his iPhone than to his charge.

Joffrey, that little shite, got howling drunk and made an utter arse of himself by pushing Sansa into the kitchen worktop and groping her, who didn't seem too pleased by it at all. Arya was surprised: she'd thought her sister would be grateful for Joffrey's attentions, however sloppy and fumbling. On hearing her protests, Sandor Clegane, totally unimpressed, rose from the chair he had stuffed himself into for the night, and took himself and Joffrey back to the Baratheon residence. 'It's in Mayfair,' they all chorused after those two had gone, for Joffrey was fond of attempting to impress people with that very line.

Arya wandered upstairs, a little tipsily. Still playing at being 'Harry Stark.' She was definitely getting into the groove of being a boy. Sansa was in the bathroom, the iPhone she'd left on the night table buzzing angrily every few seconds. Arya picked it up, absently.

New tweet from hound_dog to little_bird: Are you ok?
Missed Call
Blocked Number

New tweet from hound_dog to little_bird: Talk to me, please. Don't shut yourself away

New tweet from hound_dog to little_bird: I'm worried now, love
Missed Call
Blocked Number

Well, that's odd. Joff's crappy twitter account is princejoffrey, thought Arya. Who the hell is this?

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a person doing a thing she ought not to do will inevitably be caught doing just that thing...
Chapter Seven

'What the hell are you doing, Arya?' Sansa screeched at her sister, who was holding Sansa's phone and looking rather sorry about it.

Arya looked at Sansa, who had a black and white photograph of a man in her hand and a brown jacket folded over her arm, a jacket looking suspiciously like hers. 'What the hell are YOU doing, Sansa?'

'That's my phone. Are you reading my PRIVATE messages?'

'Give that back.'

'Who is that bloke?'

'Give it here, you cow!' 'Shut up, horseface!'

Blows were exchanged. Arya twisted Sansa's arm behind her back, causing her to screech. Sansa wriggled free and scratched Arya's face. The phone began ringing and Arya, startled, dropped it.

The photo was slightly dog-eared on one side but was otherwise unharmed.

The jacket was flung onto the lamp.

'Right, you two. Shut up and sort it,' Jon came into the room, looking murderous in the dim light filtered by Arya's jacket. Sansa, hair tousled, shirt stretched out where Arya had grabbed her, looked defiant. Arya, her left cheek sporting red welts, looked contrite. But the anger was gone. And the phone had survived its fall onto the floorboards. Sansa picked it up. Arya gingerly picked her jacket off the lamp.

And Jon picked up the photo. He looked at it and handed it to Arya. His face was white with anger. 'You lied to me, Arya,' he hissed.

'I didn't lie...Jon, I'm sorry. I just snapped the picture. It doesn't mean anything.'

'If it doesn't mean anything, then why'd you take the picture in the first place?' Jon retorted, and then left. A few moments later, the front door slammed.

Just bloody brilliant, thought Arya. Jon trusted her, and lying to him would erode that trust. She'd never lied to him before. She briefly wondered whether not telling Jon about seeing the man again counted as a lie, or just a minor little sin of omission.

Seeing how irate Jon was with Arya had the rather miraculous effect of calming Sansa down.

'I'm sorry, Arya,' Sansa began. 'I just saw your jacket on the rail and grabbed it for you. The photo fell out.'

Arya sighed. 'Don't worry about it, Sansa. And I'm sorry too. I just picked up your phone because you were getting a lot of texts. I didn't really see anything. Just some tweets.'

Sansa sat on her bed, gesturing for Arya to sit down as well.
'Do you want to talk about it?' she asked, gesturing to the photo.

'No-well, sure, actually. It's just that there's not much to talk about,' Arya began.

'He was the guy at the exhibition. Maybe you saw him walking around.' Sansa shook her head. 'Well, he came up at sat by me and he had fully bizarre hair and blue eyes and he was handsome and...' Arya trailed off. 'Talked to me. Like I was a human.'

Sansa smiled at her. 'And you felt something for him.'

'Well, yeah, but I know it's not a real thing. Anyway, I snapped that picture of him. He didn't even know I'd taken it, and then I basically ran away like a coward.'

'You've never been...?' Sansa's question died on her lips.

'No. That's the thing. I've never been attracted to anyone. Not like that.'

'It's because he's a man,' Sansa said. 'Not a boy. I know what that's like.'

Arya rolled her eyes. *Yeah, because Joffrey is such a man. Right.* She pursed her lips, as an image came unbidden to her mind. *hound_dog.*

'Sansa, is Joffrey enough for you? Is there maybe...' Arya paused. 'Someone else?'

'No,' Sansa replied. 'I love Joffrey.' Arya saw only lies in Sansa's clear, blue, guileless eyes.

'I'll always listen, Sansa.' Arya half-whispered to her, before rising and slipping downstairs to find Jon.

--

Sunday passed peaceably. Sam and Jon were both noticeably the worse for drink the night before, and were paying the consequences the morning after. Some uneasiness and tension had gone out of all of them, however. Arya had found Jon in the back garden the night before, idly watching Ghost dig up much of it. She slipped his arms around her shoulders, hugging him tightly. She whispered 'I'm sorry,' to his back. He held her close, and they watched Ghost together. It was good.

The raw edge of dread knifed through Arya's belly as she walked up Temple St. on Monday morning, her bag slung across her shoulder, drawing ever closer to the JHWire offices, which were just a couple tube stops away from Jon's. She looked horrible: her eyes had bags under them from her fitful, nervous sleep. The cheek Sansa had scratched on Saturday night was a red slash on her face. Jon and Sam and Sansa had wished her well, the latter even offering her concealer. She waved it away, for what boy wears concealer?

She found the building, quickly checking her phone to see that she was not late, and was relieved to find she had fifteen minutes to spare.

Entering the building, pushing open the heavy glass doors with the JHWire logo emblazoned on them, she advanced towards the receptionist, and asked if she were in the right place for the interviews. She handed the printed email to the receptionist, noting with not a little self-disgust that her hand was shaking as she did so. *Not like a boy. Nothing like a boy.*

'I'm Harry Stark,' Arya said. 'Here for the interviews.'

The receptionist was kindly and looked like someone's mum. In fact, she looked quite out of place in
the starkly modern office.

'Right, love. It's in 3A; the gallery space. Go out these doors and turn left. It's two doors down. You're expected.'

Arya took back the paper: her ticket to entry. Still nervous, her heart in her mouth, she exited the way she came.

3A was in an entirely different building which abutted the first one. Where the JHWire main office was modern: all glassed in and sleekly minimalist, this building was older. Georgian, maybe. 3A had its front windows painted over: black.

Silver lettering proclaimed it to be the 'House of Black and White.'

One door was black; one white.


A hand touched her arm. Startled, she shrugged it off and, affronted, said 'Don't grab me!' Turning to see who had touched her, she found a woman, small and lean and entirely opposite to the receptionist she'd seen earlier. That woman had been plump and motherly. This woman had closely cropped, curly black hair. Her dress, black and white and cowl-necked, was more suited to a cocktail reception than to a workplace. Stilettos. Perhaps this was not quite a normal workplace, Arya thought.

She had beautiful arms: long for her size, thin, yet muscled, eloquent. She was waif-like. On first glance, she looked no more than Arya's age, but she had both an air of sophistication about her and the tiny crow's feet that appear only in a woman in her mid-30s.

'Sorry,' Arya said, lamely. 'You startled me.'

'No matter,' the woman said cheerily, the red lipstick she wore framing a pleasant white-toothed smile. 'And you are...?'

'Oh, yes. Harry Stark,' Arya supplied, showing the woman her letter.

'Good. Right this way, then.' She led Arya through to another room. Less dramatic, this room was set up almost as a lecture theatre: a largeish space with creaking wood floorboards. There were about 20 chairs set up in this room, facing a central podium, with a few seats beyond it, facing the audience. About two-thirds of the chairs were occupied. The woman gestured that Arya should choose one, and she did. Halfway up on the right side of the room. A few large prints of photographs were hung on the left side. War photography. Much like the ones she had paused at during the exhibition on Friday.

Arya checked her phone. Five minutes left. The rest of the seats gradually filled with other young men. Most looked like they'd been to art school. Some knew each other, and those lads' conversation filled the otherwise silent room; those who knew no one said nothing. A few people, some men, some women, including the one who had startled her at the entrance, walked to the front. Obviously JHWire employees, but not the man himself, she gathered. A man walked briskly past her and up to the front of the room. A familiar smell traveled back to her nose, but she couldn't place it.

He walked to the front and took the podium. He smiled. _Of course. He's always smiling._
'My name,' he started, 'is Jaqen H'ghar. Welcome to JHWire, and congratulations on getting this far in our internship process.' There was polite clapping for the man from the photography exhibition, the man from Sainsbury's. *How could this be?* Arya wondered, her heart pounding, thinking of the photo in her jacket.

*Christ. I'm interviewing for an internship with this man. A year with him. I couldn't possibly stand it,* she thought.

His slightly ruffled hair had been shorn, minimizing the odd whiteness on the one side. Also gone was the leather jacket (she felt a brief pang) and the t-shirt. He was wearing a pair of dark blue jeans, completely at odds with his scruffy ones, and a fine black light-wool jacket. The kind of thing you'd see on a Baratheon and know it cost several thousand pounds. He had rolled up the sleeves. You'd never catch a Baratheon rolling up the sleeves of a jacket like that. His shirt was white and open at the neck. *Stop staring at his throat!* His casual appearance was entirely gone. He truly could have been a different person, but for her, she'd know him anywhere.

'You won't just be interviewing for an internship with me, but with all of us.'

They came up to the podium and introduced themselves. Arya barely paid attention: photographers, writers, studio and production specialists, marketing types, social media experts. They didn't just cover wars, she found out. They did a lot of studio work, which meant commercial and fashion work, too.

'Everyone has to pay the bills,' he said, laughing. 'And this building cost a lot.'

*If it's all of them, I can keep out of his way, maybe.*

He went on, talking about contemporary photography, photojournalism, and so forth. It was quite interesting to hear his perspective on the news media, and he was passionate in his delivery. Soon she was able to focus more on his words than the unbelievably odd coincidence of seeing him again. *I am Harry Stark,* she thought. *I am Harry Stark.* If he saw her in the audience, he betrayed no sign of it. She started to feel safe as Harry.

He ended his presentation, noting that the individual interviews would begin in 45 minutes. He welcomed them to enjoy the gallery, to peer around every corner and search out all the little alcoves. They'd find each applicant when it was time for the interview. The bloke sitting next to her whispered to his friend, 'He only opens this place once every three years or so, so it'll be great to see it all now.'

There was food and art. Arya could handle that. She wandered around, munching on some grapes. There were all kinds of images: from high art to what looked like Lomo-cam silliness. Not all the images were his; not even half of them. Everything he shot was elegant. Much of it was without the subject's knowledge. As if, even when he was meeting their eyes, they were still unaware of his presence. She became lost in the pictures, forgetting even to be nervous about the interview.

With each nook and cranny of the gallery that she explored, she weighed the costs and the benefits. To have access to his knowledge; what a thing that would be. To become infatuated with something that was just a picture: love in two dimensions, well, that was controllable. But in three dimensions, paper became flesh. What if the strands of desire wove in closer, knitting her and him together? That wasn't controllable. *That was being out of control, like whatever the hell is going on with Sansa,* Arya thought. What if being near him resulted in nothing more than frustrated desire? That was worse.

'Lovely boy,' spoke a voice in her ear. Startled, she turned. There he was. His smile more of a smirk.
'It's 'Arry Stark, is it?' His accent caused him to drop the initial 'H' from her pseudonym.

_Fuck. I can't do this_, she thought, turning once again to run.

He grabbed her arm, but gently. She could feel the heat from his palm as it circled her wrist. 'Don't go,' he said to her. 'Please don't go.'
All men must die

Chapter Eight

[It is the function of the mass media] to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda.

-Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky, from Manufacturing Consent

The man named Jaqen H'ghar was a mysterious figure to most of the world, including Arya. His work: to be admired. Worshipfully. A photographer who was extremely proficient, technically speaking: he was nearly magical in his ability to capture images under terrible conditions. Whether it was too bright, or too dim: it seemed not to matter. Howling winds, terrible rains, the ground shaking under his feet: it seemed not to matter. A war going on? He dodged bullets, ordnance, soldiers. It never mattered. It became art.

A commercial photographer who shoots fashion has to deal with the vagaries of models: some are easy, photogenic professionals. Some are stick-thin divas who've snorted cocaine with celebrities at parties, and think that, just because they're recognizable because their images are used to sell consumer goods, they've really arrived. Commercial photographers rarely have to worry about whether the building they are shooting in is about to be bombed.

Jaqen H'ghar, never one to take the easy road, built a career globe-trotting, seemingly looking for death and destruction, with occasional diversions into travel and nature photography. (And when he was in London, he shot whatever the company required him to). He built a business with like-minded individuals; some thrill-seekers like himself, some content to run things from the London headquarters. He sought out hot-spots around the world, never judging conflict, but providing images for it. If Jaqen H'ghar had a personal philosophy, it was that one should never editorialise a photograph. The photographer's personal bias belonged nowhere within the photo. The photographer himself should be no one. JHWire was less successful in its reportage; major news conglomerates and government are usually in each other's back pocket, and, while not always, but often enough, the news they report is the news they manufacture. And Jaqen H'ghar did not like that very much.

The mystique surrounding Jaqen H'ghar was largely due to the rampant suppression of his image coupled with the widespread dispersion of the images he shot. He was often quoted, often interviewed, and he was interesting and erudite. Interviewers stopped bothering to describe him in print, when it became clear that none of the descriptions matched each other, for Jaqen H'ghar had a chameleon-like quality. He was playful, witty, and a bit exotic. True to form, he never spoke of himself; to them, he was no one, and often resorted to saying just that when interviewers tried to dig deeper into his life. The commonest descriptors of him were that he was 'handsome and enigmatic.' Both were true.

It was this Jaqen H'ghar who had hold of Arya's wrist, who had pleaded with her not to go, and who then, taking her not-fleeing as consent, ushered her off to her interview. Through a door marked 'private', and into a central atrium. Up a set of stairs to the mezzanine. Left.

His office was a mess. Navy-blue walls. Dark wood panelling and an old, old desk: the kind of desk that looked like it had been lifted in the dead of night from one of Britain's great houses. The computer with a large cinema display an incongruous juxtaposition. A light table behind it. Negatives: real film! Arya couldn't help her smile: seeing that was exciting. Bookshelves: full,
disorganized. Files: loads of them. Stuff on the floor, even. Photos on the walls, including a very interesting and very large one of the Queen laughing; that photo was on what looked to be a door, disguised to look like the rest of the wall. He still held her by the wrist. She tensed a bit and he let her go.

He sat down behind the desk, sinking into an old-looking leather swivel chair. He gestured, and she sat at the chair opposite him. The one that wasn't piled with files and books and a cat.

He extended his hand to her, wrist-bones fine and visible. The skin stretched taut across a lean and muscled forearm. She slowly extended hers to him.

They shook hands. 'I'm Jaqen H'ghar,' he spoke, his smile broadening into a happy grin.

'I'm Harry Stark,' she said.

"Arry Stark, yes,' he said. 'Or perhaps let's call you Arya now.'

*Endgame*

Arya tried to stutter some excuses, but he just covered her hand with his other one. 'I think I understand. Based on your portfolio, I see you're serious. You weren't going to let a little thing like your gender get in the way.'

'I wanted to try,' she said.

'Very good. Just so.'

'Are you angry?' she asked. He'd finally released her hand, and it slowly emptied of the warmth he'd given her as she drew it back to her body.

'Not at all. Perhaps you have more courage than sense, but truly, I understood your reasons.'

'Why did you want only male interns?' she asked, braver now.

He let out a long exhalation. 'It was not precisely my idea. We—there are eleven of us within JHWire, you see—usually decide things collectively, and the group decided some years ago that there are too many risks inherent in this enterprise to permit a young woman to participate.'

'That's utterly insane. Women can join the army now. Women can be firefighters, and police officers, and all sorts of hazardous things,' Arya said, defensively.

'Yes, but all of those things are organisations which have rules and oversights. Codes of conduct, if you will. This is different. At the end of the day it's a man and a woman in often hazardous situations. Who share a latrine sometimes, if there is a latrine at all. Who suck out snake poisons from the other's skin. Who share a bed sometimes...’ Alarmed, Arya's eyes widened a little. ‘...to keep warm,' he finished.

'Have there been many snake-bites?' Arya asked.

'Not a one,' he said, and laughed. 'But I had to cuddle with a man for five straight nights last winter: a man with all the subtlety of a bull, who continually passed wind,' he said, shuddering in mock horror.

Arya laughed: a great peal of laughter. He was lovely. *Better than the photo.*

'Why did you cut your hair?' she asked.
'Why did you cut yours?' he retorted. 'But seriously, you've seen this,' at this he pointed at the left side of his head, where the white hairs grew. 'I didn't want to have to explain that. To anyone who came here today,' he said, pointedly, as he saw the question on her lips. She let it drop.

'Why do you have a photograph of the Queen in here, and is that a secret door?' she asked.

He smiled. 'Yes, it's a secret door; a doorway to my house.' Don't think about that. 'And I often like to boast that I have an even shorter commute to work than the Queen. Who, for the record,' he boasted, 'gave me this desk.' She rolled her eyes, as he began to pet the desk.

'How did you know I was Arya Stark?' she asked, emboldened even more.

'Ah, two reasons,' he responded. 'One, the file archive you sent was IP-logged as being from Northumberland. We did specify that our intern must reside in London, as you may recall.'

She had the grace to look ashamed at his unspoken remonstrance.

'I do reside in London now,' she said. 'With my brother.' Until my mum finds out what I've done, anyway.

'I see. In any case, your pictures and your name connected you to Arya Stark, aged 16.' He set a large book on the table. 'Look,' he said, Burke's Peerage. It told me all I needed to know about you, Lady Arya.' He gave a mock bow. 'I did not realize that you were only 16, milady,' he continued, a bit ruefully. Ah, she thought. He did think I was older. There was an apology contained in his statement, like he wanted to take back his flirtatiousness. Like he was backing away from her: throwing up a barrier that, while invisible, would also be impenetrable.

'How did my pictures connect me to, well, me?' she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Her file, she soon found out, was at the top of the heap on his desk. He took the file, rose and walked to the other side of the desk, where he placed it in front of her. Standing beside her, he thumbed through to the end picture, and stated, 'Your father was Lord Eddard Stark, yes?'

'Yes,' she replied softly.

'He was murdered,' Jaqen said, softly. 'And your little brother was hurt too. It was everywhere on the news a few months ago.'

She willed the tears not to gather in the corners of her eyes, but the tears, defiant, came and gathered there anyway.

'I hate being weak,' she said, angrily.

He gathered her to him, placing her head on his chest. To his surprise, she was pliable. Rocking a bit, he held her close for a while. His hand making soft circles on her back. It felt good: all the comfort of a brother, but with this extra spark of something: it felt nothing like one of her brothers holding her. A bit guiltily, her arms stole around his slim waist. 'You're not weak,' he said. She felt him press his lips to her forehead. Just human. And a girl doesn't ever want to believe it of her father, but all men must die.'
Chapter Nine

She felt metal sliding underneath his shirt: the metal of a chain or something like that pressing into her cheek. *Like dog tags,* she thought, soberly. And she realized that her tears had fallen freely on one side of her face, but on the other, they'd been absorbed into Jaqen's shirt. *Great,* she thought. *Five minutes alone with the first chap I've ever fancied and I've managed to cover him with mucus.*

'At JHWire,' he said, 'you will be 'Arry. There are too many rules that have been broken already,' he said, gently disentangling himself from their embrace. She stepped back from him and sat back in the chair. He brushed the trace of tears from her cheek softly, almost absently.

Arya nodded her agreement. *Too many broken rules, indeed. Understatement of the year, she thought.*

Jaqen continued, sternly. 'Here, in this room with me, you can be Arya. And at home, of course. And at the supermarket,' he said, breaking into what she was fast beginning to recognize as his trademark smirk.

'I understand,' she said.

'We'll also have to sort out school,' he continued.

'But I...'

'You need to finish school, even if you're not required by law to do so.' *Why?*

As if he heard her, he continued. 'Because your family has been through enough. Talk to them about staying in London for the school year. Or I will.' He looked at her appraisingly. 'Did you even tell them about this opportunity?'

'Y-yeah,' she stuttered.

'You lie,' he said.

Stung, she retorted, 'Well, I told my brothers.' *Some of them.*

'You need to come clean,' he reproached her. 'I will meet with your mother.'

*Oh God, no. Mum is going to murder me.* 'All right,' she gave in, grudgingly.

'Give me your mobile,' he said. She fished it out of her bag and gave it to him. His own phone rang when he typed in a number. 'There. You'll be able to find me when you need me.' *I need you now.* *Stop it, stop it, stop it!* Ludicrous images of him in the bunk beds at Jon's house floated into her consciousness. She mentally batted the images away.

'Besides the paperwork, you've got one final thing to do, and you should do it tonight. Details are here.' He handed her an envelope. Kind Jaqen was gone. Flirty Jaqen just an echo. This was business.

A soft knock sounded at the door. The plump, motherly one from reception did not wait to be told to enter, but came right in. She had a red file folder in her hand. She beamed at Arya.
'Umma, this is Arya.'

Oh crap! He said my name, thought Arya.

'It's Harry,' she countered. 'Pleased to meet you.'

'Arya, this is Umma. She knows!' he said, in a hoarse stage whisper. 'I can't keep anything from her, can I, Umma?' His smile broadened.

'No,' the woman replied, with obvious fondness. 'No, and you never could.'

Arya chastised herself for feeling slightly jealous of the woman, who looked to be in her early fifties.

Umma handed Arya the red folder.

'In there,' Jaqen pointed to it, 'you'll find more details. We had arranged on-site accommodation for our intern, but we think it's better for you to stay with your brother. Ignore that part. It would be inappropriate, she thought, agreeing with what he had not needed to say aloud. And Mum might go for my staying with Jon for a year, but not for my staying here.

'Go home now, and read through the package. Fill out and sign what you can. Umma will show you out.'

She was dismissed. Umma held the door open for her, and Arya put the red folder and the envelope Jaqen had given her into her bag. As she left, Jaqen said to her, softly, 'And don't forget tonight's assignment.' She nodded again and left.

Her bag had grown slightly heavy on her slim shoulders, but Arya chose not to take the underground back to Jon's house; it was less than a mile, anyway. Shifting the weight, she walked home, her mind saturated with facts and feelings. So much so that it became a little unreal. The sheer coincidence of it all. Could it really be a coincidence? Is this what fate feels like? Arya was a rational girl, at heart. She'd had a model, in Sansa, for what flights of fancy could do, and she couldn't stand that kind of behaviour. She herself would rather be, well, herself, rather than a simpering romantic idiot. Arya did not understand the reason why so many of her schoolmates fancied so many boys. When they were younger and went to the village school, which actually had boys in it, every day was like Valentine's Day for many. They paired up: miniature versions of their parents. They broke up: little primary school divorces. The girls fancied the boys. The boys chased the girls.

When Arya was older, she attended public school. The sons and daughters of Lord Stark were no snobs, but everyone knew the state schools were not as good as public schools. Sansa was unhappy to be sent there, for Lady Grassmere's School was both not too far away from Winterfell and a girls' school, and Sansa longed to be sent away to school and board somewhere. She also enjoyed the coeducational experience as much as many of the other girls did. In other words, she wanted to get away and she wanted to continue receiving the attentions of boys.

The dearth of lads at Lady Grassmere's affected Arya tremendously as well, when it was time for her to leave the village school, since it was the lads there who were her closest friends.

At Lady Grassmere's, Arya experienced the true misery of one who did not fit in. She was small and weak-looking. She was blunt about things, and had a Northern accent to boot. Her tomboyishness coupled with the fact that she was a day student there rather than a boarder cemented her place as a target for the other is, until they learned two lessons about Arya. At first, the older girls would bully her, but then they learned she was useful – Arya wasn't a stellar student, but she was rather athletic.
This was their first lesson.

A certain contingent of girls at school didn't care about any sporting proficiencies she had and would torture her in sadistic or passive-aggressive ways regardless. Jon and Robb commiserated with her prior to her being sent to Lady Grassmere's, and she recalled vividly how they were convulsed with laughter thinking about their wild sister fitting in with proper little ladies. 'She'll probably file her pencils down and shank someone if they give her any trouble,' Robb cried. Jon laughed so hard he had to clutch his gut. 'Arya,' he gasped, 'just remember to stick 'em with the pointy end.' She tried hard to keep her face serious, but had laughed along with them.

After being tripped half-a-dozen times, bumped, pushed, having her schoolbooks stolen and dog feces placed in her desk, she asked Sansa for help. Her sister's face was carefully blank as she responded. Sansa wouldn't help her, and couldn't help her without risk to herself. Her teachers might have assisted, but one didn't tell tales, did they? One day, after being there about a month, she'd had enough and confessed all to Jon one night in the barn when they were feeding the horses. It was Jon who provided her with the means to her salvation. 'Just don't leave bruises,' he had said. And the proper little ladies had learnt their second, and most important, lesson: the small, tomboyish, weak-looking girl with the Geordie accent would retaliate. Hard.

From that point forward, they left Arya alone. It was as an observer, rather than a participant, that she watched them. They fell in love with boys from bands. They fell in love with the only male teacher on staff. They talked about their boyfriends from back home. And they snuck into the town after school and fell in love with the town boys. They fell in love with each other, on occasion. They even fell in love with her brothers: Sansa having offered Robb and Jon and Theon up as some kind of commodities to give herself currency. (And Theon, for his part, dutifully obliged Sansa in this enterprise, consequently having his pick of some of the daughters of England's finest).

For Arya, school, and the collective angst of its pupils, was something to be endured rather than enjoyed. At the end of the day, she'd go home and play with the village boys, asserting her place once again in the hierarchy of her mates. She was happy to be away from the sighing and love-struck girls at school. Eventually, even her safety and surety with that group began to erode. All things must pass: and the passing of childhood is especially poignant to those who would choose to remain in that state. Her mates, these lads she'd grown up with and thought of as brothers, began to notice things. The village girls. Sansa, whose long red hair became...talked about. Breasts. Bottoms. Hips. Lips. Whether a girl would. Whether a girl wouldn't.

It bewildered Arya. And it bewildered her even more when they began to turn and notice her. The swell of her chest. There's nothing there! she had cried out, mentally. What lay underneath her clothes. Nothing! Wrestling matches turned to groping tussles. The boorishness of boys she could deal with, even enjoy. The perversions of boys, however, made her want to run. And so, reluctant to gain this attention, after many attempts to divert it elsewhere, she began to withdraw from this group of people, who'd been her constant companions for as long as she could remember.

She became despondent. Is there something wrong with me? She would ask her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Am I a lesbian? But the answers didn't come, really. She didn't like girls that way. She didn't like boys that way. She didn't like anyone that way. Had her parents some insight into her thoughts, they might have reassured her, told her about time and its magical workings. But they, of course, just saw her growing sad.

It was around this time that Ned Stark, who was perhaps wise, or perhaps just lucky in his timing, gave Arya a gift: the camera she named Needle. She threw herself into photography with all her heart. It relieved her loneliness. It gave her something: the ability to look at life and capture it, but not necessarily participate.
Now, as she walked home from JHWire, Arya felt a bit guilty, since she'd always been contemptuous of her friends' and school-mates' constant longings for someone or other. She now understood a bit of what it was like to be consumed by this feeling. Arya walked on.

Perhaps, she reflected, this is rather unlucky. It would have been so much easier to feel this way about a boy my own age. Someone for whom I won't have to hide my feelings all the time. Someone who isn't about to hire me. This isn't simply complicated: it's bloody impossible. What do I do with impossible? She thought about Jaqen's behaviour, her mind caressing the syllables of his impossibly exotic name: how she felt him erect a barrier between them, only to walk through it and hold her close only seconds later. He made me feel cherished, she thought. Touching me. Kissing me, even though it wasn't a real kiss. And then the walls went up again. She searched herself, honestly not knowing which was better: to give in to an impossible fate, (if fate it was) and face her feelings, thus embracing the expectation of rejection and suffering because of it. Or to maintain the walls, adding to them over time. To never speak the words. To back away from him each time he advanced, until it just dissipated. Does this feeling ever go away? she wondered. She never paused to consider her third option. Stop now. Go home. Go to school. Forget this. For, somewhere deep in Arya's mind, that option was the true impossibility.

She turned on to Jon's street and stopped in her tracks. The interview...he didn't even ask me any questions! As she walked up the steps to Jon's house, fumbling for her key, she realised that there was one more large hurdle to overcome. Jon. He's going to be so very, very angry with me.

A bit philosophical, I know. But really, if this happened to you, your mind would be absolutely churning, too!
The same boat

Chapter Ten

Arya paused for several minutes on the front steps of the house, trying to rehearse the conversation she would need to have, inevitable and unpleasant as it might be, with Jon. It was just noon, and Jon was expected home by half-six, so she had time to calm herself and plan a cool, collected conversation.

Hi Jon...remember that guy I met at the photography show? Well, that's actually my new boss. What a strange coincidence, right?

Hi Jon...I don't want you to get angry, but there's been the most astonishing coincidence. That guy that I accidentally took a photo of is my new boss.

Hi Jon...guess what? That guy from the photography show works at the company I'm going to be interning for.

Hi Jon...I fancy an older man like mad, and I'm pretty much going to be working for him for a year or more, and I don't know what the fuck to do about it. So, what's for dinner?

Each scenario Arya played over in her mind resulted in Jon going barking mad on her. She knew his temper well, and knew that she was lighting the powder-keg no matter what she decided to tell him, since deciding not to tell him was a choice that had been taken from her. She'd told Jaqen several lies; she'd told him more lies than truths, in fact, and there was no way he'd not check up on whether or not she told her family. Her mother would be angry, but angry about being deceived in the first place. On the other hand, Jon's anger would stem from his fear for her. Mum could be placated with a bit of a story, but it would be hard to convince Jon that this was a good idea. Because it isn't a good idea, thought Arya.

Arya walked into the front room, and found Sansa watching television (children's programming?) on the couch and Sandor Clegane, sitting once again in the chair that looked far too small for him, thumbing through a magazine. Her magazine.

'I didn't know you were into photography, Mr Clegane,' she said.

'I'm thinking of getting into it,' he said, his voice a low rumble.

'Where's Joffrey?' she asked.

'Oh, he asked Mr Clegane to bring me back home,' Sansa said. 'Mr Clegane was just wanting to take a look at the magazine. We're all going to the Baratheons' later for dinner tonight.'

'I can help you, if you'd like,' Arya said to Sandor, ignoring Sansa's social planning.

'Help me?' he queried.

'Yes, if you'd like me to. I can help you choose some basic gear to get started.'

'That's very kind of you, Arya,' he said, rising. 'I'll consider that.' With that, he stalked out of the house.

Sansa kept her eyes glued to the TV. A studied nonchalance.
Arya walked up the stairs to her room. Her phone buzzed: a text from her mother. 'How was the first day of the workshop? Talk to you tonight. Bros. & Nymeria & I miss you, love.'

She was grateful to rid herself of the bag, dumping it in the corner. She rifled through it, finding first the red folder and then the envelope Jaqen had given her. Sansa hadn't made her bed that morning. That was odd, Arya thought. *Little princess likes everything neat.* While Arya's bunk was customarily rumpled, Sansa's was not. Something caught her eye: a piece of foil. She picked it up, and climbed up to her bunk.

Uncrumpling the foil packet, she felt like Eve as she ate the apple, and *knew.* She saw everything so clearly now. *What has my sister done?* A rush of horror flowed through her, followed closely by a rush of pity. Everyone hated Joffrey Baratheon. He was a horrible, spoilt boy, who clung to his mother, who lied and cheated and stole. Worst of all, he whinged. Constantly. About everything. There was not a single redeeming quality in the boy's personality. He was nasty to nearly everyone, mean-spirited, and he was hopelessly sadistic. When he was younger, he loved nothing better than playing horrible little games with his younger brother and sister, and if one believed them, he loved torturing their pets as well. His one redeeming feature, the one which had probably beguiled Sansa in the first place, was his looks. He was blonde and blue-eyed, tall and tanned. He and Sansa were well-matched, in an Aryan, horsey kind of way. Everyone understood that, especially Cersei Baratheon, who pushed them together constantly, almost desperately. Early on, she had cast Sansa in the role of daughter-in-law, and didn't seem keen to relinquish that idea. Joffrey, on his part, didn't seem to care. On one level, he went precisely where his mother told him; moreso since his father's death, upon which he'd been given a real role to play, both within his family and within his father's corporation. At 21 years of age, he had a job with plenty of toadies to lick his boots, money, a bit of power, and a rather ostentatious car. He wore none of these gifts well. On another level, Joffrey did whatever he bloody well wanted. And what he wanted appeared to be making people suffer.

At some point, Sansa must have transferred her affections from Joffrey to his minder. *Sandor Clegane.* Arya was utterly gobsmacked. The tenderness she'd imagined between them was real. Sansa's oddly withdrawn behaviour must have been inspired largely because being Joffrey's girlfriend, or groupie, or whatever it was, was the only way she could see her lover with any degree of regularity. Arya had clearly wandered into a stolen, private moment. *Thank God I was thinking on the steps,* she thought. Confronting Sandor Clegane *in flagrante delicto,* and with her sister no less, was not something she relished having to do. *Oh, Sansa! What a mess!*

In a funny way, it made Arya feel better. A lot better. Shared misery is better than shouldering it alone. Here was Sansa, an eighteen year old, in some sort of crazy relationship with scarred, huge, slightly frightening Sandor bloody Clegane: in a worse pickle than she could ever be with Jaqen H'ghar. She didn't know what to say to Sansa. What does one say to one's sister, having discovered such a situation? Arya found herself unable to answer that question. Unable to judge her sister's choice. Sandor Clegane was an odd duck, but he was loads better than Joffrey. Anyone would be better than Joffrey. And being caught in the grips of her own infatuation had softened her naturally judgmental approach to the idea of people being in love, generally.

The red folder stared up at her, begging to be read. She opened it, finding an employment contract, insurance forms, consent forms, emergency notification forms. *All this for an internship?* The sheer volume of paperwork began to give her a headache: she would ask Jon to help her dot the Is and cross the Ts on these things later, after she confessed everything to him. There was also an introduction to the company, detailing their activities and how she, as the intern, would fit into place. Or places: for she was to rotate through the various units. A little chagrined, she realised that she would not be Jaqen's intern: she would be his company's intern. Maybe that was a cause for relief. *At least there's nothing particularly weird in here.*
The envelope was next. She opened it.

He’d put one sheet of soft, white paper in it, folded precisely, she noticed. The blue ink from his pen had seeped a bit through the paper. Opening it, she found a few lines of handwritten instructions.

Arya:

Tonight, I want you to make a self-portrait. It must be honest. As the photographer, you must be no one. As the subject of the photograph, you must be yourself.

Jaqen

If the red folder had been all corporate and impersonal, the contents of the envelope were anything but. A bit furtively, she lifted the paper to her nose, half-expecting to find his smell embedded in it. Slightly disappointed, she withdrew it, smelling nothing but the characteristic flat smell of paper and the slightly acrid smell of ink. No 'lovely girl' this time: when he said it, it scared her. When it was absent, she felt its loss. And what did it all mean? Self-portrait. *All right, but what is an honest self-portrait?* she mused. *The photographer and the subject are one and the same – how can I be no one and myself?*

Arya had just begun to despise Jaqen's mysterious, European, cryptic *crap* when she was distracted from the whole subject. Sansa, having allotted some necessary time to herself to calm down from her near miss, entered the room and began rifling through her clothing.

'What are you doing?' Arya asked.

'Baratheons' for dinner,' Sansa said. 'We'll have to dress for it.'

*Not bloody likely*, Arya thought, recoiling at the notion of both dinner and dressing up.

It was Jon who changed her mind about going out. Though he had arrived home physically, he was still at work. *He just never stopped working these days*, thought Arya. This time, he was trying to write a report. She felt guilty about asking him to deal with the red folder, not to mention scared to tell him about the whole JHWire thing. She hovered around the periphery of his visual field, holding the folder, and waiting for a break in his concentration.

Of course, having one's younger sister hovering around, knowing that she probably had some important news to share, is itself a break in one's concentration, and Jon soon resigned himself to the fact that no more work would be getting done that night, and shut the laptop. He readily assented to going out for dinner. Enduring the Baratheon family madness would be shite, but it would get him out of the house and get a proper dinner in them all with very little effort on his part.

Arya gave him the folder, saying nothing. He opened it. Seeing what was on the first pages, he congratulated her, hugging her and spinning her around until she was breathless and laughing. They went through everything. He set aside the pages that would need her mother's signature and helped her fill out the rest. It didn't take more than half an hour, and Arya became so excited that Jon himself became excited for her. The final thing in the folder was the photograph she'd taken of Jaqen H'ghar.

The man's face, evidence of both his sister's lie and her rapidly disappearing childhood, stared up at him. Jon was a workaholic software developer, but he wasn't naive. The face in the photograph was looking at something out of frame: Arya. His smile broad and playful. The pupils, looking out from half hooded lids, dilated slightly: the first stages of that wondering desire that a man might feel towards a girl who was quite out of the ordinary.

'What is this?' he asked her, dreading the response to his question.
'It's him,' she said softly. 'Jaqen H'ghar.'

Years of aiding and abetting her had made Jon somewhat malleable to Arya's will. There was an argument. He raged. She raged back. Sam asked them both to shut it or go outside. Ghost began to howl, which made them both feel guilty enough to stop. Jon, of course, yielded before her.

'I want your word nothing is going to happen before we tell your mum,' Jon said, giving in. She winced a little: Jon always referred to Catelyn that way. *Always reminding himself,* she thought.

Arya looked at him a long while. 'I am a sixteen year-old girl, Jon. I haven't finished school. I have just lost my father. I look like a boy. I've never had a boyfriend, and I am not pretty nor am I particularly smart. I don't go about seducing men. Why would a man like this be interested in me in that way? If he pays me any mind at all, he's just being kind. He's not a pervert. Meet him yourself and decide.' She thought back to her conversation with Jaqen earlier that day. He'd threatened to meet the family anyway, so this was a good card to play. *Although I may die of embarrassment should this meeting take place.*

'I will, Arya.' Jon said. 'You can depend on it.' He kept his thoughts to himself. It was clear Arya had no clue – about men or about herself.
Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

On the nose of six, Catelyn phoned Arya's mobile. They spoke briefly: Arya hadn't quite planned out how she was to break the news of what would be a lengthy absence from Winterfell, from her family, and from her school to Catelyn. Instead, she provided vague answers to the questions Catelyn asked about the fictitious workshop and asked after her brothers. By the time she'd exhausted her mother's ability to relate Bran's continued battles into better health, and confused her mother heartily by asking ridiculously detailed questions about the running of the farm-gate business, the weather, and other things she was never known to have any interest in previously, Jon had had enough.

Watching Arya on the phone had led him to a decision. He made the classic 'give me the phone' motion to his sister. Surprised, she muttered a quick 'Jon wants to speak to you,' before he had grabbed the phone out of her hand.

Jon made small talk for about five seconds, which was about as much as he could bear. And then he asked Catelyn a favour, and delivered the coup de grace himself.

'I'd like Arya to stay for me for the year. There's a fine arts school in London that she really wants to attend. She also got an internship with a world-renowned photographer. Yes, just from today's workshop.' A little white lie. And another one.

Arya's mouth had opened to its utmost width. What is Jon doing? she thought. Jon moved out of the front room and went up the stairs. She heard his door shut.

She never learned the precise details of the conversation Jon had with her mother that night, but when he returned with the phone, her mother spoke to her again, calmly. She congratulated Arya on the internship and sounded proud. Weary and sad, but proud. She wasn't angry at all, Arya thought. She was just sad. But she's always sad.

'Why did you do that, Jon?' Arya asked. 'I should have told her.'

Jon was examining the picture of Jaqen H'ghar. 'Because she's been through enough. It's easier for her to blame me for this.' His words echoed Jaqen's from earlier in the day.

'Blame you?' Arya didn't understand.

'It was me who told you to apply for the internship, Arya, and when you wouldn't, I submitted a portfolio for you.'

Arya was appalled. 'Why would you do that? I mean-you didn't do that. Why would you say you'd done that?'

Jon just smiled at her. 'Let's just say it's easier for her to understand my lying to her than your lying to her.' He moved to the papers in the JHWire red file, and

But now we've both lied to her. Arya felt miserable and so, so selfish. Bad enough that her mother was in Northumberland, widowed and taking care of a business and two young sons, one of whom required round-the-clock care. Yes, she had two sons to help her, but they had aspirations too. And Winterfell required work. There were stables, and self-catering cottages, and tenant farmers. There was a massive greenhouse enterprise. There was just so much: the lords of Winterfell had diversified, becoming agro-businessmen rather than simply landed gentry depending on rents. To Arya, it was
paradise on earth, but it took work: both from its employees and from its children. And now Jon, who had long been alienated from what was his rightful home, distanced himself further by shielding her from her mother.

Jon must have seen her face awash with guilt, for he sat down with her and reassured her. 'You weren't going to stay above another year anyway, and we both know it.' She nodded. 'And for me, it's all right. You can still tell her: but give her some time. Let this be for now.' She nodded again, not really convinced. But she didn't let herself sink further, because hovering just below the surface was the grim reality: my Da is dead and can't ever come back. And that was too horrible to bear.

It was a frock. It was green. It wasn't ghastly, since it had neither ruffles nor sparkly bits. But it wasn't exactly what Arya would have chosen for herself (jeans and a hooded sweatshirt would have suited her just fine). But dinner at the Baratheons' Mayfair townhouse called for a frock. Arya put it on and combed her hair. When Sansa, herself looking rather pretty in a pale blue sheath, suggested the additions of mascara and lip gloss, Arya threatened to kill Sansa in her sleep.

She walked down the stairs, Sansa behind her. Catching sight of herself in the full-length front hall mirror, Arya sighed. *Awkward,* she thought. She put on her jacket and shoes, ignoring Sansa's over-exaggerated sighs.

So what? *Sneakers and a grey camouflage anorak aren't the rage with green cotton frocks?*

She slung her camera bag over her shoulder, Jaqen's note folded up into the pocket of her jacket. Somehow, she'd have to get that self-portrait.

Dinner at the Baratheons was the usual mess. The food was good, however. Cersei prided herself on, if not cooking herself, making it appear as though she did. Everything was very homemade-looking. In fact, it was so rustic and homely that one just knew by instinct that it had been catered by some top-notch company.

Cersei presided over the table, her beloved Joffrey at her right. Her twin brother Jaime sat at the foot. Jaime Lannister was a weird guy, thought Arya. An engaging man with a rather forlorn air about him. *Maybe it's because his parents spelt his name like a girl's,* she thought. He had never married. Tyrion Lannister, their youngest brother, sat amongst them like a cat amongst the pigeons. He was brilliantly funny, and he had never stopped getting married. Arya couldn't quite recall what his newest wife's name was, and vowed to avoid her in order to avoid embarrassment. Oh, and Tyrion was also a dwarf, which was pretty much the first thing one noticed about him.

Joff's younger brother and sister, Tommen and Myrcella, carried with them terribly poncey names, but were utterly normal children, who bore the brunt of Joffrey's horrible sociopathic behaviour. *One day, Arya figured, they're likely to kill him.*

It really was a rather weird dinner, but it was always like that. It was familiar-weird, not strange-weird, and no one really thought anything of socialising with the Baratheons because they'd been a fixture in the Starks' lives forever. Somehow, Arya noticed, Sansa had engineered it so that she sat next to Sandor Clegane. Despite the fact that Sandor Clegane worked for the family, he was always included in their social occasions. Poor man. Throughout dinner, Arya subtly glanced at the two of them. As if expecting onlookers, they were so careful not to talk or touch that it appeared as though they were magnets whose poles repelled one another.

Cersei was tipsy when they arrived and would have been falling-down drunk during dinner had she not been seated. She took the occasion to sling a few insults here and there, mostly at Tyrion, who gave as good as he got. It was sad, Arya reflected. She was pathetic.
Robert Baratheon and Ned Stark had grown up together. Men who become fast friends at an early age often forgive each other for quite terrible behaviour in adulthood. And while Ned Stark had always been steady and responsible, Robert was a bit of a profligate. Having been nicked in his early adulthood by selling marijuana (unfortunately, to an off-duty DS), Ned Stark bailed him out. And Robert repaid that faith by actually turning himself around to a degree. He stopped selling dope and blowing thousands of pounds on weird rubbish (Ned had once told Arya that one of Robert's purchases involved both an American Cadillac and a leopard). Instead, he went to business school and became some sort of management consultant. He even did speaking engagements for a while.

Robert Baratheon was from an old and respectable Northumberland family, even if he himself didn't uphold his name particularly well. Cersei Lannister, whose father had made an absolute ton of money in banking, married him for reasons no one knew. She and Robert Baratheon were incredibly poorly matched. Their marriage was a pitched battle at most times. Their friends always felt like they had ringside seats to a fight of some sort. Marked by infidelities on both sides, horrible fighting, binge eating, and, in later years, alcoholism, it was less a marriage than a cautionary tale.

Robert had even had a long-term lover, a London girl whom he'd never even promised to leave Cersei for, as men do seem to promise, and had a son with her. In fact, Robert and Cersei's bond was perversely strengthened by their mutual hatred. Divorce was out of the question: neither wished to give quarter to allow the other to eke out some semblance of happiness. They were bonded by misery. It was less a wonder that they managed to breed a creature like Joffrey, and more a wonder that Tom and Myr (as they chose to be known) were likely to grow up to be normal, rational adults.

And then Robert died a few months before Ned Stark. A stupid hunting accident, where he was unfortunate enough to be charged by a wild boar, the tusk of which pierced his thigh, severing his femoral artery. He was dead within minutes, not sober enough to have it dawn on him that he was, in fact, really going to die.

Her father was noticeably upset, and she'd put her arms around him, Arya remembered, at Robert Baratheon's funeral. They ate the wild pig that killed him. It was Cersei's idea.

After Cersei could no longer hold herself upright at the table, her brother Jaime peeled her out of her chair and taken her off to her bed. They withdrew from the table to the lounge, or the 'drawing room' as Cersei liked it to be called.

Sansa had asked her to take her picture, and Arya complied. 'Make me pretty.' Sansa said, and sneakily, Arya changed her angle of approach so that she could fit in Sandor Clegane in the background of the photograph. He was his usual hulking self, sitting in yet another chair that was too small for him. As their wedding present, she thought, I'll buy him a chair that actually fits him. The thought of her sister married to Mr Clegane gave her pause for a second, but the absurdity of the idea made her mouth quirk a bit with laughter. 'Make me PRETTY.' Sansa said again, thinking Arya's fight against laughter was something to do with how she was trying to distort her sister's naturally photogenic face. Arya thought, through it all, that she saw Sandor Clegane's eyes follow and settle on Sansa. She took two photos, framed identically. One, focused on Sansa. A very shallow depth of field. Sansa's face would be visible, but the world around, including the figure of Sandor Clegane, would be blurred: shrouded in mysterious and beautiful bokeh*. The second photo was of Sandor Clegane; Sansa's face was blurred, but gently. She was still recognizable.

Joff had insisted they install a billiard table in the room, and his mother had, naturally given in. So Jon and Joffrey played billiards. Jon creamed Joff, who then hit Tom with the cue. Accidentally, of course. It was better than the last dinner they'd had there, for Joff had creamed one of his younger siblings (Arya couldn't remember which) with one of the billiard balls, which had been partially deflected into a window. While the others were giving comfort to the boy on this night, Arya slipped

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* Bokeh: A photographic term that describes the out-of-focus areas in a image. It is often associated with beautiful, often circular, shapes.
out of the room, bag in hand. To be honest, she hadn’t noticed half the hijinks at the dinner table. She’d focused a bit on Sansa, but she was more intrigued, not to mention anxious, with Jaqen’s little assignment. And Jaqen himself.

She went into the loo. Like everything else in the house, it was opulent. Ridiculously so. But a bit clinical, she thought. White marble.

She sat on the loo, thinking. An honest self-portrait. I am no one as the photographer, but myself as the subject. What can he mean?

She thought about the exhibition, and those three photographs of his that she had sat and faced. She recalled those few minutes of conversation. She had said Jaqen H’ghar was talented, and Jaqen himself had asked her if that was, in fact, the case.

He was talented. But why? Because the photographer is no one? What made them no one’s, if they were his? How could no one's photographs be so beautiful?

And the answer came to her from an unlikely source: Sansa. Make me pretty, she'd said. Arya had shrugged Sansa's words off: Sansa was always pretty. But if I had made her pretty, or ugly, I would not be honest. I would not be no one. I just had to make sure it was her, and not somehow my projection of her. And that was honest. And that was no one.

And so, for myself. I must be me and only me. And that is how I can be honest, and no one.

She set the Leica up on the bathroom counter, cursing the fact that she hadn't thought to bring a tripod. The light in the bathroom was good, but too yellow. It would print badly in black and white. She screwed in the flash adapter, and set up a flash to bounce off the wall behind her. Finally, she connected the cable release and calibrated the appropriate distance she'd need to sit at.

And then she took a deep, deep breath, and slipped out of her dress to sit on the bathroom floor. She pushed the cable release button. 5-4-3-2-1. The flash popped, and it was done.

Many times, Arya thought a digital camera would be better. The ability to take and retake without any consequences was very tempting when an entire roll of film came out horribly, or when eyes were closed, or exposures or framing were just horribly off.

This was not one of those times.

Arya was having trouble falling asleep that night. The day had been a whirlwind, the evening a bit mad. The rush of discovery. Solving Jaqen's photographic riddle. There might be more where that came from, she warned herself.

The soft buzz of an incoming text message. Not Sansa, this time. Arya looked at her phone. A number she didn't recognize.

‘Lovely girl, come at 09h00 tomorrow. J’

Her heart began to pound. Lovely girl again. Her fingers felt heavy and incapable; her mind felt like mud. What do I say what do I say what do I say? she screamed in her mind.

‘Thanks,’ she typed. Bugger it: that's the best you can do?

‘Sleep well.’ His response was nearly instant.
She did not respond. After all, what could she possibly say?

*bokeh is a photographic term referring to blur. Leicas, like Needle, are very good at making pretty blurs.

Thanks for reading. More Jaqen soon - I promise. And soon we'll meet another person with a familiar face...
Chapter Twelve

Tuesday dawned cloudy-bright, with the high overcast skies so characteristic of a London summer. Or winter, for that matter. The kind of sky that confuses the eye: brighter than blue sky, yet soft and grey. The optic nerve sends strange signals to the brain, and most people just get a headache as a result.

Having slept horribly, her euphoria at completing her self-portrait building onto her anxiety with respect to the coming day, she woke early and slipped out to take Ghost for a walk.

The dog padded obediently alongside her as she went into the park near Jon's house. Blades of longish grass heavy with the morning dew brushed against her ankles. She didn't feel confident unleashing Ghost, though Jon had told her it was fine. Even at that early hour, there were diehard joggers and power-walkers passing through on the footpath, and she didn't want to have to shoulder the responsibility for passers-by running in fright from the large, white, wolfish dog. So she doffed her sandals and ran with the dog on his leash.

A girl in the first bloom of romantic adoration looks for her lover (or her imagined lover) in the places people inhabit, picking through generic crowds or scanning coffeeshops, looking for that one special face. Arya was no different: the knowledge that Jaqen H'ghar lived less than a mile away from her continually reasserted itself in her consciousness. Even as she played with Ghost, attempting to wrestle the stick from his mouth with mock ferocity, she was conscious of possible onlookers. Was he running down that path? Would he be wearing a hat, and so, would she be able to recognize him by his lean figure alone? She shook these thoughts from her mind and, slipping her sandals back on, slowly walked back to the house, Ghost panting by her side.

Had she turned back, around the time she left the park, she would have seen a man, lean muscles working under his skin, running with another man: shorter and much broader. Jockeying for position, they each kept trying to push the other off the footpath. But she didn't turn back, and instead made a mental checklist for the upcoming day as she walked back to the house.

Arya's mental list was comprised mostly of behavioural tasks:

1. *Don't get in the way.*

2. *Be quiet.*

3. *Learn things.*


5. *Don't cry.*

With respect to rule #5, it was bad, she thought, that she'd had what amounted to an emotional breakdown in Jaqen H'ghar's office the day before. A repeat performance was not going to happen. She walked in the door. Jon was grateful to her for walking Ghost and had made her a sandwich for her lunch. After grabbing a bite to eat for breakfast, showering off the morning chill, and packing her bag for the day, she set off. Choosing again to walk the mile to JHWire, Arya settled into the role of Harry, or 'Arry as Jaqen called her. It really wasn't that difficult. It's not like she had to change her clothing, for everything she had, except for a few items, were entirely unisex. *Un-sex, rather.* It was just an attitude adjustment to become a boy. And not a huge one at that, if she discounted her new
fascination with the opposite sex. Or rather, the same sex. *Let's not get into that,* she thought.

She arrived at the reception area of JHWire at a few minutes before nine to find Jaqen H'ghar draped over the counter, chatting to Umma fluidly in a language she didn't recognize.

'Hello, Umma' she said. Umma greeted her warmly, instantly switching back to English. For the first time, Arya noticed slight traces of an accent in the older woman's speech. Jaqen straightened up when he saw her, unrumpling his sport coat. *Pinstripe, this time,* she thought. He hadn't shaved: the beginnings of golden stubble looked good. All other aspects were identical: dark jeans, and a crisp white shirt, unbuttoned at the neck.

Jaqen grinned at her. He squeezed Umma's hand in farewell, Arya noticed, then winked at Arya and indicated she should follow him. *They share something,* Arya thought. *A language, affection.* Again, she tried to fight against the small stirrings of jealousy she felt.

She walked behind Jaqen, almost bumping into him as he stopped. 'Wait,' he said. 'No "hello" for me?' He glanced over his shoulder, grinning.

'Hello, Jaqen,' she said shyly, torn between whether to refer to him as that or 'Mr H'ghar', which just sounded hopelessly weird.

'Hello, Arya,' he said, mock-seriously.

He led her to a desk in a central office area. Three-quarter high walls separated the different work stations, most of which were obviously in use, judging by the amount of gear and junk within them. Theirs were personalised, due to long acquaintance and acquisition of things: hers was blank. She wondered who had last occupied it. The office area was quiet; it seemed as though people hadn't gotten to work yet. The part of her that was raised on a working farm scoffed at this. At Winterfell, they rose at dawn in the summer and well before dawn in the winter. A sudden rush of homesickness rose up in her, which she quashed instantly. She sat in the swivel chair. It wasn't a large space, but it had a desk with drawers, a computer exactly like the one she'd seen on Jaqen's desk the day before, and a guest chair, currently occupied by a lounging Jaqen H'ghar.

Jaqen showed her the cubby where she could stash her bag. He was close enough to her that when she swivelled the chair to put her bag away, her knees brushed his. He did not flinch at the contact. She put the bag away, extracting the red folder and the roll of film she'd shot the night before at his direction.

'Take the film to Eleni, whom you met yesterday, yes?' *I did?* At her blank look, his grin grew even broader. 'She was manning the door yesterday at the House of Black and White,' he said. 'Oh!' Arya blurted, 'The waif-like one.' *Rule #2 broken: Be quiet.*

He threw his head back and laughed. *His neck extended is like a poem,* she thought. 'Yes,' he said. 'She IS waiflike. But she's actually 36!' Arya smiled. His enthusiasm was infectious. *Hopefully, in the future, I will manage to adhere to Rule #3: remember people's names.*

'So, take the film to the waif.' Arya cringed. 'She's the darkroom tech when she isn't playing hostess at the House of Black and White. She'll develop it for you; you can then do the prints yourself. Then come to my office when you're done and we'll go over the plan.'

They rose and left her office. He turned back to her, his face inches from her own, and said, 'And there might be an email waiting for you on that computer.' Again, the smile. It lit up his face and just made her want.
She found the darkroom easily: it was down the hall from the central office area. The waiflike woman named Eleni was still impeccably attired. Almost costumed: she’d added a white lab coat to her ensemble. This made sense: working in a darkroom can easily result in clothing being ruined. Arya’s own approach was to wear a pair of ratty jeans and a hooded sweatshirt of Robb’s whilst in her own darkroom. *To each his own*. Eleni took the film from her, and ran it through the commercial developer. She didn’t say much to Arya, but once the film had been developed and placed in the dryer, she provided an orientation to the darkroom for Arya.

Eleni took the approach that Arya was just a stupid girl (no, boy) who didn’t know anything about a darkroom. After hearing about stop-bath for about the third time, Arya gently tried to disengage her.

‘All right,’ Eleni said, clearly displeased. ‘We’ll see how much you know.’

She left Arya in the darkroom, film ready and red light on. Listening carefully, Arya didn’t hear anything click when Eleni left, so she went first to the door. A small act of sabotage: Eleni hadn’t closed the door properly. Light leakage into the darkroom would result in the prints being unusable: something Arya had faced when small brothers would burst into her darkroom at home. She had installed a lock there, and she found the lock here, turning it with perhaps more force than was absolutely necessary. A very satisfying click sounded, and she was ready.

First, she printed a contact sheet. There were only a few shots on that roll anyway; she’d snapped a few things here and there since Saturday, including a couple shots of the dog, of Jon. Even one of Sam, whose eyes were so kind. There were a few of various Baratheons and Lannisters from the night before. She’d caught Joffrey’s billiard-table tantrum. And then the photos she’d taken of Sansa, and her self-portrait. She flipped the lights in the darkroom to look at the contact sheet, once it was dry. Her photo was exactly as she thought it would be. The ones of Sansa...she wasn’t sure of.

Arya took the liberty of printing the three photos. The one of herself, of course, and the two of Sansa. She’d tell Jaqen, or the waif. *No: Eleni.* Just to make sure it was all right. She waited ‘til they were dry before flipping the lights on, enjoying the familiarity of the darkroom's red glow. She checked carefully: the chemicals were in good supply. No drips or leaks. The water was off. Looked good. She grabbed the now-dry photos, unlocked the door, and left the room. She blinked in the fluorescent glare of the hallway. Eleni was nowhere to be found. Arya peeked into the room where the film developer was, and retraced her steps to the central office area. No Eleni. So she went to find Jaqen himself, stopping first at her cubicle to pick up the red folder.

The day before, she’d accessed Jaqen's office through the gallery space, so she retraced her steps all the way to Umma's post at reception. Umma was not at her desk. *No one is ever here,* Arya thought. A noise startled her. A man was crouched under Umma's desk. 'Hello?' Arya said. He straightened up, kneeling, and brushed the dust off his hands before extending one to her. He was not particularly tall, but he was very broad. His biceps bulged against his black shirt. His face was hooded by a Chicago Bulls baseball cap.

'Hi,' he said. They shook hands. He hadn't given her his full attention, trying to shimmy something back into place.

'What are you doing?' she asked. 'Where's Umma?'

He frowned a little and looked at her, meeting her eyes. 'I'm fixing her computer, he said. I'm Gendry. Gendry Waters – a technician here. You must be the new intern.'

*Oh crap!* ‘Gendry Waters?’ she said, turning it into a question. She KNEW Gendry Waters! He was Robert Baratheon's son. Joffrey’s half-brother. She had no idea how much contact he had with his dad recently, before he died, but Robert had brought Gendry to Winterfell more than a few times
when Arya was just a little girl.

'I'm Harry Stark,' she said. The light went on for Gendry. 'Harry the new intern. Harry. Arya. Arya?' he whispered. 'Is that you?'

Great, she thought. Jaqen had asked her to continue to be Harry Stark. But Umma knew and now Gendry knew too.

She hushed him, quickly explaining. Gendry nodded, grinning a bit at her audacity. He asked what she needed Umma for. Arya explained that she was just trying to figure out where Jaqen's office was before just going outside to the next building.

Gendry showed her the hallway that led to the central atrium. She remembered the space from the day before, when Jaqen had grasped her wrist and led her up the stairs and to his office. She was startled at the transformation in Gendry. He'd run to fat as a young boy. Now, just a few years older than herself, he looked as if he were made of muscle. 'You look more like a model than a technician,' she blurted, breaking rule #2 yet again. He looked well pleased at that. Rather than witness him preen at the inadvertent compliment, Arya said goodbye to him and rushed up the stairs to the mezzanine, and left to Jaqen's office.

The door was closed. She knocked softly. She could hear him within, on the phone. Do I push in? Do I stay out here? She stayed outside and waited. Within a few moments, he had opened it from inside and motioned her in, his head cradling his mobile, his smile gone. He returned to his seat.

'Just pick it up, Mel. It's getting ridiculous. Saturday, then. Right. Bye.' He hung up, and for the first time, Arya saw him without the mask of the smile. He looked tired and a bit cheesed off. He rubbed his eyes for a second, and she wanted nothing more than to hug him, or rub his temples, or something. Anything. He smiled at her and sighed, motioning for her to sit. The office was as hopeless a mess as it was the day before. Even the cat looked as though it hadn't moved. It glared at her with orange-red eyes.

'Don't wait for me to tell you to sit, sweet girl. Just sit.' She sat. Sweet girl!

'I'm sorry,' she began. 'I printed two other pictures I took last night. Not part of the assignment.' He waved her concern away.

'You'll have to show me, is all,' he said. 'But first, let's do the paperwork.' He went through everything. Jon had written him a terse, typed note of explanation. For all intents and purposes, Jon would be acting as Arya's guardian for the year. Having dispensed with the employment issues, he asked to see the photographs.

I haven't even looked myself, she thought, but nodded. It's not like Jaqen knows Sansa. It was safe to show him.

He looked at both. He nodded at one, but his nose wrinkled at the second. He put them down on the desk, flipping them sideways so they could both see.

'This one, he said,' pointing to the one of Sansa, Sandor blurred behind her, 'is soft. You focused on her nose rather than her eyes. Or her mouth – that would have done.' Sansa had her typical 'I'm in a picture' smile plastered on. Arya shuddered a bit at the idea of focusing on her mouth. The eyes, however, should have been way sharper.

She agreed with him. It was a beginner's mistake. Sansa wasn't a hard subject to shoot. And her nose wasn't huge or anything. There was no reason why she should have focused there.
'Is this your sister?' he asked. Arya nodded. 'Tell her not to smile like that. It's cliché.' Arya snorted.

'This one,' he pointed to the one of Sandor, with Sansa blurred in the foreground, 'is interesting. Technically, it needs work, but it is interesting. The look on the man's face is so raw.' She scrutinized the photo. Sandor Clegane, sitting awkwardly in that too-small chair, his face turned to look at Sansa in front of him. The scarring on his face gave him a hang-dog look. His mouth was opened slightly. He looked nothing more like a giant mournful hound whose master is too far away. Like all the longing in the world coalesced itself into one person. hound_dog, she recalled the tweets she'd seen. That's him.

'Why does it need work, technically?' she asked.

'Ah, it's because of him. She's so white and he's in a shadowy corner. We're missing detail from him. Photoshop will fix it up fine, but there's not enough light on him.'

Stung, she said, 'How could I have changed this? It wasn't in a studio or anything. And I used film.'

'You should have dodged it while printing it.'

'But your instructions were "no editing" when I sent in my portfolio!'

'That was the portfolio. Do you really think we don't edit anything?'

Ah. Rule #2 broken again. She added Rule #6: Don't take anything for granted to her mental checklist.

She nodded.

'And now,' he said, 'let's see it.' She handed it over. His face reddened. Did I just catch Jaqen H'ghar blushing?

Why? 'Are you blushing?' she asked. Rule #2 rule #2 rule #2! Shite! Why did I blurt that out?

'Lovely girl,' he began. 'Arya.' Uh-oh.

'Let's say, if we might, that not every intern gives a man who is her employer a nude photograph of herself on her first day.'
When Jaqen looked up at Arya, he looked composed enough to her. All traces of embarrassment, had he even felt it, were gone.

He put the photograph down on the desk between them.

She had peeled her dress off and sat on the cold marble floor of the loo, pale and goosefleshed and shivering a bit. And she had looked directly at the camera, hiding nothing.

She assessed the photograph critically. It was a harsh photograph. Her face was lit, but her shadow was dark behind her. Her eyes, grey in the picture, were open and clear and lucid. Her irises were sharp, ringed by black, their texture wonderfully detailed. Her eyelashes were dark, her eyebrows even darker. Punctuating the seriousness of the face was the mouth, half-quirked, as if she were either amused or defiant. Or both.

In the photo, she sat, her knees pulled to her chest and her arms around her knees. One broken fingernail was visible, and the chill was apparent. The hairs on her arms were standing up.

In all, a lean woman who'd almost left the girl behind. Skin pale; the dark grainy shadows highlighting the muscles in her arms. The photograph showed no trace, to Arya's mind, of sensuality. She looked at Jaqen, but he was looking at the photograph.

'Is it wrong?' she asked. 'I tried to be honest. Sansa inadvertently gave me the idea, really.' His eyes flashed to her. 'She'd asked me to take her picture, earlier. The ones you saw. She asked me to make her pretty.'

Arya continued. 'And then when I was there,' she tapped the photo, 'I knew that I couldn't make myself pretty or ugly. I couldn't distort myself in any way.'

He said nothing, still looking at the photo. 'Stark...’ she said. 'It's stark.'

'More courage than sense,' he said, shaking his head, but he was smiling again. 'Do you want to know what I see when I see this?’

'Yes. I want to know what's wrong with it.'

'We don't need to talk about what's wrong with it. I mean, it's a studio shot that you took in a toilet. Had you a studio to run to last night, you would have used it. You will work in the studio and hone those technical things later. But that's not what I want to talk about.’

He paused and rose from his desk, as if to draw closer to her. Instead, however, he turned away from her, towards his light table.

'It's incredibly brave. It's so open and trusting and naive and vulnerable. Am I going to have to protect you from yourself? he asked her, rifling through the photos on the light table and selecting one.

'Why?' she asked. Where is this coming from? she thought. 'Why would I need protection?’
'Here,' he said, moving to stand beside her. *I am caught between a cat and Jaqen H'ghar,* she thought. *Yikes.*

He put the photo down. 'Gendry,' he said. 'My intern from last year. Look at this. This is his portrait. Look how terrible it is."

'I know Gendry, actually. I saw him today, well, he's...well, he used to visit us when he was younger.'

Jaqen shot her a withering glance. 'So yet another person knows you're female, and underage?'

Arya shot him a glance of her own right back.

'You didn't answer me,' she said. 'Why would I need protection, especially from myself?'

'Gendry's photo is terrible for two reasons,' he said. She rolled her eyes. *Was he ever going to answer the question?*

He put his forefinger underneath her chin, drawing her face up so that she would meet his eyes. 'One, he's total crap. That's ok: he didn't do the internship to be a good photographer. There are some things that he does better than anyone, and it was those abilities that we chose him for. But the second reason why this photo, in particular, is terrible, is that Gendry protected himself too much here. It's honest, but there's nothing that he's...Just so."

'But you, sweet girl, reveal too much. I don't mean it in a literal sense,' he said when she began to protest. 'You're too trusting. There is vulnerability in this picture. There are people, even here, who will take advantage of you if you're overexposed.' She didn't know who he meant. Perhaps he didn't either.

'Don't bare yourself to others like this, lovely girl,' he said. There was a warning in his words.

He held her chin for a moment, his free hand lightly caressing the line of her jaw. Moving closer to her, she thought at first that he was going to kiss her, the idea of it like a fire lit within her mind. She felt a slow, aching restlessness in her belly. Jaqen seemed to be fighting himself. *Those barriers again.* His arms stole around her and he pulled her head to his chest, his fingers wrapping into what was left of her hair. She could feel him sigh. This time, she turned her head to him. She fancied that if she reached up on the tips of her toes, she could kiss the soft hollow of his throat, which he'd so conveniently left uncovered.

Before she had a chance to kiss anything, before she had a chance to register much more than his cinnamon-spice smell, he released her so quickly she tottered a bit and steadied herself by grabbing the chair behind her.

And then he was back beyond her reach. Like nothing had ever happened. *It's probably a good thing that one of us has some self control,* Arya thought, but she felt a bit hurt by the suddenness of it all. *I am probably mistaking kindness for interest again,* she continued thinking. *He just likes to hug. Me. A lot.*

'Don't frown, lovely girl. I have presents for you.' Jaqen handed her a bag, his blue eyes light and happy. *Man, can this bloke flip the switch instantly,* she thought.

*Well, shite!* she thought, as she looked in the bag.

It was a LowePro sling bag, and inside was a Nikon D800, a wide-angle lens, a 50mm lens, and a small telephoto. Still wreathed in that glorious new plastics smell.
'What is all this?' she asked.

'Standard issue to the new interns,' he said. 'Did you not read your contract?'

'It's...no. It's too much, and I have a camera, and...no, I bloody well didn't read the whole thing.'

He chuckled. 'You can't use the Leica for everything: especially not for much of what we do. Keep it for a fine art camera and use this for the job.'

'But you...you have negatives everywhere! And a light table, and a darkroom, etc.' she cried.

Soberly, Jaqen regarded her. 'I do a lot of fine art.'

She left his office, pausing to thank him shyly. It was a big gift, this. She had no idea that was in her employment agreement, and vowed to read that at length to find out what other surprises were in store for her.

She had gathered up the pictures of Sansa and Sandor, but Jaqen put his finger on her self-portrait.

'No,' he had said. 'No, you can't take that one. I'm locking that one up.'

She spluttered. 'But it's my photo! I took it! It's of me!'

'It's mine now,' he said, implacable. 'You printed it with my paper and my darkroom supplies, on my premises.'

'But you said not to let people look at it.'

'That's not what I said. I said for you not to bare yourself like that.'

'But what guarantees do I have that it will be safe here?'

Jaqen smirked. 'I'll lock it in my safe. Of, if you prefer, I'll sleep with it under my pillow.' His smile set off that slow ache in Arya's stomach again.

'Yes,' she said, meeting his flirtatious? gaze. 'I think that's what you should do.'

The rest of the staff filtered in a little before noon. She met the three photojournalists that were on staff aside from Jaqen. A Geordie, like herself, named Rorge, who seemed to have no first name and who looked more like a soccer hooligan, a slick Frenchman named Jean-Paul Biter, and a slim, small Japanese man named Ken'ichi Izembaro. It was Ken, she found, who would be undertaking her training for the first while. She couldn't help but feel a bit sad, but Jaqen had told her that she was the company's intern, not his own personal one. And of the three, Ken was really rather nice. The waif was back from wherever she'd run to, and she looked down her nose at Arya even more.

Not a friend, Arya thought. Even as a boy, the women aren't my friends. It would be a long while before she got used to this, she thought that afternoon. Fitting into new situations is hard enough, but fitting into a new workplace is harder. Everyone has his or her routine already, and the new person is often simply in the way. I don't want to be underfoot, she thought. I want to learn everything and be useful. And though she may not have formed this thought consciously, Arya also had a desire to impress the boss. Ken had informed her that she would be helping out on fashion and commercial photography for the remainder of that week, and showed her the studio.

The funny thing about JHWire, a fact common to all decent-sized studios, was that so few people
worked in such a large space. It was needed, of course, for all the different operations of the business, but Arya thought the cavernous studios were grand and theatrical. 3B was set up for fashion shoots. It had a separate street entrance, as well as an entrance off the House of Black and White, changing areas, washrooms, and space for a large group of people. It had stage lighting, which was fun, in addition to the regular photographic lights, which had to be struck and taken down with each and every shoot. The intern's job, Arya found out that afternoon. It took her forever to set up the lights for the shoot that Ken had planned the next day. Then they tested everything, Arya playing the boy playing the model: striking ridiculous poses inspired by hip-hop and flexing her muscles. As girlish as she might have actually been, Ken said nothing that would have her believe her cover was blown.

'What's up there?' Arya asked, seeing a high bank of windows on the one side of 3B.

'Jaqen's place,' Ken said. 'It's really unbelievable.'

'Ah,' she said. So he can watch me here, she mused. Not that he'd want to.

Arya left for home, walking on heavy feet, carrying her normal bag with Needle in it, and the new and heavy LowePro sling. A tap on her shoulder caused her to whip around. In his Bulls' cap, a wide grin on his face...Gendry. He flexed his biceps, entreating her to give her one of the bags, which caused her to laugh. She handed the LowePro over to him and they walked back to Jon's together.

On her way back, she excused herself briefly from their conversation to text Sansa.

'I'm just coming home. Want anything?'

'No, thanks. I've done the shopping & am just making dinner.'

Relief. At least tonight she didn't have to worry about catching Sansa in the act.

Catching up with Gendry was great, insofar as one can catch up with someone, who one hasn't seen in seven years, in about fifteen minutes. He was just so wonderfully familiar. There was no heart-stopping weirdness with him. Arya was grateful to him for just not changing. He'd always been a nice, roly-poly boy, jolly and joking. And now he was a lovely great strong man, just as jolly and joking. He handed her the LowePro on the steps.

'Arya, do you want to have a proper catch-up tomorrow? Maybe coffee after work?'

'Yes, let's!' Like I drink coffee, but it will be lovely anyway.

'Good,' he said. 'You're probably well done-in, so I'll see you tomorrow.' Gendry waved good-bye and Arya went into the house.

She was done in, all right. She was knackered. Sansa had cooked. What was she doing all day? Arya wondered. She barely made it through the meal. Her feet and shoulders hurt, and worst of all: the queer feeling low in her stomach hadn't gone away.

She had planned to ask Sansa, in a round-about way, about these things, but she was just too tired, her mind whirling and jumping, to phrase her questions so as not to give herself away. Subtlety and deep fatigue create a potent and unstable cocktail.

And Sansa was busy on her iPhone. Texting, tweeting, facebooking, whatever. This time, Arya had no illusions as to who it was that her sister was chatting with.
Bzzz. Her own phone startled her out of her half-sleep. A text.

'Lovely girl, your picture's under my pillow. Sleep well. J'

Fuck. He's really playing with me, isn't he? Well, two can play.

'Lovely man, your picture's under my pillow, too.'

It was.
Retreating

I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. To put to rout all that was not life and not when I had come to die, discover that I had not lived
- Henry David Thoreau

When Arya arrived at work on Wednesday morning, there were two things on her desk: a book and a sticky note.

The book: Basics of Photoshop CS6 Extended

The sticky note was green. A red arrow pointed to her computer.

'Turn it on,' it read.

She did, noting with a bit of pride that JHWire used TheWALL, which was the internet security suite that Jon was endlessly working on. On the desktop, there was a readme file, which, when she opened it, provided her with her email login ID and a temporary password.

Stark at jhwire dot co dot uk.

She liked the sound of that.

She went to the email program and immediately changed her password.

2 new messages were in her inbox: one from this morning, and one from yesterday morning. Both from Jaqen. She read today's first.

Did I not tell you to check your email yesterday? It started. Cheeky.

You'll find a photoshop book on your desk, and here’s a link to some online training. You're already signed up for the online site, so browse and select whatever tutorials you need. I wasn't sure what you already knew.

Ken will answer any questions you have, just ask.*

Work on photoshop for the morning. There are images on the M-drive you can use. In the afternoon, assist Ken with the Mirage shoot. Make sure you have a handle on that Nikon – you'll be doing the product photography for Mirage.

JH

Seems straightforward enough, Arya thought.

She'd used Photoshop before, but her experience was limited to a few areas: removing red-eye from party snapshots taken by various family members, salvaging her own photos if they happened to be worth saving, but were over-exposed or in some other way deficient, and photoshopping Sansa's head onto a variety of horrors.

She clicked to the first email, loath to delete anything sent from him.

'Hi'. That was it. She rolled her eyes and hit reply.
'Hi.' She wrote back.

It turned out that her knowledge was rather helpful.

She scanned the book, noting certain things that she didn't know how to do. She went to the online site and found an intermediate tutorial that covered a few topics that she thought would be useful. Using the images she found on the shared drive, she was able to practice adjusting the images: tone, shadows, levels, contrast, sharpness, creating multi-layered images, and so on. And she found a photograph of the staff of JHwire, and she took no little pleasure in swapping heads and bodies. Eleni's head on Gendry's body flushed her with the most absurd amusement. She saved that one back onto the M-drive.

It was about 10:30 when she rose and stretched, taking her eyes off the screen for the first time since she'd turned it on.

She heard rather than saw the commotion. The purposeful click-clicking of a woman's stride, Umma's voice raised in protest. Gendry as well.

'Where is he?' the stranger said, and walked straight into Arya's office.

'Who are you, and why are you in Jaqen H'ghar's office?' the woman asked Arya.

'It's my office, and who are you?' Arya retorted. The woman, in her late 20s, Arya guessed, was very pretty. Very 'done'. Black pencil skirt, red top, cut low. Too much jewelry. Her long red hair was near the colour of Jaqen's own, but hers was obviously dyed, whereas his, albeit strange, seemed entirely natural.

'He hires children now?' the woman asked, arching a finely-drawn brow at Arya. 'He likes little boys now?' Her voice was rising.

'Fack off, Mel,' came a voice from another office. Rorge, Arya thought. He swore like a dockworker.

'Fack off, Mel,' came a voice from another office. Rorge, Arya thought. He swore like a dockworker.

'Where is he?' she hissed at Arya.

'I've no idea,' Arya said, returning to her seat. Who the hell is this woman? she thought. Doesn't sound like a former employee.

'Why did he give you his office?'

'Get your hands off me, Gendry,' she said, exaggerating his name.

'He's moved offices, Mel,' he said. 'He's in the House of Black and White now. We can go there and you can get your stuff.' Arya's heart sank, though she betrayed none of this. A girlfriend? His wife?

Arya felt the woman continue to gaze at her, but Gendry's words had an effect and she moved off. Arya decided to ignore the stream of vitriol that still spewed from the woman's mouth. She shuddered.

It was hard to concentrate after that, so she tinkered with the camera instead, learning its ins and outs. In a way, Arya felt let down. Jaqen had been flirty with her; Arya couldn't deny that there was something between them. A feeling. A spark. Sparks can catch flame. Feelings can grow. Yet,
already there was enough standing in the way. I am far too young, she acknowledged. I've no education beyond the mere basics. I'm the intern. He's the boss. I have no experience – of anything, really. He's travelled the world. I went to Spain a couple times with my family. The more she thought about it, the more she thought about the mis-match between them.

She knew why she was attracted to him, in some part. He was graceful and slender and handsome; he had blue eyes and a lopsided smile. He wore his clothes well, in that way that men who look well out of their clothes look well in them. There was an earnestness and an easiness to him: he had wanted her to like him, even lust after him. There was a kindness to him, too, which made her, in her first flutterings of adolescent longing feel, if not entirely safe, comfortable. He was a tease, and a flirt, and he was horribly inappropriate for being both those things, but he wasn't a creep. Somehow, he just wasn't.

But Arya had glimpsed yet another complication on a road already fraught with perils. The redhead woman, full of fire and vitriol. Without knowing a thing about their relationship, if it even had been one, Arya had decried their connection. Having no sexual past herself, she certainly didn't want to think about Jaqen's, especially when that past came to work and insulted her. Another inequality had arisen between them, and while the others might not have seemed quite so insurmountable, this one bothered her rather a lot.

A man on a business trip meets a woman in a pub. Both are married to other people. They strike up a conversation. Attraction, fueled by booze and the excitement of being away from the hum-drum, the noise of their regular days replaced by the drone of the new city, the pub's patrons, leads to a question in the minds of both. Do we, or don't we? Sometimes they do, carried away by the feelings the interaction has generated: feelings which supersede the deep-seated roots that have grown over a long period of time. Family and home are swept away for the moment, and built up again (or not) later.

More interesting are those who don't. The man or woman who reminds him or herself of those roots: how tender they are. 'How much I love my wife'. 'The soft cheek of my sleeping child'. 'My home'. The euphoric feeling of the momentary is not enough to supplant the gratification provided by normalcy and the covenants one has made to obtain and secure that normalcy. More or less regretfully, he or she pulls away from the idea. The two finish their conversation and their drinks, and each goes to bed alone.

Arya felt like it was she who was sat at the bar with Jaqen. Mesmerised by the present, not thinking so clearly of the future. Perhaps it's time to put this fantasy away, she thought. She could reason out some of the details of why she fancied him. How it had been him to light the spark instead of someone else, she didn't know and didn't really care. She had given it some thought before, and had concluded that showing her hand or actually trying to pursue a relationship with him were each as likely to result in disaster and humiliation. And she had wavered somewhat, responding to his beckoning flirtations despite the fact that they were clearly misguided.

She concluded, a little sadly, that her first, subconscious thoughts on the matter: the thoughts that had led her to physically run away from him, to distance herself, were the right ones. And no matter how he attempted to entrap her affections, it would be much smarter for herself and her poor, broken family, if she resisted his attempts.

Instead, she would be the one to erect the barriers, and keep them high, and keep herself safe within them. She would crack the bones and suck the marrow out of the internship, learning all she could. I will be proud, she thought. Not weak.

Gendry poked his head around the wall of her office area.
'You all right?' he asked. 'Mel's gone. I'll tell you more today at coffee.'

'Fine,' she replied. 'Looking forward to it.' She smiled at him and returned to exploring the new camera.

Ken Izembaro found Arya after lunch, and they went to the studio in 3B.

'Mirage,' he explained, 'is a fairly big label that caters to young women.'

'Yeah,' she said. 'I know.'

At his quizzical look, she quickly covered. 'My sister likes their stuff.'

'Ahh,' he said. 'Well, we're shooting the bulk of the late autumn catalogue today. Did Jaqen explain what you're to do?'

'Products,' she said.

'Yes. Purses and scarves and accessories and other stuff.' He looked a bit weary.

'Is there anything...?' her question trailed off.

'Sorry. We none of us love commercial photography, but it really does pay the rent. Finances trips to Afghanistan and stuff.'

'Ahh,' she said.

'The trend these days calls for a grittier, more naturalistic attitude within catalogue shots. So they hire photojournalists like us. We're not very haute couture.' She took in his attire, nodding: cargo pants and a waistcoat with tons of pockets over a black t-shirt. And Birkenstocks. More hippie than high fashion, she thought.

'There's a smaller studio off 3B,' he continued. 'The PA will set up the products. You just have to take the pictures. I'll review everything before you're finished so that you know if anything needs to be re-shot.'

'Sounds good,' she said.

3B was a zoo. Racks upon racks of clothes, stylists, PAs, make-up artists, the design team from Mirage, girls Friday, and four or five tall, leggy young women.

Models, Arya thought. They were a different breed entirely. Far too tall to be human. Even taller than Sansa, and her sister was no slouch. These women were all posture and cheekbones and clavicles. They had just finished getting ready and were perched upon stools, not daring to sit properly lest their clothing get wrinkled, awaiting Ken's and the stylist's instructions. Someone had brought in an audio dock and it was shuffling through someone's music. It was lively and exciting.

Ken indicated where the smaller studio was, and as Arya passed through the crowd, closer to the models, she was gobsmacked when saw that none of them was more than 13- or 14-years-old.

The PA she was working with was a nice, plump girl, not much older than Arya herself. Alison or something like that. She'd explained to Arya that they'd chosen to book the second studio in the interests of time; they had originally planned to do it all in 3B but they wanted to get it all done in a day-and-a-half at the most.
Arya began a four-hour shoot; the most boring of her entire life. Alison arranged each item; Arya shot it. She was tentative at first, but soon grew confident. There really was nothing to it. Occasionally, the flash would mis-fire, so she'd have to reset things and start again, but mostly, it became rhythmical and routine.

She emerged, exhausted, watching Ken do something very similar, but with the addition of live beings.

He caught sight of her and wrapped up his work, deferring the rest to the next day.

Arya handed him the memory card. He inserted it into the computer and opened the lightroom to inspect her work. Over most, he made approving noises.

'Just a few things will require re-shoot,' he informed her. She was embarrassed, a bit, but he waved that away.

'You need to over-expose the black handbags. They're just sucking up all the light and we don't see enough detail. So over-expose them a bit but don't grey them out.' She nodded.

'Do those tomorrow. Excellent work, Harry. Go home!'

She thanked him and Alison, and went back to her desk to turn off her computer, collect her things, and go. Gendry and Jaqen were in the front, hovering over Umma's desk and insisting she bake cookies for them, to be brought in the next day. Their banter was light and they were laughing; it was completely unlike the mood of the morning, which had been soured by that woman.

Shite. I really didn't want to run into him today, Arya thought. There really isn't anything better than a little time to cement some barriers into place.

'Have a good day?' Jaqen asked her, giving her his characteristically warm smile.

'Yes, thanks,' she responded, not meeting his eyes. 'Bye, Umma. See you tomorrow!' she said.

'Ready?' she asked, looking up at Gendry.

'Let's go!' Gendry said, happily, holding the door for her. She slipped out, not looking back, but feeling (or imagining) that Jaqen H'ghar was not very happy with her at the moment.

*Yes, I know it's a comma splice. Since Jaqen's first language is not English, his grammar or spelling might be somewhat different than mine on occasion.*
Backstory

Sitting with Gendry, scarfing banoffee pie and drinking tea, was enough to drive almost all thoughts of Jaqen H'ghar from Arya's mind. That is, until they began talking of him.

The shop, 'Hot Pies', and its eponymous proprietor, were clearly two of Gendry's favourites. It didn't take much to win Arya over. The food was good, and Hot Pie himself was hilarious. He was young, proud of his shop, and a fountain of information, however trivial. He and Gendry were clearly good friends, and Arya learned that they'd attended college together: Hot Pie had studied catering and hospitality, while Gendry had studied mechanical engineering.

Gendry had grown into an interesting man, Arya reflected. He had been raised solely by his mum in East London. While Robert Baratheon had provided much in the way of material assistance to them both, his absence was felt. Gendry thought his mum had died of a broken heart, though the diagnosis had been uterine cancer. At 16, he finished his GCSEs while nursing her through what would be her final illness.

And six months ago, at 20 years of age, he'd lost his dad, too. He confessed to Arya that he'd felt angry at Robert: angry enough to not attend his own father's funeral. Gendry wasn't just angry that his father had, in essence, missed his life: those small achievements of boyhood that a father in particular is supposed to mark with his presence and encouragement. Gendry was angry because he never got any answers from his father. 'Why did he start something with my mother? He had a wife and an infant son when he got my mom pregnant. Where did he even find the time?'

Robert Baratheon's solicitor had visited Gendry after his father's death. Robert had been remarkably generous to Gendry: had left him so that he wouldn't have to work at all had he been inclined to adopt the lifestyle of the idle rich. But he had left Gendry with no answers. Once again, Arya thought of her own fortunate life. Her parents had made her because they loved each other: Arya was part of that love and felt it all through her life. Gendry's mother had loved his father: perhaps that love persisted unreasonably, for she had never received any promises from Robert, and their actual relationship drew to a close within a year or two of Gendry's birth. And, out of loyalty to his deceased mother, Gendry never went looking for answers from Robert, and now those answers would never come.

'I went to your father's funeral, you know,' Gendry said. Arya looked up at him, surprised.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't know that. I didn't see you.'

'You were dealing with your grief. I never spoke to you, though I saw you in the church.'

Arya recalled that day. Bran was still in the hospital and couldn't attend their dad's funeral. Jon had, essentially, held her to him for the greater part of the day and never let her go, as if clinging to the part of her that was her dad. And she had done the same. Robb and Theon had essentially propped her mum up. Arya recalled her mom's eyes, bloodshot with tears, her skin almost translucent with sorrow.

It was horrible. Ned Stark, after his car tyres had been blown out, had lost control of the car: it had skidded and slipped on slick roads on that March afternoon, flipping once, then again. The police had said that the car had righted itself. He was still alive, though Bran had sustained the injury to his spinal column that had left him paralysed. Then he had been shot twice and left for dead, and no one knew by whom.
Not only did her father die, someone killed him. Arya nodded, wiping away the tears that had run down her cheeks. 'I understand something of not having closure,' she said, her smile intending to reassure but ending up being more of a grimace. Gendry took her hand in his, and she found the gesture incredibly comforting.

'So, not to change the subject or anything, but I need to change the subject or I'll cry all over you,' she began. Gendry smiled at her and released her hand. 'How did you go from mechanical engineering to working for JHWire?' She was careful not to mention Jaqen, as if the name were some sort of talisman: a secret password that would provide the hearer with the revelation of her feelings, such as they were.

He told her that he'd always been interested in photography, and though he wasn't a great photographer, he was still fascinated with cameras. The project that had intrigued Jaqen, not to mention the other photojournalists in the JHWire collective, was a project to engineer and, in some cases, re-engineer digital backs for film cameras. They existed, for some cameras, but they were mostly crap, he informed her. So he'd interned with Jaqen, though it wasn't anything like her internship. He shot some stuff, and he went to some interesting places with Jaqen: places where it is easier to survive with the company of another human being.

'Last winter,' he said, laughing, 'we had to bunk together in Russia somewhere. I think it was Russia, though he knows that area and its ever-changing borders rather better than I. The man...oh Christ, does he ever snore.'

Arya laughed. Well, that explains who Jaqen was talking about yesterday, she thought.

'And he has the nerve to deny it!' Gendry said, indignantly. Arya smiled.

'So, you're friends, then?' she asked.

'Yeah,' Gendry said. 'He's a good guy: he's really been there for me. He really got his shit together last year. Quit smoking, got healthier, happier, and dumped that crazy bitch.'

'The one from today,' Arya said. She was at that point where she really, really wanted to know what happened: to obtain the insight into someone with whom she was fascinated, but the wish to know was tamped down by a nearly equal wish not to know.

'Mel. Mel-i-san-dre,' he said, drawing out her name as if it were an insult. 'She's known him for forever. I think they played together as children or went to the same church or something.'

Gendry took a sip of his coffee and continued. 'She's horrible. She's like this ridiculous spoiled child. Temper tantrums – what you saw today was really tame comparatively. She hits,' he said, rubbing his arm in remembrance. 'She hits, she threatens, she rages.'

'Why would he be with her, then?' Arya asked.

'Who knows? She's got style and she's known him for a long time and knows what buttons to push and when to push them. And she's hot, in a dangerous kind of way. For about five minutes before you realize she's barmy.'

'I should say,' he said, 'that she knew what buttons to push. He woke up one day and she was out the door. Left that fucking cat that follows Jaqen around. In fact, the cat wouldn't even go with her today, so she had to throw a strop in his office upstairs. And now Jaqen gets to keep the cat he was trying to get her to take!'

Gendry started laughing at that.
'Why would he change so suddenly?' Arya asked.

'It wasn't sudden, really. I think he'd been getting there for months and finally just got there. It could have been the fact that she got religion, which he couldn't really accept. It could have been the fact that for much of their relationship, she was carrying on with another man. Some married boyfriend.'

'Ahh,' said Arya.

'Yeah,' Gendry continued. 'We are all glad to see the back of that one. She was poison. Not even the religion civilised her: I mean, who carries around their Bible in a Louis Vuitton case, then threatens the bollocks of her boyfriend while shtupping someone else? Did she bother you today?'

'Not really,' Arya said, drinking her tea. *Liar.*

'Well, the good news is that he probably won't go away so often now that she's out of his life. I think he went on location so often to either get away from her or try to kill himself.'

*Oh, that's sad,* she thought. If it were true, that he was running away from his life because Melisandre had made it so difficult, it would be horrid indeed.

'So,' he began. 'Why do you call Rachel "Umma"?

Arya was startled out of her thoughts. 'Isn't that her name?'

'Rachel,' he said again.

'Jaqen told me her name was Umma. He calls her Umma.' Her tongue felt funny pronouncing his name, as if it too held her secret.

Gendry laughed. 'Wonder what he's playing at! He calls her Umma: she's his mother! In that backwater language of his, "Umma" means "Mum"!'

*Shite, shite, shite!* Arya shook her head, but couldn't figure that one out.

'Maybe he feels especially close to you,' Gendry winked at her. 'And you'll be calling her 'Mum' in a few years?'

She looked at him, her eyes cold and clear. 'No special closeness, I'm afraid.' *More lies.* She felt closer to Jaqen now than ever. With more sadness and confusion added. Sadness that it simply wasn't going to work, sadness for his experience with Melisandre. And confusion: the usual confusion, as to what Jaqen was doing with her, that refused to just dissipate.

'How long was he with Melisandre?' she asked, feeling cheap as she did so.

'Ooh, you got me,' Gendry said. 'Five years, maybe six. On and off. More off than on.'

Gendry talked on, about Jaqen mostly. How he really was a good person, how he'd built a business out of nothing. His pranks and his playfulness, but also his honour and integrity.

'He's not the kind of person who cares about rules very much, Arya. That's why we have a solicitor on staff. But he is the kind of person who thinks very much about what doing the right thing means in different situations.'

It had grown late, and Arya excused herself. Jon would be worried if she didn't traipse home very soon, since she'd forgotten to text him.
'Let's come here again together,' Gendry said. He looked so much like Robert.

'Sure,' she agreed. 'It was great.'

That night, she lay awake thinking. Or perhaps she lay awake pretending to think, but instead, waiting for her phone to buzz; the 11 pm vibration that signalled that Jaqen H'ghar was thinking of her.

It didn't come.

And Arya Stark, a woman grown, lay in her childish bunk and cried silently, so as to not wake her sister, who clearly had troubles of her own. She cried great fat raindrops of tears for the childhood she'd left behind, for her dead father and her poor injured brother, for her careworn mother, and for the hopelessness that lay in front of her.

A/N: I had some minor medical issues, hence the delay in this and the previous chapter. Back on track.

I would like some more feedback on the 'creepy' factor: a couple reviewers have pointed to this issue. There is a power imbalance between Jaqen and Arya, and there's no denying that. But my intent is not to portray someone as creepy or villainous, since that's got very limited possibilities. Our struggles are that which make us human, and I'm interested in exploring that.

Incidentally, on the specific 'creepy' issue in chapter 13, that of Jaqen texting Arya that he is sleeping with her picture under his pillow, I would like to clarify that he's just saying something in fun - he threatened to do that earlier and is trying to bait her by saying it again.

Thanks, everyone, for reading and commenting and your messages to me. I appreciate it a lot.
Chapter Sixteen

Arya's morning activities were easily becoming routine to her. Wake up, slip down from the bunk without disturbing Sansa, go out with Ghost, eat, shower, pack up, go. This morning, however, the waking-up bit was more difficult. Her eyes felt heavy and fuzzy, as if they'd been packed with cotton wool. Once she'd gained some semblance of consciousness, she looked at her phone, against her better judgment. Still no texts. She felt bereft.

As she climbed down from the bunk, on little mouse feet, Sansa's voice caused her to freeze.

'I heard you, you know.'

'Heard what?' Arya asked, jumping down, not feeling the need to be delicate since Sansa was clearly awake.

'Crying last night,' Sansa said, looking at her sister with a clear and measured gaze. *She's been up for some time, then,* Arya thought.

'Yeah,' Arya said. There wasn't any point denying it. Sansa rose from the bed and put her arms around her sister.

'We're all unhappy,' she said. 'Da's death...and other reasons.'

'Yeah,' Arya said. Sansa looked at her. 'It is more than Da's death, isn't it?'

'I don't want to talk about it,' Arya said, neither confirming nor denying. 'Yet, anyway.'

'I understand,' Sansa said, a trifle grimly. 'Believe me, I understand.'

Arya wandered off to the loo, wondering, not for the first time, what Sansa was going to do with herself and her own odd situation with Sandor Clegane.

Her eyes were swollen and bloodshot, her hair tousled. *How can short hair even get this messy?* she thought. She looked like she'd had quite a night. Arya shrugged, and got on with it. When she'd returned from her walk-run with Ghost, she felt better. More human. Jon must have noticed her eyes, however, since his were full of concern for her.

'You don't have to make my lunch, Jon. I've only been doing that since I was eight or so,' she teased him. He just smiled and continued on. 'Do we have any cucumber?' she asked.

'Why?' he asked.

She pointed to her eyes, and he pointed to the fridge. She rummaged through and found the cucumber. She cut several slices, adding them to the sandwiches he was making. Then she tilted her head back and put the two remaining slices on her eyes, holding her arms open for him to hug her. He did, whirling her about, her head still tilted back, until she was dizzy and laughing. The cucumber slices fell, plopping to the ground, where Ghost promptly ate them. They laughed some more, now hugging each other as hard as possible. Kicking him away, Arya squawked, 'Shite! That HURTS.'

Jon looked at her appraisingly. 'Well, at least your eyes look better, covered in cucumber juice like that.'
She smiled.

'But seriously, is everything all right?'

'Probably,' she said, her smile a little wistful. 'I'm just a bit unused to this grown-up business.'

It was on his lips to say that she wasn't a grown-up, that she was just a little girl. But she wasn't. She was as tall as she would get, and she was woman-shaped, and she had come into maturity earlier than many people he'd known. And so, he bit back what he was going to say.

If Arya and Jon had shared their thoughts with each other at that moment, they would have been charmed to discover that each was thinking very similar things about the other. Arya was thinking how it was so important to enjoy any moments of closeness with Jon that she could eke out here and there. He was ready, she thought, to start a family of his own. Another woman will take first place in his heart, and I will be relegated to occasional thoughts, birthdays, family gatherings, and Christmases.

And Jon thought about time, and how unmerciful it was, for it had taken the little girl he loved and turned her into a woman. On the cusp of 17, she was already embarking on a career which would be brilliant: of that, he was certain. Someone (who wore Jaqen H'ghar's face in Jon's imagination) would make her his girlfriend, maybe even marry her, though he had his private doubts that she would go down such a traditional path. And she'd hold out her arms for that man to hug her and twirl her around the kitchen, while Jon would be left behind. Jon wrapped up the lunches with needless savagery.

'Growing up is difficult,' he said. 'It's difficult, and you put your feet wrong much of the time.' She nodded. 'Don't be too careful,' he said. 'You have to make mistakes to learn from them.' What the hell was that? Arya thought. She had just received some kind of tacit permission from Jon, but permission for what?

Arya had gone to work, feeling a little better than she had earlier in the day. She wanted to get stuck into her re-shoots immediately, but was told that it was Thursday, and therefore she could not until they'd had their ordinary Thursday staff meeting.

They gathered in a room Arya had not yet seen. She would have much preferred another layout, since the oval table meant that everyone could see one another, and she still felt like she didn't want to look at Jaqen's face: that looking at him would mean the crumbling of resolve, instant humiliation, and the like.

Jaqen, thankfully, didn't chair the meeting; that responsibility was one no one wanted, and so, they all assumed the duty week by week. The woman from marketing, whose name Arya kept forgetting (Maeve? Marge? Ma-something?) was tapped for this meeting. She was all soft looks and sighs with respect to Jaqen, whom she clearly fancied.

It was boring. There was a lot of squabbling about assignments, there was a lot of talk about the budgeting and the projections and the forecasts, and within about 15 minutes, Arya just wanted to walk out. Gendry, two seats down from her, betrayed no emotion, but he must have been party to her thoughts. He winked at her, and seconds later, she felt a foot tap hers. She shot a glare at him: she couldn't concentrate as it was. Another tap, more insistent. Another glare. And then he slid his foot lightly over hers. She kicked him. It was reflex, she told herself. He yelped, and covered it by coughing. Everyone, Arya included, looked at him quizzically.

'Nothing, nothing,' Gendry rasped, taking a long and exaggerated sip of his water.
Rorge spoke. Arya found his heavy Geordie accent instantly able to tap into a wave of longing she felt for the familiar comforts of home.

'And have we seen the back of that woman now?' he asked Jaqen. 'Our intern doesn't need to hear that shite she spews; yesterday she was accusing you of buggering him.' That's not quite what she said, thought Arya. Rorge was, in his way, being strangely protective of her, despite the fact that the shite he spewed was far more horrible, in general, than anything Melisandre had said.

Jaqen stood. Arya looked up at him now, for to not do so would have been a noticeable omission. She saw the bluish spreading bruise, the slight swelling on the apple of his right cheek, and wanted to weep. Guess Gendry wasn't exaggerating: Melisandre does hit. Hard, by the look of it.

Jaqen spoke to everyone. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'As most of you know, I've had no relationship at all with that woman for more than a year. I hope she will not return: I have certainly told her not to come back, not ever. You may call the police if she does, or I will.' He looked at Arya. 'A man can be judged on the errors he has made in the past. A man's mistakes can certainly come back to haunt him. I hope that you all won't judge me too harshly and will be able to look beyond this.'

Rorge spoke. 'I'd tell you to not shit where you eat, but since you've decided to work and live here, it would be crap advice.'

'Thanks so much, Rorge, for sharing your wonderful aphorism with us,' Jean-Paul said, displaying his slightly yellowed teeth in a pointed semblance of a smile.

'Fack off, Biter,' Rorge said good-naturedly.

Arya was still looking at Jaqen as he lowered himself into his seat. How much she wanted to rise and go to him, giving him the false forgiveness he seemed to seek (for there was nothing to forgive but the fact that he had lived longer and done more). How much she wanted to cradle his head to her chest, to kiss away that bruise. Yet in the same thought, how much she hated him for having that experience with another. What must it have been like? She had seen the woman herself, seen Mel's slim waist and her breasts and her flared hips: her obvious sensuality. At some point, Jaqen had been with her: responded to and enjoyed her. What if I don't measure up? Arya thought, and replaced that thought instantly with even more pernicious ones: I won't measure up. I couldn't possibly measure up.

Gendry's light touch on her arm startled her. 'OW!' he'd written on his notepad. She grinned at him and returned her eyes to Jaqen. He was smiling at her, gently and ruefully.

Arya spent the morning helping Ken with the rest of the Mirage shoot. One of the models, Vittoria, had taken a shine to her, and asked 'Harry' for 'his' number. Arya declined, solemnly telling the poor girl that she liked men. It wasn't a lie. The girl, for all her unearthly height and model-ness, was just a child. Arya was half-inclined to take her aside and tell her to pull herself together and not go chasing after boys. But that wouldn't have been something Harry Stark would have done.

In the small studio off 3B, it took Arya some time to get the re-shoots done correctly: the hard part was to over-expose the black goods, but not so very much. Finally, she had it done – adjusting the exposure and the way the umbrellas diffusers were set up did the trick.

She showed Ken, who was pleased she'd figured it out. And then the coterie of fashionable individuals filtered out of the studio and she was left alone to take down the equipment. She started in the small studio, packing away all the gear and rolling up the backdrops.

When she walked back into 3B, she found she had company.
Thanks to everyone who's helped me with respect to the issues I pointed out in the last chapter. I'm glad we're on the same page. Pun intended.
Chapter Seventeen

And shall I take a thing so blind,
Embrace her as my natural good;
Or crush her, like a vice of blood,
Upon the threshold of the mind?
-Alfred, Lord Tennyson, from In Memoriam A.H.H

Stepping into 3B, Arya found Jaqen waiting for her, smiling.

It was not a nice smile, having been born of good manners rather than genuine happiness. She scowled at him, and was rewarded with an earnest grin that reached right up to his eyes, crinkling them up. Now that was a lovely sight, and she gave him a half-quirk of her mouth back. He had nice teeth, she thought, idly. Don't think about those teeth nipping at your neck. Barriers? she called out in her mind. Where are you? Desire, that great underminer, seems to work double-time to overcome many of our most reasonable objections to things we want.

Jaqen handed her a camera. Hmm, she thought. 'Medium format, but with a digital back. Gendry's work?' she asked.

'Yup,' Gendry said, from where he had perched, shirtless, on a stool. She hadn't noticed him before having been so wrapped up in thoughts of Jaqen's face and its various components. Get it together! Barriers, please! she thought, blushing furiously.

Jaqen's smile disappeared. 'All right,' he said. 'I want you to shoot a bit with this and get used to it, then I want you to practice with photoshop.'

'Ok,' she said, a little unsure. What exactly was she supposed to photoshop?

'Why aren't you wearing a shirt?' she asked Gendry.

'Look at his skin. He's got the...what did you call it?' Jaqen said. Gendry started laughing and supplied the word. 'Farmer's tan.'

'Ahh,' she said. 'And that's what you want me to photoshop later?'

'Just so,' Jaqen said. 'All right. Begin. I'll help as you need me.'

Arya started, concerned that Jaqen's 'help' would be only a fascinating distraction. The bloom of the bruise on his cheek was more noticeable now; spreading, angry, purple. It was hard to concentrate on Gendry with Jaqen in the room, especially since he appeared to be interested in scrutinising her every move.

'Gendry, I don't mean to be rude,' she began. 'But, are you going bald?' Jaqen chuckled, a throaty sound that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

'What?' he said, 'No!'

'Then why are you always wearing that cap, stupid?'

'I like the Bulls!' Gendry defended.
'Well, if you keep it on...oh, never mind,' she sighed. 'Jaqen, can you get the bounce-board?'

Though surprised to be put to work, he obeyed, grabbing the silver board from where it had been left on a table. She told him where to hold it, surprised at how meekly he submitted to her orders. But perhaps this is a test. Using the bounce-board would direct light to Gendry's face, which had been shaded under the stupid cap.

She shot a few frames, looked, repositioned herself. She was deeply thankful it was an SLR, and not a twin-lens camera, for though she'd seen these, she'd never actually used one. There was at least some familiarity with this one.

'Jaqen, can you come here, please?' He trotted over to her, the silver reflector in his hands.

'Is it me,' she lowered her voice, 'or does Gendry stand incorrectly somehow?'

'He stands like a woman,' Jaqen said, barely able to contain himself. 'You're standing like a woman!' he yelled at Gendry.

'I'm not a model, you arse,' Gendry said, flipping them both off. Arya clicked the shutter release.

He truly was a horrible model, but Gendry did have a lovely body, honed equally by work on construction sites and a dedication to fitness. She particularly liked the way his waist tapered down into his slim hips: a clear reminder to her of how men are built so differently than women. She found herself thinking of the way her arms had managed to steal around Jaqen's waist earlier in the week, measuring him with her arms. He had given her comfort, and she took it and rather more. A guilty pleasure, or a pleasing guilt. One of the two, anyway.

Gendry flexed and did cheesy martial arts poses, even going so far as to alternately flex his pectoral muscles, left-right-left-right. It was a sensational combination, showmanship and a nervous tic all wrapped up into one package.

'Does he ever stop?' Arya asked Jaqen, bewildered. 'You'll have to stop him, it seems,' Jaqen said to her.

She put down the camera and went to Gendry. She tugged his left hip forward. 'Jaqen is right. Only women stand like that,' she said. 'To slim themselves. Stand straight to the camera.' She whispered something in his ear. He nodded and she ran back to the camera. She motioned to Jaqen to hold the bounce board again. 'Now, please.' she said to Gendry.

His face softened and took on a childlike quality that provided an interesting juxtaposition to his well-toned physique. There was a rawness, an emotional intensity, and yet a completely relaxed innocence about him. Click-click-click. She chose to move around him rather than have him move and ruin it.

'All right,' she said. 'Thanks, Gendry. Jaqen, I think I have enough to work with.'

Jaqen was surprised. Gendry was a wonderful figure study, but was horribly inept as a model. That Arya could reveal Gendry to have some well-hidden photogenic quality would be an amazing testimonial of her abilities and bode well for her future. What had she said to him? he wondered.

Gendry, having been coerced into modeling – in truth, he'd only done it because Jaqen had said it was for Arya to learn from – wandered back to his own work, leaving Jaqen and Arya to wade through his photographs and even out his skin tone. He chuckled at the sheer banality of the task she'd been given.
Arya and Jaqen were sat at the desk in 3B. The memory card was inserted into the computer and the lightroom software was fired up.

They scrolled through the pictures. There was a lot of silliness. The bounce board had helped light Gendry's face, however. Arya was pleased she'd noted and addressed that. The framing was off in her first shots, getting better as she had begun to shed her 35mm preconceptions and embrace the medium format frame. The shots taken after she'd whispered in his ear were lovely. His eyes, Baratheon-blue, conveyed something of a nostalgic feel. It was masculine and childlike all at once.

'Can I crop it?' she asked Jaqen. He nodded. She did, leaving his shoulders, but letting it be more about his face than his ridiculously toned abdominal area.

'That is the first decent picture I've ever seen of this man,' Jaqen said. 'Leave it now. Actually, crop from the bottom a bit more. Yes, there.'

It could have been what is known colloquially in the industry as a 'mugshot', but the photograph was so much more than that. It was wrenchingly evocative.

'Now,' he said. 'The farmer's tan.' She had trouble with this one, finding it difficult to even up Gendry's skin tone without over- or under-exposing him. At one point, she'd turned his face a sickly shade of yellow, which made her giggle.

'Help?' she implored.

He smiled and showed her how to select just a particular area and match the tone.

It looked good. Polished.

Jaqen made an appreciative noise. 'What did you say to him?' he asked.

Arya smiled. 'I told him to think of Winterfell,' she said. 'He was always happy when he came and stayed with us in the summers. I just wanted to tap into that.'

'Just so,' he said. 'Good.'

He printed a copy of the photograph and handed it to her.

'There,' he said. 'For under your pillow'. His gaze was hooded and appraising. He'd made a move, however minute, admitting something of his weakness.

Where did that come from? she wondered. Is he... jealous? What? Of Gendry?

Instead of responding, she raised her hand gently to his right cheek, lightly trailing her index finger down the length of the livid bruise.

'Does it hurt?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said. His eyes were half-closed. She noticed that his breathing had changed. The uneasy feeling in her belly began again to plague her, and this time it was coupled with a feeling of euphoria; she felt as though power were hers. He was very, very still.

Fuck! What do I do with this? she thought. Of course, Arya did what came naturally; she upped and ran for it.

Had Jaqen H'ghar lived five hundred, or a hundred, or even fifty years earlier, he could have asserted
himself more easily. He could have grabbed her, held her to him in an embrace borne both of love (or lust) and possessiveness. And society wouldn't have looked twice at him for doing so. But those atavistic qualities, so helpful for our cave-dwelling, hunting-and-gathering forebears, had been redacted from the modern book of Western masculinity. And like many others before him, Jaqen found himself sandwiched firmly, in a proverbial fashion, between rock and hard place. He was bound by an old-fashioned chivalric code, which led him to open doors for women, give up his seat on the tube to them, and change tyres for them on the A12, even if it meant being rather late for a shoot in Essex. But he felt, as many men do, unable to navigate this new male culture, as if its rules had been rewritten in invisible ink. His own father had fucked his way through all of Europe and it had been more or less socially acceptable; Jaqen, however, was not his father, and that sort of behaviour was no longer sanctioned.

Melisandre had, in a way, taken advantage of him. She was not merely unsubtle, she had been clear in what she wanted, and then she took it from him. Others had merely used him and he had, in turn, used them; Mel had hung him out to dry, relying on his inability to respond or retaliate.

Now, with this lovely girl, he would have to make the first move. He'd have to show her everything. But he simply couldn't make a move: he also felt protective of her, and he'd noted, with some bitterness, the irony that he might have to protect her from himself. Yet, he didn't think he was equipped with the necessary sangfroid to seduce a mere girl. There was, of course, a part of him that hoped she'd have the courage to seduce him, a part which he tamped down, or attempted to: it really wasn't possible or permissible at this moment. Never a particularly sexually voracious man, he rather thought he might want quite a lot more than a simple seduction.

Jaqen was quite clear in his mind about one thing, however. He was completely drawn in by Arya. Every time she touched him, it gave him hope. Every time she quirked her mouth at him in that little half-smile, the veneer of self-control he had erected slipped a little further. Those impossible and impermissible things that he had detailed, in his logical and reasonable mind, became little more than abstractions. Though society had decreed that he was unable to possess her, he was fast becoming her possession.

Arya ran home, flushed with sensation. Just running that one fingertip along his face had filled her with indescribable awareness. His passivity aroused her. The curve of his face and its imperfections fascinated her. The world around her was more vivid. She was more alive than she'd ever known herself to be.

And everyone was happy at home. Jon had finally finished some kind of project and could relax, though relaxation for him just meant not working at the week-end. Sam was learning how to cook from Sansa (though the Indian takeaway down the street would feel the economic devastation from any successful instruction), and Sansa herself had found a job to support her through her gap year. A crap job, but a job nonetheless: managing the office at a small security firm. A security firm? Something's afoot, Arya thought. She was growing accustomed to London, to this, her home away from Winterfell. Will we all really be living here together like this for the year?

There's a little voice inside us all: Eve's dulcet tones, tempting the Adam in us to eat the apple. The voice is what helps us along in doing silly things. It's probably this voice that has led to the propagation of our species, however, so we shouldn't be too quick or too thorough in our castigation of it. That voice called to Arya in the late evening, as she was lying in her bunk, hot and restless. She grabbed her phone and quickly, before her nerve failed, wrote a text.

'There's no more room under my pillow for anything else.'
Why did I do that?

The ring startled her. She quickly answered.

'H-hello?' she said, tentatively. *Oh God! Really?*

A pause. As if he were deciding whether to speak or to hang up.

'Jaqen?'

'Lovely girl,' *Oh God, oh God, oh God.* His voice sent chills up her spine. 'We really must investigate what's going on under your pillow.'

'Just so,' she said, and hung up.

'What was THAT?' Sansa screeched.
Untimely revelations

Chapter Eighteen

O, for a gag, a sock, a fist to the face. Anything to stop her mouth!

'Sansa,' Arya hissed. 'Shut it!' The last thing she wanted was for Jon to storm in to referee another fight between his sisters, and impulsive Sansa to blurt out something stupid.

She vaulted down from the top bunk.

'Arya,' Sansa said, slightly calmer. Thankfully. 'What are you doing? And who were you talking to?'

'My...uh, employer,' Arya hesitated. Damage control.

'You're lying!' Sansa accused. 'Do you...are you seeing someone?' She was incredulous, and her voice was rising again.

'No, Sansa...it really was my employer.' Calm.

'Arya,' Sansa said. 'It's actually quite worrying. Your behaviour over the last week has been bizarre. You and Jon have obviously cooked something up together: you cut your hair, you suddenly get this magical internship, and you look like a girl with a secret.'

Magical, all right. I wish Sansa had been given the cupboard under the stairs, and then I wouldn't have to explain anything.

Sandor Clegane couldn't possibly fit in the cupboard under the stairs, she amended her thought, nearly hysterical.

Oh, bollocks, she thought, as she weighed her options. Arya was an accomplished liar. Any child living in a large family, who wishes to obtain space and time alone without being scrutinised by said family members, practises evasion and deceit. Since such a child must dance to the tune called by her parents and older siblings, having no real autonomy or sovereignty over herself, she cannot be perfectly honest all the time, unless she wishes to simply be the puppet of those who have more power than she herself does. Arya was no different. It wasn't as though she was naturally dishonest: it was merely that, at times, she wanted to do precisely what she chose to do without regard for the wishes of the other people around her.

Yet, lying was dreadfully inconvenient, and the sin of thoughtlessly doing what one wanted was magnified when one lied about it and happened to get caught. And frankly, lying to Sansa wasn't worth it, unless she happened to learn the truth and go to their mother with it. And it was Jon who lied to their mother, and Jon who would get the lion's share of the punishment if the thing wasn't dealt with properly.

In the space of a couple seconds, Arya realised two things. One, that it was safe to tell Sansa anything. Had Arya robbed a bank, she would have felt safe telling Sansa. Since Arya knew Sansa's little secret, it would be fine to reveal her own, much more boring one.

The second realisation that Arya had was one that most girls realise in their early childhood: it's a very good thing to be able to tell another girl one's secret. To get it off one's chest, to bounce around an idea, hope, wish, or dream with someone else. Another girl would understand. Especially Sansa, she thought. Though they'd been like chalk and cheese, now they had something in common to bind
them together. Sisterly handcuffs, as it were.

She'd have loved to unburden herself to Jon, who understood and loved her best, but she knew full well that doing so on this issue would result in his quitting his position and devoting the rest of his life to the design and manufacture of modern high-tech chastity belts for wayward siblings.

So Arya sat down beside Sansa, and told her more about her week: disguising herself as a boy, working at the studio. Even about running into Gendry. And then, tentatively, she told Sansa about that first rush of feeling when she'd seen the stranger who'd turned into Jaqen H'ghar.

Not unexpectedly, Sansa was an avid and sympathetic listener on the subject. Arya told of her interest, her responses, and her feelings. Of course, she wasn't stupid enough to tell Sansa about her few chaste physical interactions with Jaqen, but she did confess to enjoying the ongoing flirtation, as well as not knowing how to go about the whole thing generally.

Sansa asked some questions which Arya was quite unable to answer. How old was Jaqen? Where was he from? Was he trustworthy? What was he planning to do with her? What could Arya say? 'He's a really brilliant photojournalist' didn't exactly cut it. While Arya thought Jaqen H'ghar was well-intentioned, and not just some perve with a propensity for tomboyish virgins, she had all of a week's acquaintance to judge him by. Coming up short, Arya simply fell silent.

The few answers that Arya provided her sister caused the anxiety Sansa had been feeling over Arya's odd behaviour to bloom into worry.

'Look,' she said. 'Maybe this isn't the best idea for you.'

Arya rolled her eyes.

'Has he...' Sansa struggled here. 'Touched you? Have you...and he...?'

'No! Jesus, Sansa,' Arya rose to her own defense. 'I met him a week ago, and I actually go to that office to work.' Mostly. 'And it's not exactly about sex, either. It's more like...just...attraction,' she finished lamely.

'Arya,' Sansa began heavily, as if she understood everything. 'Attraction has a way of ending you up in bed.' Well, she clearly did understand that part of things, Arya reflected.

'Maybe you should go home for a while? Clear your head? Maybe tell Mum?' Sansa suggested. Unfortunately, her suggestions sounded rather like threats to Arya, who didn't want to go home, didn't want to clear her head, and most certainly didn't want to tell her mother.

'If you tell Mum, Sansa, I warn you...' Arya said, ominously.

'Oh for heaven's sake, Arya, she'd insist on meeting him, then she'd give you a packet of condoms like she did with all of us. When I started having sex, she just asked me to be sure and safe and it would be all right.' Meeting him? Oh God, no.

'And was it, Sansa? Was it all right?' Arya's anger rose up. Sansa was telling her to come clean, yet there was no way she'd told their mum whose equipment those condoms were required to adorn. She didn't wait for Sansa to reply.

'I suppose it would be all right for you, Sansa. I mean, Joff is around your age, and even if he is a complete prick, he's a known quantity.' Arya laughed, on the offensive. 'It's not like you went and told Mum that you were fucking some stranger. Some older man. Oh, I can imagine what she would have said if you went to her and said, "Mum, I need advice. I've just boffed Sandor Clegane, right,
yeah, Joff's babysitter. Right, thanks for the condoms: that's just brilliant."

Sansa had turned white. 'Wh-what are you talking about, Arya?'

Arya turned to her sister. 'Is Sandor Clegane still interested in getting into photography?' she asked sweetly. 'I'd love to show him the basics.'

'Maybe,' Arya continued, 'You could have him take pictures of you when-' Sansa slapped Arya across the mouth, hard.

It degenerated from there. Since both girls feared discovery, they fought quietly, landing blows and pulling hair, but making no noise. It was strangely slapstick; like a Buster Keaton film from the 1920s, before sound got invented. But their tussle ended abruptly. Sansa burst into tears, putting her arms around Arya and crying, crying, crying.

'Shhh,' Arya said, rocking her sister. 'I won't tell. It's okay. I've known for a while and it's okay. I never would tell.'

'It's just so hard,' said Sansa. 'Day after day, pretending to be interested, pretending to be chasing Joffrey. To have to go there and see him, and his mother, and all of that just to catch a glimpse of Sandor.'

Arya privately thought that it was a very strange arrangement. Sansa's rationale was that it was better than nothing. Sandor Clegane had a good gig working for the Baratheons; he made thousands of pounds more than if he had worked in private security. He couldn't stay in the army since receiving a medical discharge for alcoholism. He looked terrible on paper; he looked worse in person.

'I love him,' she said, the tears welling up in her sky-blue eyes. So much like Mum's, Arya thought. So naive. So silly to have made an insane situation even more complicated. *Pot calling kettle black,* she chastised herself.

She sat with Sansa for hours until Sansa drowsed, then fell asleep. Arya's mind was awhirl with what her sister had told her.

Sansa had been in love with Joffrey from afar. As a little girl, seeing him only occasionally, she had not registered the pure shite of his personality. She had fallen in love with his golden blondeness, his status as the eldest son of a rich family, and had not seen him enough to assess him truly. That he was churlish and spoiled and sadistic, she learned much later, once Cersei Baratheon had sunk her hooks into Sansa and branded her as future daughter-in-law material. For the past two years, Sansa had been pushed towards Joffrey, who was at best indifferent towards her, at worst cruel. He delighted in little tortures: verbal, emotional, and physical. For years, he'd only had his siblings on which to vent his spleen. Sansa was new, and she was weak: she both cried and bruised easily.

Sandor Clegane, in a drunken fog most of the time, was easily able to intervene in Joffrey's little games, stopping them before they got worse. He never corrected Joffrey's behaviour: that was, after all, not his place. But he prevented serious harm to befall Joffrey's victims. And then something shifted. Through exposure to her, it was inevitable that he would share conversation with Sansa: telling her a few things and being told a few things. *Such a lonely man!* Arya thought. And somehow, he'd forgotten that he didn't give a rat's arse about anything in the world, and somehow, she'd forgotten that she thought him ugly, this huge man with the scarred face. Tendrils of caring began to wreath them, and when Joffrey's well-shaped, yet hard, unlovely mouth found Sansa's, determine to foist his desire upon her, it was Sandor she thought of. It was Sandor who stopped Joffrey. On occasion after occasion, Joffrey would attempt to impose himself on Sansa in some misbegotten way, and each time he was foiled by Sandor Clegane. While Joff still hadn't figured out
that his bodyguard and Sansa were conspiring against him, he did feel frustrated in his efforts to beat Sansa down and make her submit utterly to his will.

Joffrey had raged after one such incident, where he had torn Sansa's dress clean off, intending to expose and humiliate her. The appearance of Sandor Clegane, with a blanket, quashed his plans. It was shortly after this that Sansa's dog, Lady, had been found dead. It had been a suspicion shared by Sandor and Sansa that Joffrey was responsible, but there was no evidence to suggest his involvement.

But it had been Sandor who had clumsily comforted Sansa in her grief for her beloved pet, and in those awkward moments, the two realised that they, quite simply, loved each other. A man, who had gone unloved for his entire adult life, always thinking himself unlovable: a man grotesque in size and monstrous of face, who discovers himself to be loved by a beautiful redheaded girl, will reward her, in most cases, with nearly slavish loyalty. And it was forbidden, and exciting, and new. The stirrings of their passion were borne of great mutual need (and quite possibly, a little bit of gleeful malice against pulling the wool over Joffrey's eyes). They were each fascinated by their 'oppositeness'. Her smooth white skin against his, rough and tanned from being outside. Baritone and treble. Her slimness and smallness: she was dwarfed by him. Hands: his, calloused and huge. Hers, soft and slender. Fingers interlocking, arms around each other. Legs intertwining. His misgivings: he said she was too little, just a little bird. She said nothing, but thoroughly convinced him otherwise. Often.

All this went round and round through Arya's mind, until she, too tired to climb up to her bunk, fell asleep beside her sister.

AN: Boom!
Sunlight, filtering through the cracks in the blinds, woke Arya. It was Friday, she thought groggily, unwilling to open her eyes. Her neck was sore, her mouth felt dry and awful. A noise beside her: a soft sniffing sound. She opened her eyes. Eyes met hers: the preternaturally intelligent, light eyes of an overly large white dog, more a wolf, really. Ghost, his head thrust all the way into the bunk, had been contemplating how best to wake Arya in order to get his morning walk.

'Hey, boy!' she said softly. Guess he's gotten used to the new routine, too. Beside her, Sansa slept on, exhausted by the cathartic confession she'd made the night before. Arya rose and dressed, and went out for a morning romp with Ghost. They were both happy with the exercise. She was preoccupied with her thoughts: Sansa's revelations the night before had been emotional. At once, she felt happy for her sister, who had discovered something deep and meaningful and honest. Privately, she and her brothers, and possibly even her mother, had doubted Sansa's ability to embody anything but the hopelessly superficial. However, Sansa, in shedding some of her naïvete and adolescent fantasies in the way she had done, had opened herself up to vulnerability and potential danger. Arya did not harbour any illusions that either Joffrey or his mother, upon learning what Sansa had done, would shrug it off. There would be repercussions. And Sansa's newfound joy was a clandestine one, which gave Arya pause. While the excitement of secrecy and sneaking around was enjoyable (potentially as enjoyable as subtle flirting with Jaqen H'ghar at our shared workplace), there was still an element of guilt in doing something so forbidden.

While Sansa knew Sandor Clegane better, both literally and biblically, than Arya knew Jaqen H'ghar, she still faced many of the same problems Arya did. The Starks were not a family that lived their lives caught up in labyrinthine complexities. It was an open family. We don't sneak around much, she thought. Or I don't know about it if we do. It was bad enough that Sansa's relationship with Sandor, if it ever came to light, would cause a rift between families that had been close for a generation. She would, Arya thought, receive further censure for having hidden such a relationship. And how was she to confess? Bringing Sandor Clegane home? At least, if Arya brought the lean, handsome, courteous, not to mention renowned, photojournalist home for her mum to size up, he had attributes that might give Catelyn pause before she ran him out of the house. Catelyn had met the hulking Sandor Clegane on several occasions. She knew his predisposition for drink. To find that Sansa had been duplicitous and had carried on an affair with such a man, well, Arya thought that he possibly wouldn't make it past the front steps.

We're both doomed, she thought, miserably. I might be a little less doomed than Sansa, though.

It was interesting for Arya to contemplate this, since she arrived at a truth in doing so. Despite wishing to assert her independence and forge ahead, she found herself wanting to do so in a way in which her family would approve. She didn't want to have to hide, and she wanted whomever was standing by her side in the future to be able to do so openly and honestly, receiving all the joy that she herself found at and with the denizens of Winterfell. With her thinking done, and Ghost panting beside her, she went home and went about her morning routine.

Work that day was fun. She still had seen no evidence of the business that drove the group forward: the hardcore photojournalism, and so she'd asked Rorge, with whom she was working that day, about it.

'Nowt to do but wait,' he said. Baffled, she asked him what he meant. He explained that, although it
was the philosophical core of their business, it didn't pay the rent. They had to be diversified in order to survive as a collective and do exactly as they facking wanted. So they waited for the best opportunities, like photojournalistic none of them relished the experience of being attached in any but the loosest of ways, to armies, news syndicates, or worst, private security firms. They wanted to report back on real experiences, and that often resulted in one government or another being somewhat angry at them. If one were to become good, however: really, really good at capturing stories and photos from around the world, that would pave the way clearer. For newsmen were about selling newspapers, and when photographs arrived that struck dumb their jaded souls, it didn't really matter whether the photographer had cheesed them off the week before. They had to be careful, Rorge explained. Some pictures weren't worth taking, some stories weren't worth being written. Although the reading public would have benefited from the knowledge, 'it were better to save your skin, innit?'

They had set up 3B to shoot a band that would be arriving in the afternoon: some rising UK stars. Arya vaguely recognised one of the names: had he been on Pop Idol?

Rorge gave Arya an assessing glance, and lowered his voice a bit. 'Watch out for this c**t,' he said, pointing to the photo of the boy in the band that she sort of recognised.

She looked at him in mute incomprehension.

'He likes the young lads,' Rorge clarified.

'Ahh,' she said, nodding. Well, I'm not a young lad, am I? she thought.

He'd returned to their earlier conversation. 'And it's going to be hard for Jaqen to take you to certain places. It's a facking dilemma, so don't you give him trouble, lass.'

She protested, but he just shook his head at her. Well, and Rorge knows it too, now.

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Arya had some time at her desk in the late morning, which she spent clearing out her email and absentmindedly eating her lunch. Jaqen had written her, using his all-business email tone, to request that she involve herself in the coming week with some plans they all had to make the House of Black and White more of an active gallery space. 'What's this got to do with my learning photography properly?' she muttered. As if in answer, the next paragraph told her that she had to acquaint herself with all aspects of the business, and this was a good opportunity to get her feet wet in that.

Trust Jaqen to be able to issue reasonable explanations for everything, she thought. She took her lunch out and started to eat at her desk, wondering how to tell Jaqen that Rorge knew her secret. She felt for a while that Rorge had treated her a bit differently than he had at the beginning of the week, and wondered how long he'd known she was a girl. This really is the worst-kept secret, she thought, and typed out a reply.

And then Jaqen himself slid into her office, clad in what she now thought of as his work uniform: jacket, white shirt, jeans. He hadn't shaved. From all-business to no-business, she thought, as he snaked his hand out and grabbed the apple from her lunch.

She couldn't help but smile at that. The apple again. So much for subtle flirting. He bit into it with mock passion, his eyes meeting hers over his lowered lashes.

'It goes better with cheese, I see' she said, rolling her eyes and snatching the apple away from him, applying her mouth to it in the same fashion. Mum, I'd like you to meet...oh, bollocks.
He chuckled. 'Just so,' he said, echoing what she'd uttered just before hanging up on him the night before. He got up to leave, for he evidently had no purpose there other than to torment her. However, she felt she needed to tell him about Rorge and so, as he was rising from the chair, she put her slender hand on his thigh to stop him.

You bloody idiot! She screamed at herself in her mind as she jerked her hand away. You don't place your hand on a man's thigh!

'Cabout,' he said, cocking a brow at her. She could have sworn she saw his pupils dilate. 'Sorry,' she replied, lamely.

But he did sit back down, and she did gain his full attention. Having blushed to absolute puce, she told him that Rorge knew her secret. He sighed, a long, low exhale, then shrugged. 'Can't be helped, sweet girl.' No, it couldn't, and wasn't he just a marvel of discretion himself?

'It's all right,' he said. 'There are still six who still don't know. I'm not in trouble just yet.' He smiled at her and left. This time, she had the good sense not to touch his jean-clad thighs or any other parts of his body again. It was funny; that queer feeling in her stomach settled back in when she had touched him. She had no real idea what she was doing, since she had received no anecdotal evidence from girls, except for Sansa's late-night confession. Yet she also knew that there was a kind of something in her brain that flushed her with gratification when she thought of Jaqen, when they touched. And that something, endorphins or whatever it was, drove her forward to experience more of that funny sensation. She felt a sort of pity for Sansa, tinged with a bit of envy, for being enslaved by such a feeling. She wasn't to know, not really, that it's that irresistible feeling that drives humans forward, a biological imperative pretty much entirely unconnected to higher-level thinking. But Arya was wise enough and honest with herself when she concluded yeah, we're pretty much going to do this thing, however stupid it turns out to be.

She returned to 3B for the photoshoot with Rorge and the band. Knight of Flowers had achieved moderate success. Its singer-bassist, Loras Tyrell, was sighed over by Arya's demographic. Though he was quite talented, her peers at Lady Grassmere's appeared not to care, and just fluttered and simpered over him. Arya snorted. Silly girls. If what he had said were true, Rorge could put an end to all those silly girls' plans to be the mothers of Loras Tyrell's children.

It was puzzling. Knight of Flowers was by no means the first or last band that Jaqen and company had photographed, but it was a bit of a mismatch. Their gritty, photojournalistic style didn't necessarily map well onto a band known for its very pretty members. Rorge looked at Arya like she was an idiot. 'Because our Margaery is his sister.' Oh yes, that's her name. Margaery. The coy bint in marketing who's trying to pull Jaqen. Bitch.

'Ahh,' she said.

'Just remember what I said and keep out of his fackin' way,' Rorge said.

The band filed in, late. They were astonishingly pretty. Arya felt a bit bad: as a woman, she could never hope to be so feminine. They'd mastered the androgynous look. After being styled and coiffed further, they took their places and Rorge began.

It was absolutely hilarious. They hated him. He swore at them, threatened to bugger them bloody, and generally unleashed every epithet in his not inconsiderable vocabulary of maledicta at them. Arya thought, with no little amusement, that Rorge was on the cusp of making the drummer cry. Loras was just annoyed. Their manager threatened and raged.
The photos, naturally, were brilliant. Rorge had coaxed the boys out of their stagnant, bored expressions and turned them into angry little beasts. Even their manager, a sour shite, liked the shots: it fit their new album, which evidently Rorge had paid attention to, far better than their default bland hipsterism.

Rorge had instructed Arya to take down the studio set-up, and she complied. And Loras Tyrell wandered back into the studio. Rorge was a bloody psychic, Arya thought. She told him where he could find his bandmates.

'I like you,' he said. Oh, no you don't, she thought.

'You're cute,' he said. 'I've not seen you before.'

She backed away from him, but he advanced towards her. Oh, God, no. This is like a bad American film, she thought. 'Oh, just stop,' she said.

He grabbed her hand, pressing it to the crotch of his trousers. Arya tried to withdraw, but he was too strong. She gave her quirky little half-smile to him as she began to tighten her hand around his genitals through his pants. His eyes widened, and he grunted in pain. Unfortunately, instead of letting her hand go, he clocked her one on the jaw. 'Oh, Loras!' Margaery Tyrell, cried. She had entered the studio unnoticed, flanked by Jaqen and Gendry. Arya staggered and fell, and Loras fell hard across her body.

Expecting to get the wind knocked out of her, Arya was surprised to find Gendry, in all his lovely muscly-ness, picking Loras Tyrell off her, as if the man weighed nothing at all. She scrambled to her feet. 'Thanks, Gendry,' she said, shakily. He put his arm around her to comfort her.

'Again? You fucking idiot,' Margaery said, clearly displeased by the scene. He does this often? Arya wondered.

Loras was attempting to straighten himself up. It seemed as though Gendry had done a bit of damage to his shirt whilst extracting him from Arya. Too bad Gendry hadn't damaged his face, she thought.

'Don't touch her again,' Jaqen said quietly. 'Ever again.' Arya thought she would rather never see Jaqen angry at her: he looked as if he were liable to explode at any second.

Loras looked at Arya incredulously, as if he'd just discovered the possibility of that other kind of androgyny. And Margaery looked at Jaqen, with eyes narrowed, surprised at something she saw in him. And now another person knows I'm not Harry Stark, Arya thought, sighing.

Arya was grateful to Gendry, who helped shore her up. He helped her take down the studio, all solicitous and kind. In truth, she wasn't that upset. Loras Tyrell was an arse, but everything was fine now. She'd been a bit frightened, but it wasn't Arya's first time fending off loutish males.

Gendry had wanted to go and talk about it with her and put ice on her chin.

'Maybe pie?' he'd suggested. She shook her head. 'No, I can't. Jon's asked me home tonight. Something on there.'

They compromised. Gendry walked her home.

Jaqen watched them go, still seething.
Chapter Twenty

This chapter is dedicated to the faithful RhaenysB, whose appreciation of Jaqen's leather jacket has been noted.

There were nine bottles of wine on the table in the kitchen when Arya got home.

And Jon and Sam were both home early.

Maybe binge drinking is the usual Friday night thing for them, Arya thought. For us.

Jon was on the phone, but waved hello to her.

Sansa arrived home shortly afterwards, humming. She looked a little worse for wear after her crying jag the night before, but she held herself more easily. Privately, Arya thought that Jon was going to have to get used to keeping a stock of cucumber and paracetamol on hand to ease the ailments and maladies of young ladies.

Jon hung up the phone. 'Change into something presentable,' he said. 'We're having company tonight.'

'Company?' Arya queried.

'The company, really,' he said. 'The bosses. And others. And I've some other business to take care of. We've just finished the e-commerce software.' Jon was excited. Arya's face hurt when she smiled, but she smiled anyway: it was worth it to see Jon happy and not at work for once.

'Invite Joff, if you'd like' Jon said to Sansa. She smiled, that weak smile of hers that Arya recognised now, and complied.

While a twenty-four year old man organising a party will always ensure there's plenty of plonk, the nibbly bits, well, that part fell to his sisters.

They ate, food from the Indian takeaway being ordered once again. Rogan josh this time. Makes a nice change from the chicken.

She'd slipped out of the house and into the yard, in order to play with Ghost. The moon's almost full, she thought, slipping out of her shoes. The noise had gotten a bit much for her, and she was a bit on her way to being sozzled. The house was not small, but it was still cramped once enough people were stuffed in it. Compared to Winterfell, where there was always a nook, cranny or garrett to run to, Jon's house was a bit claustrophobic. The Mormonts, Jon's bosses, were nice enough men, though. The father, whose job she always teased Jon about taking, was a somewhat stern old man, old-fashioned but solid. The son, Jorah, was a bit of a bear, but a gentle one. Father and son didn't get along whatsoever, but they both liked Jon well enough. And so they should, Arya thought. He's made them enough money.

The night was young. Sansa was attended by Joffrey, who was thankfully quite inebriated even before he arrived, and hence, quiet. And Joffrey was attended by Sandor Clegane, who always
seemed both inebriated and quiet. Arya hadn't wanted to watch her sister play that most dangerous game, as if the mere fact of her knowing her sister's secret would cause it to be broadcast, streaming out from her eyes or something. Arya didn't want to be the one who gave it away; and she certainly didn't want to face Sandor Clegane with the knowledge writ large upon her face.

So she'd left Sansa's side and had gone to Jon's. He was talking about some eye-poppingly boring technical issue with the Mormonts. Sam had invited some pretty, dark-haired girl over. She had a gaunt face. Arya could have sworn she was pregnant. *Nope, not going to touch that.*

And then other people flowed in. Arya had no idea who they were. They animated the house. So, when she could hear the laughter ricocheting off the walls, she'd decided she'd had enough and slipped out the door to the deck. The lawn is lovely, she thought. Cool and green and soft.

She sipped the wine she'd brought out with her. 'Maybe I should have invited someone. Gendry, perhaps, right, Ghost?' She immediately felt sad, for Jaqen H'ghar had been the name on her lips, not Gendry. It was Jaqen with whom she wanted to lie on the cool green soft grass.

'Let's howl, Ghost,' Arya said. The dog looked at her with his calm light eyes.

Awwoooo, Arya called. Ghost whined a bit. Awwoooooo, she howled, laughing. She sipped her wine.

Awwooooooo, they both howled at the moon. Ghost took up the refrain and began baying at the moon. Arya laughed until she choked, and Ghost licked her face all over, his paw on her stomach.

'Ow. Goddammit, boy!' she cried, putting her arms around Ghost and burying her head in his furry neck.

'Don't let me interrupt,' a voice, above her. An amused, low voice. A cultured, European voice.

'A lovely girl and her wolf. One rarely sees such a thing,' _Oh fuck, Jaqen H'ghar._

She was lying on the grass, wrestling a dog. Her wine glass had tipped over. And Jaqen was crouched above her.

He extended his hand to her, rising. She blinked, a little stunned.

'I should offer to help you up,' he said, 'or...you did exhibit some preference for my leg, earlier.' He stuck his leg out.

Arya scrambled up, heart palpitating, accepting neither the proffered hand nor leg. He'd shed his uniform, appearing before her much as he did one week ago. V-neck t-shirt. Light grey, she squinted to note in the dusk. The leather jacket. It was a nice jacket. Lambskin, she thought. Motorcyclish. Black.

'Take off your jacket,' she said, facing him. He smiled at her, and slowly, deliberately, unzipped his jacket all the way. Then unzipped the zippers at the arms, one at a time, before shrugging out of the jacket. _Ziptease_, she giggled to herself.

'Thank you,' he said, handing her the jacket.

'It's warm,' she replied, taking it.

'Yes, it is,' he agreed.
She sat down on the steps of the deck. The back of his shirt rode up a bit when he rescued her wine glass from the lawn. His back was smooth and tanned, the crease of his spine sharp. He sat down beside her. Not close enough to touch. Close enough for her to smell him, though. The leather was soft under her hands.

'Your brother said to come,' he said, forestalling her question.

'Ahh,' she said. *That made sense. Sort of.*

'We had things to talk about.' *Yes, I'll bet.*

'It's all right now,' he said. 'Mostly.'

He pointed to his right cheek, the purple bruise on his face fading a bit, yellowing around the edges. 'He thought you did this.' Jaqen grinned. 'Don't worry. I gave you an alibi.'

'I was late,' he continued. 'I should have been here earlier.' In fact, right after work, he'd gone to the corner shop, where he had purchased a packet of cigs and sat with them on his desk. He had stared at them for almost an hour, yearning to medicate his anxiety in a reasonably time-honoured way before throwing them in the bin.

'What's 'mostly' all right?' she asked.

'Ah, we'll talk about that later, lovely girl.' He turned towards her. She wondered if he would inch towards her and tilt his face to her and kiss her. Just like in films.

'I was worried,' he said. I didn't get a chance to ask you. Are you all right? Your face...Does it hurt?' Jaqen asked, reaching out to touch her jaw. It was an uncanny reversal of the day before.

The back door creaked open.

'Oh, there you both are,' Margaery Tyrell's voice came chiming towards Arya and Jaqen.

She squatted down, her hand splayed on Jaqen's back to stabilise herself. 'We were so worried about you, Arya. How's your face, love?' *We. Arya. Love.*

*Margaery Fucking Tyrell, her hand on Jaqen's shoulder, her breast squashed into his back.*

Arya handed Jaqen his jacket and rose, her face inscrutable.

'It hurts,' she said, and walked back into the house.

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Green tendrils of jealousy grow when we aren't certain of our position in another's life or heart or both. A woman grows jealous of another woman when a man, whom she's known for all of a week, brings someone else to a party at her house. Unsure of his affections, she is tempted to formulate worst-case scenarios. No trust has been built, yet. She has no knowledge of his constancy, no examples of his fidelity to remind herself of. These grow over time. It is time, more than words, which provides us with a fuller picture of who someone is.

A woman like this, new to situations such as these, is unsure of herself: she has no idea whether she will be able to keep him faithful and true, if he's even capable of it in the first place. She measures her perceived shortcomings against what she perceives as another woman's assets. And she thinks to herself, as Arya did: *Was it all just in my head? Did I misunderstand something? Did I understand nothing?*
Margaery Tyrell had soft, curly, brown hair, and her smile was shy and sweet. She looked like a woman, not a boy. She likely did not howl at the moon. And she was here with Jaqen. He'd brought her.

Green tendrils of jealousy grow, and their blossoms are a bit like flames. Burning, scorching thoughts. *He flirted with me, and now he brings her here. What a prick. Arrogant arse.*

Arya passed through the kitchen, scooping a bottle of wine. A new kind, she thought. Hopefully better than the last. She headed up the stairs to her room. She sat on Sansa's bunk. Jon came in as she was proceeding to throw half of it down her gullet. He put his arms around her.

'That one...isn't a girlfriend?' he asked. Arya shook her head, leaning into Jon a bit woozily.

'No,' she said. 'She works with us.' She sighed. 'I don't know, actually. Maybe? She fancies him.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I invited him. I wanted him to come: we had certain things to discuss. And I wanted to see him, to get a sense of him. I admit I thought him a perve or a paedo or something before. But he appears to be looking out for you, and I don't think he's a sicko. Much.' Jon hesitated. 'I did ask him to bring someone, if he wanted,' Jon admitted.

*Well, thanks, Jon. That was fucking clever.*

'It's all right,' Arya said, rising from the bunk, a bit unsteady. 'Let's go back downstairs.'

Jon hesitated before rising. 'Arya, I think...you might have misunderstood, y'know.' Jon, of course, didn't wish to defend the polite headache that was Jaqen H'ghar. However, his sister was clearly intoxicated, and probably shouldn't be encouraged to jump to any conclusions about a man who, not half an hour before, had been honest with Jon, both about his interest in Jon's sister, both personal and professional, and his concern with that interest. Jon had to respect a bloke like that: grudgingly. The girl Jaqen had brought seemed more interested in Joffrey than anyone else. And wouldn't that be nice, Jon thought. *Getting rid of Joffrey.* He chided himself: Sansa would be upset, even if no one else were.

Jaqen had felt Arya's mood change as she rose and went back into the house, but he had no idea what had transpired in her head. He followed her, but was continually stopped by people who'd figured out or been told who he was. *Margaery's doing, of course. Ever the publicity whore, no, publicity hound,* he thought. *A man should be charitable.*

Jaqen H'ghar was like an assassin in a room full of warriors. He had ended up in conversation with two men; father and son. Blunt businessmen. Self-made. Not diplomats. They'd asked him how he'd built his trade, and he told them as best he could. But it wasn't quite the way they knew how to do things. Their paradigms were simply too different. They had capital. They invested capital in something that would produce a tangible product. He, on the other hand, traded in stories and pictures. Images of cultures and conflicts: things that most Western men, men like these, would only be able to understand on the most superficial of levels. They could understand his talent. But they couldn't understand quite how he commodified his talent, or what possible influence he could have. How he could tread so softly yet have such a large impact.

'Let me say this,' he said, leaning against the stairs. He gave them his best bored smile. He just wanted to find Arya and figure out where she'd gone in her head.

'If I wanted to, I could have any picture I chose on the front cover of *The Times* tomorrow. The news business is entirely about persuasion.'
'That's a trifle arrogant, don't you think?' Arya said, hearing his words as he came down the stairs.

It was as though she was gone, and something ferocious had taken her place. *She's angry*, he thought. *At me, it would seem.*

'Pick any picture, lovely girl,' he said. 'Anything.' He stopped. 'No, pick three,' he said. 'I'll give you three.'

*The suits, what were they called again...Mormons? No, that's not right at all. Mormont. Yes.*

'Messrs. Mormont will be the witnesses for this.' They were entertained, at least.

'Fine,' Arya spat. 'The bloody guy in the red and yellow dress,' she said, recalling a picture she'd seen in the House of Black and White. 'Tomorrow. And I'm not your lovely girl.'

'A name, lovely girl.' She looked murderous.

'Whatsit. Yeah, the bloody Dalai Lama, right?' she said, uncertainly. Both the Mormonts cracked up.

Ahh. He smiled at her, a tight smile. 'Just so,' he said. He dialled a number on his mobile, moving through the house to the garden.

She followed him, spoiling for a fight. He spoke to someone named James. She didn't want to eavesdrop, and so, heard nothing much more, except his laughter. It was a short conversation.

He hung up, and advanced towards her.

'Sweet girl,' he said, cajoling her. Her arms were folded over her chest.

In truth, Arya was somewhat the worse for drink at that moment. And, if one believes that alcohol amplifies what is in our hearts already, Arya was on the cusp of being that classically belligerent drunk that is quite often found in English terraced houses of a Friday night. Whilst some specimens are usually perched in front of the telly and are slagging off the referee of some sport, others can also be located in groups of people, where they inevitably launch into some hopelessly inchoate and incomprehensibly stupid tirade.

Arya's was laced with profanity and references to things he couldn't quite pick out. It was charming.

'I don't understand why you're angry, lovely girl.' He closed the distance between them, intending to fold her in his arms. She backed away, wobbling.

'I,' she declared solemnly, 'am not a girl. I am a woman.' It was all he could do to keep from laughing out loud at her.

'Of course you are a woman. A lovely woman.'

'You are a patronising cunt,' she said.

'But I'm not patronising you,' he protested. 'Well, maybe a little, but only because you're perhaps a little drunk.' He was so close to her now, and she'd backed up, right up to the brick of the house.

Jaqen H'ghar had broken the cardinal rule, which in fact is the only rule, of dealing with drunk people. That rule? Never accuse someone obviously sozzled of being so. It has a terrible effect.

'Fuck you,' she said, vehemently. 'And fuck Margaery, too.' She emphasised Margaery's name, making it an epithet.
Some shred of self-preservation lay in Jaqen H'ghar, who was a subtle man, just not one that was particularly well-versed in dealing with the souls of young women. Jealousy? he thought.

He put his arms around her. She punched him in the side. He swore in a language she did not recognise.

'Not nice,' he said, grabbing her wrists. She struggled, but was quite uncoordinated. In fact, Arya was not particularly sure she wanted to struggle, hence her noncommittal approach to the whole struggling portion of the evening. He was so close, and he made her feel quite liquid.

He held himself close to her. Not touching. Just rather close. And put her arms up against the brick of the house.

'Margaery,' he began, 'was concerned with how her brother treated you today.'

'She fancies you,' Arya said.

'I know,' he said. He couldn't help smiling.

'I don't like that,' she said.

'I know,' he said, softly.

'Are you going to kiss me?' she asked, courageous in her cups.

'No.'

'Why?' she said. 'I'm nearly seventeen.'

'I know.'

'Then why?'

'Because you're nearly seventeen, and you've had too much to drink.'

'I want you to,' she sighed. 'and I have not had too much to drink. I'm fine.'

'I know you want me to, and you really have had too much to drink. In fact, you're probably going to sick up all over in a few minutes.'

'Then just do it before I'm sick.'

He paused. 'A little one, then.'

She had had a hard day. And it was the weekend. So he gave into Arya's insane, drunken demand. Just a tiny little bit. On her jaw, where Loras Tyrell had hit her. Thinking of her stern brother only a wall away kept him perfectly in check. He'd kissed his maiden aunt with more passion.

His reward? She vomited on him.
The cold light of morning

Chapter Twenty-One

In vino veritas est

Alcohol’s only soothing balm is its ability to impact the memories of its users, reordering, reshaping, and even eliminating them. One wakes, hoarse of voice, the taste of rotten ferment fuzzed upon the tongue, stomach roiling. One wonders about the gaps in one’s memory, but is safe in the knowledge that, during the evening, one had been making incredibly erudite and witty points to very attractive people. Occasionally, one wakes with one of those formerly very attractive people, whose fairy godmother appears to have deserted him or her in the cold light of morning. And sometimes memory trickles back, and sometimes it never does. One hears stories, which seem to give the lie to one’s fragmented memories of being the funniest and coolest person in the room. Friends laugh, or simply shake their heads, often wincing.

Alas, sometimes alcohol won’t even give a girl the comfort of stealing her memories from her, and poor Arya woke up with the knowledge that she had behaved like a complete arse the night before.

Her first suspicion that something was desperately wrong was when she opened her eyes, finding herself half-dressed on the couch in the front room rather than tucked up into bed. Either the sun had thrown off all its rays whilst folding into a supernova, presaging the end of the world, or she had been victimised by a giant, throbbing hangover. As her consciousness expanded, bringing her awareness of the rest of her body, she realised it was the latter.

And, as one does, Arya then thought to the night before. She hadn’t had a great time, she reflected. Too much noise. The embarrassment-pleasure of Jaqen’s arrival. The whopping misunderstanding with Margaery, who was still a stupid grabby little miss. Then she’d thrown a strop at Jaqen, behaved like a feral child in front of the Mormonts, and then...

No, no, I don’t remember that part.

She sighed. Yes, I do.

He’d had her hands. She’d punched him, so that was fair enough. And she was angry. So angry, then not angry at all because he was so close to her and she was so squiffed it was easy to forget the anger.

I threw away my pride and begged him to kiss me. Her stomach churned. After I punched him.

But he did kiss me. Her mouth quirked in triumph.

It wasn’t a proper kiss. She frowned.

But it was something. And then somehow there was sick down the side of his shirt.

No, let’s not remember.

But we do.

I sicked up on him. Fuck.

Jaqen H’ghar had seen the tell-tale signs, and he’d gotten mostly out of the way, but she’d managed to
vomit on the left side of his shirt. Had she not lolled her head at that very moment, he would have made a clean escape. He noted that.

He wasn't angry at her, really. In 2008, he'd avoided dying by inches whilst holed up with Chechen rebels in the northern Caucasus. Russian military helicopters had strafed their camp, and he'd felt the whine of bullets over his head as he ran for it, felt the clods of earth they kicked up strike his body, dirt entering his eyes and mouth. If they'd used their rockets, he'd have been killed instantly. He'd broken a lens, but found in that moment he had no desire to photograph the event anyway, preferring instead to survive. He avoided dying by inches many times. But he couldn't, evidently, avoid being puked on by a girl.

What's a t-shirt in the grand scheme of things? He'd helped her inside, and her brother, red-faced with embarrassment, had rushed them both upstairs. He'd deposited Arya into her room, where she sat rather bonelessly on the floor, propped up against the bunk beds. Jaqen had smirked. Bunk beds.

And Jon had shown Jaqen H'ghar, world-renowned photojournalist, to the upstairs loo, where he'd stripped off and cleaned up as best as possible. Jon, sheepish, had brought him a towel and a fresh t-shirt. Jaqen didn't appear to like reeking very much, so Jon all but assisted him into the shower.

Jaqen had known Arya Stark for a week, and he was already bathing in her house. Or, to put it a different way, he'd known Arya Stark for a week and she was already vomiting on him.

Great, he had thought.

He'd elected to wash his hair, not entirely confident that it had escaped her 'attentions', and had just applied the pink, fruit-scented shampoo to his head when the door banged open, and Arya rushed into the loo to vomit once again. Feeling protected in his current location, Jaqen had wondered idly whether she was going to make it to the toilet or not, but she did.

'Ooh, God,' she had said afterward, noticing his very naked self showering in her bath, hot water sluicing over his head. 'Sorry.'

He made no reply, but cupped water in his hands and lobbed it over the tub screen, drenching her. She exited as quickly as she was able to, which was, in her current state, a slow wobbling walk. To his amusement, she'd tried to pull off her wet jeans while leaving the loo, and she'd left the door open as she went back to her room, one pant leg trailing behind her. She'd wriggled out of them fully in the hall.


And she had vomited again, in an empty bathroom this time, and felt much better. Sansa had been loath to sleep in the same room as her sister. So Jon had helped Arya downstairs after everyone had left, putting her to bed on the front room couch.

No one bothered about her jeans. She'd caused enough trouble.

A red blob, indistinct, appeared to her right.

'Jon?' she asked, uncertainly.

His face, unsmiling.
'Jon,' she said. 'Your shirt is too loud. Can you turn it down, please?'

'Funny,' he replied. 'Get up.'

'Okay,' she said, compliant in spirit, if not in body.

It took her about an hour to peel herself off the couch and ooze forth to the kitchen. She found the paracetamol, and took two. Jon gave her coffee, which ordinarily she hated, but today it seemed like a good idea. And she started to eat a full English. Sort of.

'Nothing better for a hangover than a greasy breakfast,' Sam said, kindly, patting her hand.

And there she was, sitting in her knickers and a t-shirt, attempting to get something down her throat. Even Sansa had gotten up before her sister, an event as unlikely as gravity reversing itself. They were all sitting there, all staring at her.

She didn't need telepathy to know what Jon was thinking, with that dark look he kept shooting her. You're supposed to be the responsible one, his mind screamed at her. Even Ghost cast a recriminating glare or two at her, although that might have been because he wanted her sausage, which she couldn't bring herself to touch in order to give it to him.

'Sorry...' she started. Her voice sounded weak and breathy to her ears. Fuck.

'I'm really sorry about last night. I don't know why I did that.'

Jon snorted, his black mood lifting. 'Yes, you bloody well do know.'

'It's all right,' Sansa said. Wait...Sansa is absolving me?

'We all do silly things,' Sansa continued, as if daring Jon to contradict her. Well, she'd know, Arya thought.

'And it wasn't that bad, and she was safe at home rather than out at some club full of wankers.'

Jon frowned at Sansa, never having heard her defend Arya before. Nor, for that matter, had he ever heard her utter the term 'wanker.'

'I met a girl,' Sam said, breaking the silence. Ahh, Sam. Thank you, Arya thought.

Jon smirked.

'Her name is Gilly,' Sam continued. 'She's--'

The doorbell rang. Jon smirked again as he rose to answer it, this time looking at Arya. What does he know that I don't? Arya wondered, noticing for the first time the empty chair next to hers at the table.

The murmur of voices at the front door gradually grew distinct as Jon and another man walked into the kitchen. Ahh, Jaqen H'ghar, of course. Come to call at 1030 on a Saturday morning.

Payback's a bitch, thought Arya, morosely.

Jaqen H'ghar looked fantastic. He had slept. His hair was afflicted with a rather calculated-looking tousle. His weekend uniform was intact and the hollow of his throat looked magnificent. He wasn't bleary eyed and sick from too much drink. He'd shaved. Arya touched her jaw as she made that last observation. He'd kissed her last night and she'd felt a man's stubble on her face for the first time. It burned a bit. She wasn't to know that a woman's face soon grows accustomed to that sensation, and
then it no longer chafes and isn't thought of except in fond remembrances of first kisses and so forth.

He smiled, greeting everyone, and opened the box he carried. Buns. From Hot Pie. Redolent of butter and cinnamon and cloves. Even Arya's poor stomach felt like it could manage one and would Arya please be a love and get one now? She was heartened to see that Jaqen had actually extracted one from the box for her, and put it on her plate. She hadn't dared ask for it, stomach or no stomach.

He turned to her, his smile widening. 'Still in your pants, lovely girl?'

_I'm in my underwear. He's just seen my knickers again. Fuck it: I own it._

'Yes,' she said, smiling sweetly back at him as she broke a piece of the bun off and put it in her mouth. She chewed and swallowed. 'But I could take them off if you'd prefer it.'

He was quick to learn that that sweet smile of hers meant a most defiant challenge.

'Oh _God_, Arya,' Sansa exclaimed. 'You are just so crass.'

Jon laughed, handing Jaqen a cup of coffee and a plate of breakfast. All was right with the world. It scared him when Sansa and Arya got along. It just wasn't...normal.

Jaqen handed Arya the paper.

'I don't think you want to miss this, lovely girl.'

The Dalai Lama. Halfway down the cover of the Saturday _Times_.

'Oh,' she said, paling. 'No.' _Bugger. He wasn't just boasting._

'Amazing what an arrogant, patronising cunt can do, isn't it, lovely girl?'

Sansa's jaw actually dropped. Sam and Jon tried to conceal their amusement, a trifle unsuccessfully.

_Oh no. No, no, no, no._

She put on a new face.

'Jaqen,' she said, slowly, her face a mask of concern, her eyes a bit tragic (but not too much). She positively dripped sincerity from her pores. 'I am very sorry for my behaviour last night.'

'You lie,' he said, smiling. 'But it's no matter.' He started eating.

That used to work on her father quite well. She was slipping. She upped the tragedy a bit.

'You still lie,' he said. 'Get dressed. We're going out. Bring your Leica.' He appeared to be enjoying his breakfast.

She looked at Jon for permission. He didn't seem disapproving. Great. _They've obviously cooked something up together._ She didn't know if she could handle a bromance between her brother and her employer-flirt-man-personthing, and hoped this was a one-off conspiracy to punish her.

'Of course,' she said, all courtesy and warmth, as she rose from the table as gracefully as she possibly could in her t-shirt and knickers. Which were green. With robots on them.

She heard them laughing all the way up the stairs.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Twenty-Two

She felt better after she showered and put herself back together. Arya had contemplated stalling, but her curiosity as to what was in store for her overcame her limited ambition to punish Jaqen. She grabbed Needle, grateful to have it with her once again. The Nikon was good, but the Leica was classic.

He was waiting for her by the front door as she came down the stairs. Somehow, it was ridiculous. Like he was a suitor waiting for a debutante.

_Not my boyfriend. My boss. Whom I threw up on last night._ Somehow, after that thought, she felt much less like a debutante and rather more like a delinquent.

She gave him a smile, trying to act as normal as her stomach thought possible, and they were off.

'Where are we going?' she asked, once they'd left the house.

'You'll see,' he said. They took the tube to Barbican station.

'The Barbican?' she said, grasping the obvious.

He nodded. 'Bauhaus,' he said. They walked the short distance.

He was a little stilted with her, a little tentative. Nervous? She thought. Angry?

'Are you angry with me?' she asked.

'No, sweet girl,' he replied, taking her hand for a second and squeezing it. She was reminded of how he squeezed Umma's hands in quiet affection.

He flashed a red card at the entrance and they went in. And then he sent her away.

'Take three pictures,' he said. 'Learn three new things.'

He looked at her sternly. 'One hour. Only three pictures.'

She'd gone, amused by the challenge.

When she returned, a little smug, they looked at the exhibit. Modern. So bereft of humanity. She thought of her own home with a childish longing for the familiar.

'I can't find much warmth in this,' she said. He looked at her. 'My house was built in the 12th century. It has echoes of history in it.'

'In time, this might too,' he said. 'If it lasts.'


'What do you see?' he asked her.
'A woman,' she said. 'I like her eyes. They're clear. Not a pretty woman, and he's made no effort to paint prettiness into her.' Ahh, she thought. There's the modern part. 'He's not hidden any of her flaws.'

She looked at him. 'An honest picture?'

'Just so,' he said. 'His wife. She was much younger than he was, and a painter in her own right.' Arya's ears pricked up.

Jaqen continued. 'He taught her, and fell in love with her.'

Arya was silent.

'And then, when she developed her own style...outgrew him, you might say, he fell out of love with her.'

He continued. 'It's said she couldn't paint for many years afterward when she heard he had married again, so heartbroken she was. And, less than a year from when their marriage ended, he'd found a new love with a nineteen-year-old.'

Arya heard the story Jaqen was telling her, and heard as well the story he was not telling her. Regret and a lingering wistfulness coloured his voice. She practically heard his barriers going up, a great rush of stone walls rising from the rumbling earth.

'What a bastard,' Arya said.

'A bastard, perhaps,' Jaqen replied. 'Or perhaps it was just life. People fall in love and out of love all the time,' he continued. 'Perhaps he should have exercised some restraint.'

'That's not why he was a bastard,' Arya said. Jaqen looked at her, cocking a brow.

'He was a bastard for not letting her grow, for not letting her paint what and how she wanted. He was a bastard for not letting her be herself,' she said.

'People fall in and out of love all the time,' she pushed on, mocking him. 'I know that, stupid.'

'And people die,' she said softly. 'My father died. We still have no idea why. Does the pain I feel here mean that I should have insulated myself from my father's love? That I should have been protected from it?' she asked, her hand a tight fist above her heart.

'He taught me most of what I know about photography. It was his hobby, and he loved the thought that it would become my career. He would have wanted this,' she said. Her last word hung heavily in the air, gravid with possibilities. **He was so concerned for my happiness.** They'd roamed the moors together, Ned Stark and the daughter who understood him, and he'd asked her things, and she'd told him honestly, and he worried for her. He was so troubled that she didn't really connect with people.

He would have wanted this? Jaqen thought. It was an echo of something Jon had said to him the night before: that Ned Stark would have wanted his younger daughter to learn all she could from this opportunity, even if he had known the complicated feelings surrounding it.

'But I'll knock your teeth out if you hurt her,' Jon had said, frowning. A beat later, he admitted that he had no idea why he said that: it felt like he was obliged to do so.

Jaqen had absolved him, this young head of the family, who'd assumed the mantle of *paterfamilias* so reluctantly. 'It seems fair,' he had said. 'Even though I really rather cherish my teeth.' He'd smiled
prettily and shown them.

He had tried to explicate these complicated feelings to her brother, rather inarticulately. Jaqen had no idea, truly, how or why a girl of not quite seventeen had besotted and befuddled him, and he'd told Jon bluntly that he'd no wish to lie his face off about that. Jon had smiled at that, and warmed to the courteous, elegant man in front of him. For Arya had besotted and befuddled her brothers, as well. It wasn't as though they had the power to refuse her much of anything, even through years of attempting to defend themselves against her. (They were simply grateful she wasn't very demanding.) So, how could a perfect stranger stand a chance against her, armed with no such foreknowledge? Discovering that they had this in common (though perhaps Jaqen did not dwell so much on the carnal as the cerebral) gave birth to a certain camaraderie between the two. Jon, for his part, was reassured that Jaqen H'ghar possessed a modicum both of self-control and honour, and wasn't a lecherous sister-corrupting sicko. It eased his burdened mind somewhat.

Jaqen thought about their sadness. They all wore it, every day. The brother and the sister and Arya. They were so young, trying to navigate their ways in a world where they still needed their father's guidance. And so, they began mythologising him. 'Da would have wanted'. 'Da would have liked'. 'Da would have been proud/upset/impressed'. Would her father really have welcomed a man like him with open arms, knowing Jaqen held a tendresse for his daughter?

His thoughts flitted to his own father and he absently raised his fingers to the left side of his head. Who knew if he were still alive? He rather thought not. He rather hoped not, if only for his mother's sake.

Arya was stood there, waiting for him to speak. He folded his arms across his chest.

'I don't want to be a bastard, sweet girl,' he said, smiling. Possibly, the best I can do for you is to leave you alone.

She drew close to him.

'Are you a bastard?' she asked him, placing her hand on his forearm. She could feel the warmth from him seeping through his jacket.

He shook his head. 'No, I don't think so.' He shifted, putting his hand over hers. Possibly, the best I can do is just to hold out as long as possible.

She quirked her little half-smile at him, and he thought he was lost.

They abandoned the Barbican, neither caring much for textiles or pottery, and went to the studio. He shrugged out of his leather jacket, abandoning it on the chair outside the darkroom, and went in to help her print her pictures.

Yeah, I need help printing three pictures, she thought, wryly.

'So what did you learn, lovely girl?' he asked her in the soft glow of the darkroom's safelight. The pictures had been printed and hung like dripping laundry on the line: red and white.

The first picture: an elderly woman. She was made of wrinkles, from her forehead to her neck. Her fine white hair pulled back, some of it escaping, made a halo against the light from behind. Her eyelids, sunk low from her years, hooded her eyes. Her eyebrows had grown coarse and grey and unkempt. Her mouth was a fine slash, her smile carved from one sunken cheek to another.
'Nonna,' Arya said. 'È una nonna.'

Jaqen smiled. The photograph was beautiful, her Italian accent a horror.

The second picture. Two lads from the Royal Navy, fully kitted out in uniform. Mates. One grinning cheekily, his arms folded in such a way as to emphasise the size of his biceps. *Probably trying to pull Arya*, Jaqen thought. *Puffed up little twit.* The older one smiling as well, but forcing it. A haunted smile.

'Windward. Good name for a sailor, isn't it?' She asked, pointing to the man on the left. The one with biceps. 'He told me the Queen gave them all rum last week. Jones,' she said softly, 'is worried about his friend Tim, who's missing.'

'And then Windward got upset since he'd sounded like a git when they're both scared for their friend.' She smiled.

'That was the picture you should have taken,' he said. She thought about it, nodding slowly. 'Yes, I see.'

*Muti-tasking.* Shite, she thought, irritated.

The third picture. Her heart pounded. The figure of a man, half visible from around a corner. Slim and tall. She'd caught the length of him, his neck and his jawline and his shoulder and his left foot. He was faceless, though he had the slightest shadow of a nose. Could have been anybody.

But it wasn't anybody. It was him. He smiled. *Caught.*

'This one,' she began, not looking at him. 'This one was difficult. It was so hard to position him the way I wanted. He's full of secrets. He is a secret, really,' she said matter-of-factly, flipping the fluorescent light on. The red drained out of the room. She unclipped the photos from the line.

'My secret,' she barely breathed, as she left the darkroom.

*Possibly, I won't be able to hold out for very long after all*, he thought, ruefully, and rubbed his tongue along his teeth.

Chapter End Notes

I shall give out cyber-points if you guess the artist that Jaqen is pontificating about.
Sunday and goodbye

Chapter Twenty-Three

On Saturday, she'd walked home alive, feeling the pulse of the city, the electricity of just simply living. On Sunday, she lazed with Jon, their legs knit together on opposite ends of the couch, thinking and just being. She thought about Jaqen and, had she been equipped with the requisite vocabulary, she might have thought of him as positively Byronic in his tragic-hero-complex. They'd had a nice time after he got off his 'what's best for you' soapbox. Or rather, after she'd kicked it out from under him.

Someone quite a bit older than I am, and he appears to be just as clueless, she thought.

'Jon,' she started. He looked up from his mag. 'What did you say to Jaqen on Friday night?'

He started reading again, flipping the page. 'Just talked about the travel arrangements of your internship.' Flip, flip, flip. 'And I said I'd kick his teeth in if he hurt you.'

'Lovely,' she said. 'Very mature.' She filed the travel bit in her mind for further questioning. It filled her with too much excitement, and she couldn't very well betray that to Jon.

'Yeah, I thought so too,' he said, grinning at her.

Sam came into the front room, holding his phone. 'I got a text from Gilly!' he cried, excitedly.

Jon and Arya gave the look to each other. He'd talked of nothing else. And it was great, really. But...it was too much. He'd met her on Friday. She worked at a pet shop and liked rabbits an awful lot. And Jon and Sansa and Arya had all thought she was up the duff. No one had yet summoned the courage to talk to Sam about this particular issue, however, and so, he banged on and on about her.

Poor Sam, Arya thought. Poor sweet Sam. Jon glanced up at her from his magazine again, and looked pointedly at the door. They scrambled out of the house with Ghost, and even though Jon had been for a morning jog with a couple of mates, he reinforced his commitment to physical activity by running and playing in the park with Ghost and Arya. Exhausted, they returned to the front room and the couch.

Catelyn Skyped them, clearly bothered by something she would not share. Jon and Arya did their best to pry it out of her, but she held to her secrets with a grip as strong as a vice, irritated at them in the end. She looked tired, the corners of her mouth pulled into a deepening, permanent frown caused both by sorrow and gravity's intemperate unkindness to middle-aged women.

Jon always set her teeth on edge anyway. Poor Jon, Arya thought. I've lost Da, but he's lost both his parents. It was an old and abiding source of tension between the older Stark children and their mother. Catelyn never warmed to Jon, seeing in him a reminder of a life Ned Stark had in which she had no part. She was the stepmother, never the mother. And while she never treated him poorly, she clearly did not love him. As he grew up, he stopped trying, refusing to provide her with the love that a mother is due. Catelyn was perversely annoyed by this.

What Jon lost in not having Catelyn's love, he gained from his siblings: they all adored him, supporting him through this one small glitch in an otherwise unquestionably decent and easy life, which had amplified as of late. Ned Stark's death had not changed how Winterfell worked, but his title, Earl of Northumbria, had been the one thing that could not be split between the children. It was the one remnant of feudalism, and it passed to Jon, the eldest son. Of course, Jon being Jon, tried to
relinquish it and settle it on Robb, for it was Robb who was most deeply involved with Winterfell as a working farm. Robb, however, wouldn't hear of it. The title became a hot potato, which none of its possible heirs really cared about, (except for maybe Sansa) and Catelyn took the easy road and settled blame on Jon.

So Catelyn snapped at Jon, and Arya, sick of it all, ended the conversation rather abruptly.

They'd scarcely done so when Robb texted Jon.

'Ignore Mum,' Robb wrote.

'I do, generally.' Arya swiped Jon's phone and replied before he could stop her.

'LOL – Arya?'

'*grin* - yeh'

'Anyway, it's about Theon.'

'What happened?' Jon wrote.

'He's gone to see his father.'

'What? Oh no'

'yeah, and that's why mum's upset.'

'k thx'

'see u both here in a few days...?' Robb appended a birthday cake emoticon to his message.

'we'll see if we can make it for next week-end.'

'k'

Theon Greyjoy had lived with the family for years and years. They had, quite literally, found him one day as he wandered into one of Winterfell's barns. He'd been hungry and dirty and unkempt. They'd thought him an orphan, and what does one do with an orphan, but feed and clean him and put him to bed? It turned out that his father, Balon Greyjoy, an itinerant fisherman from the Orkney Islands, had gone bloody barking mad and, taking his son, hied himself to the mainland where he began to commit the first in a string of violent crimes, involving robbery and sexual assault. He'd moved south, dumping Theon near Winterfell – the boy wouldn't stop crying – and was nicked shortly after. Due to the severity of the attacks on his victims, Balon Greyjoy had been in prison for close to fifteen years, though the year before, word of his release had reached the Starks.

No wonder Catelyn was so upset. Despite Theon not being her son, he was treated as one. It felt like betrayal, if Theon were indeed seeking out the insane criminal who had thrown him away. Would Theon call him 'father'?

Jon texted Theon, though Robb told him it was pointless. No answer.

'D'you think he'll go back to Winterfell?' Arya asked Jon.

'Yeah, I do. But I just wonder who he'll bring with him.'

They were quiet for the rest of the day, and when Sansa returned with food, their supper was a
They were lying awake in their beds, Arya and Sansa. Sleep was hovering around the edges, but wouldn't yet come in and take them.

'Sansa,' Arya began. 'How old is Sandor Clegane?' She was actually more interested in learning Jaqen H'ghar's age, but she wasn't exactly about to ask him, so speculating about someone else's lover's age seemed a good substitute.

'Thirty-nine,' Sansa said, bluntly. Arya's mind screamed in revolt. That would make him twenty years older than her sister.

'Oh, Sansa,' Arya sighed. 'Who am I to judge? Jaqen could be just as old, for all I know.' She didn't really believe that for a second.

'I know,' Sansa replied. 'I know, and I know, and still I know.'

'Do you love him?' Arya asked, wondering what she herself was feeling.

'Yes.'

'Does he love you?' Arya asked, yearning for that love herself.

'Yes.'

'Are you going to marry him?'

'Does that sort of thing even matter anymore?'

'No, I guess it doesn't.' Arya had never even considered marriage herself, not once. But she knew Sansa's dialogue, which she heard repeatedly when Sansa was a little girl playing with dolls or conscripts. Let's pretend. I'm Sansa. You're Simon/Oliver/Joseph/Michael. We love each other. We are getting married. This is our baby, whose name is Jane/Samuel/Michael/Dora. (Michael seemed to figure into Sansa's romances much of the time, though Arya had never known if he was based on a real person or just a construct: a bland and inoffensive name heard in many places.)

'What's it like?' Arya whispered.

'Bad at first, then good. Then more than good. Then it's just necessary.'

'Necessary?'

'Yes, like you're not in...,' Sansa paused, searching for the word, 'equilibrium if you don't have it. Do you have something you want to tell me, Arya?'

'No, no, no,' Arya said, dramatically. 'For I've never even been kissed!' She thought of a man's rough stubble along her still-sore jaw. 'Well, not exactly.'

'That's pathetic, Arya. You're almost seventeen.'

'Pathetic or not, it's the truth.'

'What about that boy...? Oh, she's talking about Mycah.'

'The one from the village. The butcher's son.'
'Mycah,' Arya supplied.

'Yes, that's him.'

'No, we played with sticks and called them swords, and duelled upon the moor,' she said, giggling at her own tone.

'He fancied you!' 

'Yes, I was getting to that. He wrestled me to the ground once and tried it. Maybe two years ago? And then I hit him, really rather hard, and he stopped coming round.'

Sansa giggled. It was so like her sister. 'You didn't want him to kiss you, then?'

'Oh, no. It was disgusting. All sweaty and hot breath.'

'There is an element of sweat and hot breath involved in the business, you know,' Sansa said. 'But adrenaline and excitement too.'

'Do you want that man to kiss you, Arya?' Sansa asked, but her sister's soft and regular breathing told her that there'd be no answer that night.

Arya slept, her dreams full of sweaty men scaring her with their hot breath and avid eyes.

The next morning, she went to work in a bit of a grumbly mood, conscious that she had to work with the waif the entire week. Umma greeted her, her eyes sad.

Good morning,' Arya said. She no longer knew what to call the woman. It was awkward. Thanks, Jaqen.

Umma followed her to her desk.

'Here, Arya. He left this for me to give to you.'

An envelope. Just 'Arya' on the front in that bleeding pen on that silky paper. There was something in the envelope besides a letter. She could feel the contours of something hard. Metal? Stone?

'What's this?' she asked.

Umma smiled at her. 'He had to leave early to catch a flight.'

Rorge appeared, crowding the entrance to her office. 'He's gone to the fackin' Sahel. Left early this morning with Jean-Paul. He'll be there for a good few weeks. Should be back before the Olympics, though.'

'The Olympics start on the 27th!' Arya said, surprised into yelping. That's weeks. No Jaqen for weeks. She was instantly miserable, but chided herself. This is the job, you selfish bint. You didn't expect him to be around much when you applied.

'Where is this place, anyway?' she asked.

'Google it,' Rorge said. He laughed and walked away.

Her knowledge of sub-Saharan Africa was dodgy, she found, and she reminded herself to actually read something about geography as well as pay more attention to the paper. Being completely
Infatuated is not an excuse to turn into a bloody idiot. Just from a basic internet search, she found what she needed to know.

She checked her email. Just a couple of things, but the all-important one from Jaqen was there.

LG:

I'm off for a while with JPB & someone from Reuters. Won't be able to text you or interrogate your under-pillow activities for a few weeks.

Ken will provide you with some other things to do, and don't forget your waif-work this week.

Keep out of trouble and off the sauce.

JH

P.S.: Umma has an envelope for you.

Get sozzled once; and no one lets you live it down, she thought. Wonder who the Reuters someone is? An image, unbidden, popped into her mind. Buxom, blonde, tall, in tight-fitted khaki kit, looking every inch the professional journalist. She probably shoots Canon, Arya scoffed. Someone. Someone.

Fuck, he'll miss my birthday. She chided herself. He doesn't know when your birthday is. Stop being such a child, for heaven's sake.

She couldn't bring herself to open the envelope, and tossed it in the top drawer of her desk so as to avoid looking at it. Then, facing the inevitable, she went along to find Eleni.

No Jaqen for weeks.
Chapter Twenty-Four

Working with the waif wasn't half bad, once she figured out that Arya was, in fact, a girl.

_Four more_, Arya thought. She wondered how Eleni had managed to acquire the knowledge, and learned, to her chagrin, that she herself had been careless.

Her self-portrait. Arya had left the negatives in the darkroom. It's not as if there weren't loupes and light-tables around. Eleni had looked, and seen Arya.

In her characteristically blunt way, she asked, 'This is not a picture of a boy. Who are you, girl?'

And Arya told her. After that, it seemed easier. Eleni swore in Greek. A lot. It was charming, though possibly Arya would have been less charmed had she known what Eleni was saying. The waif wasn't tremendously pleased with Jaqen, but at any given time, there was always someone upset with him. He'd gone and done just what he pleased when he lied about Arya being a girl, and Arya was beginning to see that Jaqen H'ghar did what he pleased rather a lot. _Hope they don't find out my age_, she thought.

The waif set Arya to work cataloguing the prints in the cellar below the House of Black and White.

'If we're going to use it as gallery space, we'll need to know what we have to exhibit.'

So Arya found herself photographing photographs. Thousands of them. The photos didn't have to be good, but Arya found herself not able to settle for taking simple snapshots. Instead, she dug through the studio equipment and found a ring flash. She used that to light the photographs and made sure she took adequate pictures. Slow work. Scut work.

By the end of Monday, she was half-insane, and asked Ken if she could have Friday off, to extend her week-end. She was expected home, she said, for her birthday. He almost looked surprised that she would bother asking, so laissez-faire was the attitude in the office.

So she packed up and left on Monday with, if not a light heart, at least a slightly grateful one.

Gendry stopped her at the door. 'Arya!' he yelled. 'Let's go together.'

She waited for him as he quickly packed up.

'Don't you live in the building?' she asked.

'Yes, but I thought we could grab a bite,' he said.

'Great,' she said.

They ate fish and chips in the park. It was a nice day, and Arya had been cooped up for the entirety of it. Gendry was happy to fill in most of the conversation, and she found herself grateful again, and allowed her mind to wander.

It's funny the difference a week makes. One week, give or take. One week into an acquaintance and absence throws us into total disarray.
How is it possible that in the space of a week one person can grow to matter so much that their absence dejects us, brings us low? Our brains, such malleable things, rewire themselves to grow reliant on ocular/auditory/olfactory/tactile/gustatory stimuli from one certain source. She missed seeing him, hearing him, smelling him, touching him, and to her great dismay, she found herself wondering about tasting him. Some sort of physiological dependency had clearly manifested itself within her. One week, give or take.

Gendry was both a poor substitute and a great distraction, and she found herself content. Greasy fish and chips will soothe the ravaged soul. And Gendry was funny. He told good jokes and he was interested in a lot of the same stuff she was interested in: who knew that a son of Robert Baratheon would make such good company?

She asked him, somewhat gingerly, if he ever saw Joffrey. He grimaced.

'Not my favourite person, really.'

'Yeah, we all think he's barking.'

'What the hell is your sister doing with him?'

Arya thought for a moment. 'I wish I could tell you,' she said, confident that the double-entendre wasn't quite a lie. Gendry invited confidences, and Arya knew Sansa's secret would be safe with Gendry, but she couldn't bring herself to violate her sister's trust, as newly minted as it was.

Gendry was great friends with Jaqen H'ghar, despite the difference in their ages. Arya closed her mind to this knowledge, since it would be so easy to use Gendry to find out more about Jaqen. She snorted, mentally. That's like unwrapping your Christmas presents early. There's no joy in that, not on Christmas morning.

Oh yeah, it would also be incredibly wrong to use Gendry like that.

She couldn't stop him from volunteering information, however, and she felt it was largely fair game when he did. This time, he told her that he and Jaqen ran together in the park every morning. Funny, she thought. Her fears about being seen cavorting with Ghost were sort of justified, but weren't relevant any longer. Jaqen had seen her howling with the dog on the lawn: who cares if she were seen running in a park with the large wolfish beast? But what was more interesting was Gendry telling her information he thought she must have known already: their running partnership had become a trio since Jon had joined them.

Fuck. That weasel. She didn't quite know which weasel she meant.

'Gendry, she spoke, changing the subject, 'what was the travel portion of your internship? Where did you go besides Russia?'

'Well, we spent several weeks there, in the Urals, doing some investigative work on a rather shady oil company, then headed down to Kazakhstan, then Turkmenistan...all the 'stans, really.'

'Was it dangerous?'

'In places, yes. But don't worry, they won't let you into somewhere dangerous.'

Fuck. They had a bloody conspiracy going.

'That's what I was afraid of,' she said, flashing a tight smile to him.
'Did the pictures and the story sell?' she asked.

'No, actually. Well, sort of. The story was suppressed: Newscorp wouldn't buy it, even though they're the ones who wanted it in the first place. So Jaqen--and here's one of the reasons why I like this bloke--sold it to National Geographic and they ran it as an environmental piece.'

She laughed at that. *Clever, clever Jaqen.*

Soberly, he continued. 'We had to hire a private security firm for a few months just in case the Russians came after us.'

'And did they?'

'No. Jaqen is pretty well-protected, actually. He doesn't even let his picture get 'round.'

'Yeah. Any idea where I am going?'

'Italy, I think.' *Ooh, danger. I might die from eating too much pizza.*

'Ahh,' she said.

'But I don't know the details.'

She yawned, then smiled at Gendry. 'Sorry, I have to get going. I'm wiped after the day of drudgery.'

'Walk you home?'

She waved him off. 'No, don't bother.'

*It's fifty paces from here...why would I need to be walked home?*

She left him sitting on the bench. He watched her go, and waved.

The rest of the week was unmitigated drudgery. Menial. *Stack, photograph, restack, download, enter data, upload, tag, tag, tag. Repeat.*

It left her a terrible amount of time alone with her thoughts. *What is Jaqen doing? Who is he with? Who is that Reuters bitch? Why do I call her a bitch? I should respect her. Why do I even think she's a she?*

And softer ones. *How's he doing? What's he shooting? How is it down there for him? Is he safe?*

Never having had to miss a meal in her life, though at times she skipped them due to sheer inattention, Arya wasn't clear on what famine really looked like. She'd seen so often the famine tropes that had been presented on telly: gaunt children with big bellies and flies crawling on them. Deserts. It didn't register anymore. It didn't feel real.

And then she saw the pictures, which came through on Tuesday, with an accompanying story written by Kelly Reilly. *Kelly? The Reuters...woman? Bah. Can't tell from that name.*

It was wrenching, and contextual. Not a desert, but a land where crops had failed. Soil blown away from too many people uprooting too many trees for firewood. And the people: he'd captured them. Women with rich brown skin and tightly curling hair, their clothes bright and patterned: smiling, though their lips were chapped and painful. Wide-eyed toddlers, still questioning and excited and trying to play through the lethargy of hunger. And the quiet desperation of families as food aid trucks...
roll in, the Red Cross a banner of hope against the dry landscape. He'd given them their dignity: not stolen it in a bid to pull emotion from the viewer. His subjects were the ones who mattered. They would not be victimised, not by him, anyway.

She felt a wave of desire-admiration-envy for him run through her when she saw his work. It was the work of a mature artist, not a callow youth.

He wrote her another teasing email on Tuesday. It came in mid-afternoon, certainly not conforming to his usual routine of late night text and early morning email.

SG:

It's unbelievably dry here. I'm sort of sleeping underneath my own pillow...since I don't have one. :-(

Don't forget, you challenged me to a game last Friday. What's the next picture you want an arrogant arse to put on the cover of a paper?

JH

PS: You haven't gotten the envelope? Shall I whip my own mother for not giving it to you?
PPS: Was it an arrogant arse or an arrogant prick? I'm having difficulty remembering all your many insults.

She laughed and winced simultaneously.

Her heart was soft, though, as she wrote to him.

I think you should have the photo you just sent over (man + the sack of grain) on the cover. The Times again, please.

AS

PS: Be nice to your mother. It's my fault.
PPS: I believe it was arse.
PPPS: The photos are...

lovely. They were lovely. And lovely was the absolutely wrong word, despite its rightness. So she let her sentence trail off and sent it anyway.

She'd chosen a picture of a man who had a sack of grain slung over his shoulder. It had bowed him slightly, his strength evaporating. Determination shone in his eyes. He was carrying it to his family. His wife was in view, carrying an infant, who had her hands open, arms extended to her father. It was a beautiful shot.

Arya had tagged what felt like a million photographs that she'd taken from the cellar, and her mind, unbidden, started tagging this one. Family child famine food aid help us wife husband love.

She heard Margaery talking to Ken and Rorge.

'All right, so he's chosen the pic he wants. Yeah, that one. I know, I think this one is stronger but he was insistent.'

On Wednesday morning, Arya glanced at the picture. Large, on the cover of the Times. There it was. She felt a small frisson of excitement run through her, as if she'd just discovered that she had just a
little power over Jaqen H'ghar. And she liked it.

They'd Skyped him in that morning. He and Jean-Paul had retreated to a hotel somewhere in Dakar, and would stay there for a week. Riots, he had said, grimly. He looked like hell. Unshaven, unkempt. His clothes were wrinkled and dirty.

Arya felt sorry for whoever had to clean the room and brush the dust out of everything.

'Did everyone like the picture?' he said, casually propping his head on his hand, two fingers on his cheek.

_So innocent._

Margaery grumbled a bit. 'It wasn't the strongest, Jaqen. We should have gone with the landscape.'

Arya chimed in, self-conscious. 'It was the most humane,' she defended.

'Just so,' he said, looking at her.

Her heart pounded.
I am so sorry for the delay in this: some health problems returned and rendered me a quivering mass of pain. I couldn't even look at a computer. I've not completely healed, but I am feeling better. I've been catching up on some life tasks that I couldn't manage whilst I was busy being ill, so this didn't get first priority.

That being said, thanks so much for your words of support and kind reviews. It means the world to me that people are reading and enjoying this.

Chapter Twenty-Five

They Skyped in Jaqen and Jean-Paul on Thursday morning for the sacred Thursday staff meeting. Arya was grateful: anything was a relief from the cataloguing of photos. (Such is the life of an intern!) Jaqen and Jean-Paul reported that they were planning to move from Dakar to the east next week. Arya noticed that Jaqen looked exhausted, but had a gleam in his eyes. This excites him, she thought. This is his life. Jean-Paul just looked worn out, a fact that was voiced by Umma.

'I spent the night in a bloody cage,' Jean-Paul reported. 'I was shooting the riots and, uh, got arrested.' He did not look pleased.

Jaqen smirked. 'We got him out, however, Jean-Paul did not have the best sleep in prison.'

'Be careful,' Umma said, looking at Jaqen when she said it. Rorge chuckled. Evidently they get arrested a lot, Arya mused.

'Sonja bailed him out, actually. She knows the chief of police in Dakar, so it was not a difficult thing, but we had to wait 'til morning,' Jaqen said.

Sonja. Who is Sonja? Oh my god, Arya thought, as the pieces of evidence fell into place. Sonja Yoren? That must be the Reuters 'someone'. Fuck, bugger, fuck! She is gorgeous. And thirty. And blonde. Arya's flaring jealousy was tempered, albeit minutely, by the fact that Sonja Yoren had been one of her idols until five seconds ago: THE woman in the man's world of photojournalism. She tapped her pen repetitively on the pad of paper in front of her until Eleni shot her a look.

She barely heard each person talking as they went around the table, each detailing his or her activities for that week. In fact, she was so preoccupied that Gendry had to nudge her when it was her turn.

'Oh, right. Well, it's a short week for me, since I'm off tomorrow--'

'Happy birthday!' Gendry interrupted. A general chorus of birthday wishes followed.

'Right, well, next week I'll still be working in the House of Black and White cataloguing all the photos.'
Sympathetic looks met hers from those seated around the table.

Jaqen cleared his throat and said, 'Well, 'Arry, I hope you have a lovely, lovely birthday.' Arya blushed: he had somehow got hold of an envelope and was fidgeting with it. Not very surreptitiously.

_Oh, that's right...that envelope. God, could he be more obvious?_

'Thanks, Jaqen. I will.' She nodded to him, fighting off tomato-face. _For a boy, I really blush like a girl._

Gendry was next. He spoke about some technical developments on the digital backs he was working on, and Arya completely glazed over that, thinking about that dratted envelope Jaqen had left for her. Her curiosity was piqued once again, and she vowed not to leave for her long week-end without taking it with her.

She came back into the conversation as Gendry stated, excitedly, 'I'll be going with Arya, uh, Harry, to Winterfell this weekend, so that makes a nice change for me.'

'You are?' Arya and Jaqen blurted, nearly simultaneously.

'Yeah, Jon invited me.'

'Well, now that we know what everyone is doing on the week-end and now that the little farce about Arya's gender-bending antics is over, perhaps we can determine if we have further business to discuss? Or shall we just adjourn and get on with the work?' Ken Izembaro said, his tone sarcastic, but reflecting zero surprise about Arya's sudden gender-flip-flopping.

_Now they all knew. Fuck. How bad was I at this?_

Jaqen H'ghar paid no attention to the outing of Arya Stark, so focused was he on Gendry's happy plans to tag along on Arya's birthday weekend. Even through the 360p video connection, Arya could see that he was furious.

_What can I do? I had nothing to do with it,_ she thought.

'I'm surprised, Gendry,' she said, a little lamely. 'I didn't know anything about this.' She slouched a little lower in her chair, as if to dodge some missile coming through the ether.

'Jon thought more would be, uh, merrier,' he said, picking up on some of the tension and, consequently, reducing his enthusiasm to more manageable levels.

But Jaqen kept his anger under wraps. 'Gendry, Arya, I hope you have a lovely week-end,' he said, flashing his teeth in an approximation of his smile. 'And all, I'm sorry about deceiving you about Arya. It was my idea. The fault is all mine.' _Even in his anger he caresses my name._

Rorge laughed, and, putting on a Cockney accent, said, 'It's not like we didn't know, what with her brace-and-bits.' She didn't understand.

'Don't be discourteous, Rorge,' Jaqen said, frowning. All trace of his anger had vanished. Arya wondered if it had ever been there in the first place, or if she'd imagined it. _And what's to be angry about if Gendry comes to Winterfell? He came often enough in the past._

Rorge just laughed.
The meeting wrapped without further incident, and Gendry came over to her desk.

'You had an interesting reaction when Sonja Yoren was mentioned. She a hero of yours?'

'Yeah, you could say that.' And I want to punch her for no reason.

'Well, Jaqen and Jean-Paul know her well, so you'll likely get to meet her. She comes to London once or twice a year: always stays here.' He smiled at her, and hadn't a clue what fierce maelstrom was whirling in Arya's mind. She smiled calmly back at him.

What is 'here'? Arya thought. Here on the premises, here in the neighbourhood, here in Jaqen's bed? For a girl who'd not thought at all on the subject of sex, she had become quite unable to stop thinking of it in the past weeks. And it's not like she could ask him about it. He was thousands of miles away, for one. Email, well, no, that would be too embarrassing. And talking about anything like this, she thought, was ridiculous anyway. It's not like I'm entitled to my jealousy, she thought, morosely.

'And don't worry, Arya. They all knew you were a girl within a few days. The only one who believed you had a chance of fooling anyone for more than five minutes was Jaqen, and he's a bit daft sometimes.'

'What gave me away?' Arya asked.

Gendry flushed, pausing before speaking. 'Uh, men aren't shaped like that, Arya.'

Oh.

Gendry left, and Arya checked her email. Nothing. He was angry, she thought. Jealous? Arya recognised her own jealousy, and its target was Sonja Yoren. The woman was perfect. How can I compete? Arya thought, miserable.

They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. This is true, but absence also allows us to reflect on every small detail of the one(s) we love, allowing us to replay conversations, looks, touches, kisses, and so forth. We allow ourselves to dwell, in the absence of both our loved one and something exciting to do, on minutiae. And when we haven't gotten to know that person well, we can use his or her absence to fill in the details that we don't know. We tell ourselves stories about what they're doing and with whom they're doing those things. We take a rough sketch and create an oil painting, the canvas of which becomes as huge as our imaginations will allow.

Since she was busy attempting to compress two days' work into one, she was only able to devote half her brain power to her obsessive thoughts about Jaqen. She did feel his absence most keenly, however. Truthfully, whether he were present or if he were absent, she thought about him. He had managed to insinuate himself into her brain so that if he were there or not there, he was never far from her thoughts, which had been thrown into chaos.

She had been surprised at Gendry's announcement that he would be journeying up to Winterfell with the family. The family, she thought, wryly, had expanded easily to include Sam. And now Gendry. So what? Jaqen's reaction had been difficult for her to process. He had clearly been displeased that Gendry was going to Winterfell. Why? Arya wondered. Of course, had it been up to her, Jaqen would've come to Winterfell with them. But he was in Africa, traversing the Sahel, doing what he lived for. When he was around, he was like a drug, but seeing his excitement and sharing in it as best one could over Skype, well, that was getting her high, too.

And, rather than wishing him back again, she wished she were there with him. The hard thing was
that she couldn't have gone with him: the obstacles that she swatted away regularly: youth, gender, inexperience, mindblowing and inappropriate mutual attraction – were plainly laid out for her to see. While she could dismiss the former issues and simply enjoy the latter in the quiet confines of her personal life, in her professional life, all these things counted against her. Only time would nullify their impacts. *Do I have time to catch up?* Arya pondered. *Or is Sonja bloody Yoren going to step in and ruin everything?*

*Hah. Wouldn't be easy for him to hook up with Sonja with me around,* she thought, smugly. *So why would he be jealous, especially when I've practically thrown myself at him? He can't doubt how I feel. But perhaps he's not jealous, what with the blonde, tanned, and perfect Sonja Yoren by his side, ready to welcome him into her bed?*

So Arya concluded that it must not be jealousy, but something else that had aroused his ire; perhaps it was the fact that she was going to Winterfell at all rather than staying at JHWire and working. It occupied her thoughts for the rest of the day: she spent the day plucking endless petals from a daisy borne of her imagination. *He loves me, he loves me not. He's jealous, he's not jealous. I'm a silly git, I'm a silly git.*

Finally, all the work was done and all the petals were plucked. She was mentally rather exhausted, having learned that there is no truth to be found in obsessive thinking. She quickly packed up and went home, sweeping the envelope into her bag. *There, at last I remembered it.*

Arya walked home, grateful to stretch her legs and recover some sense of equilibrium. She didn't want to be Sansa, always mooning over a boy. *A man,* she corrected herself. She did not harbour domestic fantasies about Jaqen H'ghar. 'Happy hearth and home' was her sister's paradigm, inherited from their mother. Arya shrank from that: it was fine, she supposed, but it was mindless, and it wasn't exciting, and it wasn't her. She resolved not to continue thinking along the lines she had been: it just wasn't healthy. Jealousy was stupid: it was time to nip the green in the bud, lest she become some dramatic damsel and end up not liking who looked back at her in the mirror. *I will purposely not shave my legs,* she thought, *even though everyone knows I'm a girl.* (Ah, youthful defiance.)

Arya was in for a surprise of another sort when she got home. Jon was taking them all up to Winterfell that night rather than in the morning.

'Very easier with Ghost,' he said, apologetically. 'Sorry, I didn't give you loads of time to pack.' Arya understood. The dog was large, looked like a great white wolf, and had a disconcerting tendency to stare rather intensely at people. The rails allowed dogs, but there was always a fuss once the conductor saw the look of the beast.

She brushed away his apology and bounded upstairs to pack. Sansa was already upstairs, attempting to stuff far too much into a small case.

'Very three days!' Arya exclaimed. 'You have clothes there!' She herself had packed in short order, weighing herself down with camera gear rather than feminine fripperies. She used the time to help Sansa, or rather, attempt to help her. She was thrown out for her troubles; evidently, her help had not been quite the kind Sansa needed.

The sense of anticipation began to manifest itself. *Home. Winterfell. My birthday. I will wake tomorrow and be another year closer to him.*

Jaqen H'ghar had closed the Skype connection that morning with the taste of bile in his throat.
Am I losing her? He thought, closing his eyes and pressing his hands to his temples. You can't lose what you never had, spoke the voice of reason in his mind. He spent the rest of the day resigning himself to an avuncular role in her life, and trying to ease the resentment he felt about his friend for being both near to and much more suitable for her. He went out alone, Jean-Paul needing to recover from his rather uncomfortable night in the police station's lock-up. He returned at dusk, thirsty and exhausted, and handed Jean-Paul the memory card.

Jean-Paul fired up the lightroom and scrolled through the pictures, shaking his head here and there. 'Jaqen,' he began. 'You needn't tell me anything, but why so much tristesse?'

Jaqen declined to answer. He just smiled his polite smile and gave nothing away.

Note: I thought there was some entertainment value in making Yoren a woman. More about this later.

*Brace and bits: Cockney rhyming slang - Rorge is hamming it up.
Chapter Twenty-six: Home

Arya sat on the sofa, her legs curled up under her. She was reading a mag. One of Sansa's, and thus, not very interesting. Filled with gossip about people on the telly, people in the news: people who weren't important. The pics were standard paparazzi fare. Women with orangey-tans, raccoon eyes and shimmering pink lips accompanied by stubbled men wearing dark glasses. Entourages of small dogs clad in Burberry, small children with appalling names, adoring fans. No, not very interesting.

Jaqen's head was propped on the opposite arm of the sofa, his toes burrowing under the meat of her thigh. He was wearing maroon plaid pyjama bottoms and a thin white t-shirt.

Absently flipping the pages of the mag, she noticed that the plaid flannel clashed with his hair.

'You can't be comfortable like that,' she said to him, though it was her own comfort she thought of. He quickly reversed himself so that his head was in her lap. She began to stroke his hair. Soft. So soft. He sighed with pleasure.

'How did this happen?' she asked as she traced the contours of silvery white against the red. She could feel a roughness to his scalp where the hair was white.

'It's such a long story,' he said, turning onto his left side, his nose pressing against her, and presenting her with the hair that was that lovely dark red, unbroken by white. She recognised the signal: he didn't want to talk more about it, so she resumed her petting. He nuzzled closer to her, raising her shirt and kissing her hip.

'Ahhh,' she moaned. Really more of a cry.

'Should I not do that, lovely girl?' he asked, disingenuously, his breath hot against her skin.

He began to whine, low in his throat.

Arya woke quickly, completely disoriented. Where am I? she thought, before the dark settled into familiar shapes and shadows. She was in her room, at home. Winterfell.

Nymeria looked at Arya rather balefully, raising her head from where it had nested on Arya's thigh.

She scratched the dog's ears a trifle guiltily, laughing off her dream. The soft light behind her curtains told her it was near morning, so she rose and stole downstairs, Nymeria padding along behind her.

As birthday mornings go, it was a good one. Arya donned a jumper over her pyjamas, put on her boots, and headed out, past the garden gate and up the hill, rucksack slung over her shoulder. Nymeria rocketed past her, excited to finally be out with her mistress. To the east, the sun sent out streamers of red and gold, pulling itself up and bathing Arya and the moor in its soft yellow light.

They had arrived late the night before, too late to see anything. Robb had picked them up from Newcastle and they had woven their way on country roads familiar and safe even in darkness. Then, a turn to the right and slow passage under the narrow gate next to the lodge brought them home.
A home which Arya was now surveying. The moor on which she was stood spread to the north of the house. Even further beyond the moor's gentle hills lay Arya's favourite parts of the property: the forest, with the river Eythe winding through it, and the fell, rising up. To the east, acres and acres laid to miscanthus, barley, and probably some other things that Robb and her mother had planned. To the west, the kitchen garden, walled as in the mediaeval tradition, the plants of which probably were the descendants of the first plants that populated the selfsame garden a thousand years ago. Beyond that lay outbuildings and stables, a cluster of which retained their intended purposes: bakery, brewery and buttery, and dairy. Others had been refashioned into holiday lets. Further, pastures and paddocks for sheep and cattle. They still retained horses, and everyone in the family rode.

The house itself. Stone-built. Ancient. A tower remaining beside the main portion of the house, a tower half-destroyed six hundred years ago or so. More, but nothing that hadn't been reduced to rubble an aeon ago. What was left was substantial, imposing, stark like the Starks. And Arya would have given it all away—every last acre of it—to barter for her father's life. Alas, 'twas not to be, and although he was gone, this legacy of his remained. And Arya was both sorrowful and grateful. She shook her head, ruefully and trudged further up the hill. *I thought the negotiation stage was over. Guess not.* She withdrew *Needle* from her bag. Using some moss-covered boulders as a tripod, she focused *Needle* on some cranesbill, a shock of red against the loden of the moor. *Not working. Wrong lens.* She made a sound, a small grunt of displeasure as she discovered her absentmindedness, and opened her pack for the correct lens. As she withdrew it, she glimpsed the envelope half-hidden in the interior. She changed lenses, then moved to open the envelope.

A prickly feeling on her neck, or perhaps a stray sound, gave her pause. Nymeria grew watchful. She was not alone here after all. She put the envelope back in her rucksack. A speck on the top of the hillside, a puff of breath. She changed lenses again. As he drew nearer, she saw him. Gendry. *Click.* Running down the hill, shirtless despite the morning's chill. *Click.* He was gorgeous as he ran, making it seem like no effort at all. *Click.* She lowered the camera, waved at him and he ran towards her.

'Glorious, innit?' she asked, once he had reached her. He sat on the boulder, inhaling great lungfuls of air, his ribs expanding and contracting in an almost mesmerising rhythm. Steam rose from his body.

'Yeah. Such a beautiful morning. I had to get out and get up that hill.'

'The hills call to me, too,' she said, smiling.

'There's just something about this place. I remember it vividly from when I was younger.' He smiled at her, wiped his face with his shirt, and got up.

'Want to keep moving,' he said. His breathing had slowed to almost normal, and gooseflesh pebbled his skin. He donned the shirt in one fluid motion, and Arya felt a brief *something* at that.

'Shall we go back?' she asked. The sanctity of aloneness had been disrupted. The cranesbill pocked the hillside. There would be other opportunities.

He nodded his assent, and they wound their way back to the house.

By the time they reached the house, everyone was up. Arya was jostled by her youngest brothers, Bran in his wheelchair trying to run over her toes and Rickon clinging to her legs. Robb kissed her said her haircut suited her, though her mother thought it was horrific.

'What,' Catelyn began, 'have you done to your hair?' tacking on a 'happy birthday, child,' belatedly.
Much to Arya's surprise, it was Sansa that leapt to her defense. 'Mum, it looks good on her. Makes her look older. More sophisticated.'

Arya rolled her eyes at that. Sansa sneered at her, happening to see her.

And then it was time to eat. And the thrum of a large family: all the laughter and joy and chatter and occasional screeching amidst the soundscape of breakfast was almost enough for Arya to forget the empty seat at the table. Almost.

She was alone in the crowd, seemingly the only one who wasn't brimming over with happiness. Aching. Her mother alternated between fussing over Sansa and Bran. Gendry and Robb were arguing spiritedly over some trivial point of historical fact, which neither of them had any clue about. Rickon had drawn a pair of lips on the kitchen table, using someone's lipstick, probably Sansa's, and had kissed it repeatedly until his lips were rosy pink. Had she looked a bit further down the table, she would have observed that Jon was drinking his tea and watching her, in silence.

Her pack was beneath her feet, and she reached into it, fingers searching for paper. She grasped the envelope and brought it to her lap, opening it. The object was wrapped in tissue. Surreptitiously, she unfolded the tissue. Glancing down, she saw it. A thin round of glass, banded in metal. And a note.

Lovely girl...

This might not look like much, but it makes everything better. For you and your little Leica. Enjoy your birthday. Since I can't be there, won't you please take some pictures for me?

J

Both Sansa's love and mine give us rings of precious metal. But mine's a lot more useful, she reflected wryly.

Love, what love? He's in Africa, probably getting it on with Sonja Yoren. Bitterness quirked her lips down. What did you expect?

She lifted the filter, for that's what it was, out of her lap for closer inspection. Not normal, she thought, puzzled. It was made of something different. What kind of filter is it? Naturally, Jaqen wouldn't have told her.

Playful...

She placed the filter on the table, on top of its tissue. The note went back into her pack. Jon watched her still.

In the evening of Arya's seventeenth birthday, Jaqen H'ghar, Jean-Paul Biter, and Sonja Yoren were sat on the terrace of the Terrou-Bi, planning their strategy to move into Mali whilst drinking rather a lot of mediocre red wine. Jean-Paul excused himself early, since he had not fully recovered from his night in the clink. Jaqen and Sonja finalised the group's plans for the morning and headed up to their rooms.

In the elevator, she pressed herself against him, and for the first time ever, he was not aroused by her.

Her blonde, finely arched eyebrow raised itself.

'No?'
'No,' he said, with the firmness of finality.

'Someone new?' she asked. The elevator dinged. His floor.

'Not yet,' he said, and grinned. He hugged her with both the intent and familiarity of a brother, and strode, a little shakily, out the door, waving his hand behind him, goofily, from waist-level.

Sonja Yoren was bemused. While she wasn't used to anyone saying no to her, such were her charms, she didn't hold it against him. Their relationship was longstanding, and consisted of very real affection, loyalty, and occasional need, but not love. What she was most curious about was who the new woman was, for she was sure there had to be one.

Jaqen woke just before midnight, fully clothed and lying diagonally on the bed due to a combination of fatigue, not much to eat, and rather bad alcohol. He snorted, thinking of Yoren's sudden lack of appeal. What was tall, golden, and blonde, should be small, pale, and dark-haired. A mere girl. *Happy birthday, sweet girl,* he thought.

Had he been more coherent, he would have gotten his mind off his rather impossible situation. However, as it stood, his body was alive with need, and sleep found him only a few hours before his hangover did.

A/N: Thank you for persisting in reading, reviewing, and reminding me. I fell ill last summer and recovery took quite some time. I'm back, and hope to be able to keep going on a regular basis with this. Your support has meant the world to me, and I hope you continue to enjoy this story. ~CK
Chapter 27: And back again

And back again...

Jon's house, while spacious by London standards, could not compare to the vastness of Winterfell and its land. The utter familiarity of the place, settled as it was deep in Arya's and her siblings souls, made leaving it difficult and returning to it a pleasure, albeit one tinged with sadness. It would forever be thus.

Arya spent her Saturday roaming more or less by herself, eager to try out the filter Jaqen had given her. She did shoot the cranesbill, and headed into the forest after lunch with Robb. While he angled, rather indifferently, off the small, ancient stone bridge that spanned the Eythe, she and Needle shot: a brother fishing, the two large wolflike dogs crashing through the underbrush, wrestling. The sun peeking through the trees, casting shadows. Lovely long exposures of the water flowing over the rocks mid-stream. With the filter, without it. *I wonder what it does.*

'Why does it feel like you've grown?' Robb asked, interrupting their companionable silence. 'It's been but a few weeks.'

'Maybe I have,' she replied, after a pause.

'Aye, maybe you have,' he concurred. Something had shifted in his sister. She had left a tomboy, with long, often scraggly hair, and returned a petite little woman, with hair short enough to be a boy's. It was glossy, and to Robb, who'd long been used to her wildness, there was something rather unnerving about an element of sophistication creeping into his baby sister's demeanour. Even her posture was different. He felt she had gained something more like most teenage girls have - a sensuality? An awareness?

'Is it Gendry?' he blurted, unaware that he'd spoken aloud.

'Huh?' She responded, a little startled.

'Are you seeing him?'

Arya blushed, uncontrollably. He took it the wrong way, of course, and though she sputtered her denials, he was unshaken in his belief. For the rest of the afternoon, she had to deal with a very mercurial brother, whose moods swung from protectiveness towards her, aggression towards Gendry, general anger at Jon for allowing such a thing to happen, and worst, helpfulness. He was very helpful (or so he thought) in explaining how to protect herself if she had sex, at which point he digressed, saying some rather rude things about Gendry, and then he waxed rhapsodical about blokes and how their minds worked. She never got a word in edgewise, so caught up was he in his own stream-of-consciousness advice dispensing, so Arya tuned him out and went back to Needle and her photographs.

Much to Arya's relief, Robb eventually gave up, both the angling and *The Talk,* and they made their way down to the farm-gate store. There, Jon and Gendry were having a great time chatting up the middle-aged ladies who came to buy, direct from the family, the various products Winterfell produced: jams, jellies, chutneys, fruit and veg, honey, truckles of small blue cheese, milk, and cream. It was a successful enterprise that Ned and Catelyn Stark had begun a decade ago, and had grown more diverse and more attractive as they began to expand what they offered, and it didn't hurt sales when the Stark boys flirted shamelessly with the housewives in the village.
The rest of the weekend passed easily, Arya spending time with each of her brothers, roughhousing with Rickon, reading with Bran, who was still so withdrawn and distant, and obviously in a fair amount of pain. Sansa had disappeared to the stables, but Arya noticed that she carried her iPhone with her constantly, and was more often than not texting. *Horses and boys*, she shook her head ruefully. *Some things never changed.*

They left with mixed feelings on Sunday afternoon. Gendry thoroughly enjoyed the nostalgia Winterfell evoked for him: feelings from when life was a little less complicated. Jon was, as usual, anxious to get away. He was always unsettled at Winterfell, never quite feeling as if he belonged. He sat, brooding, facing the window as the train rocketed south. Arya, pressed next to him, watched his thoughts, as apparent to her as the sun and shadow crisscrossing his face. She leaned her head on his shoulder and slept. Sansa, as usual, was stuck to her iPhone, and Arya, before she nodded off, thought she'd never seen her sister so lonely.

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Monday came and went. The rest of the week, the weekend. Another week, another weekend. Arya had settled in well to the JHWire routine. She was young. Occasionally brash. Occasionally cocked things up. But she had talent, and they respected talent. She did a lot of scut work under Eleni's watchful, waiflike countenance, but Ken Izembaro had given her two portrait shoots, which she did well enough that she was praised openly at the Thursday meeting. 'Jaqen'll want to see these,' Rorge had grunted. High praise indeed, from the dour Northerner.

There was no Jaqen H'ghar. No sign of him, at least no word to her. No email, no texts, no 'lovely girl', no smiles. Nothing. No one was worried, so Arya assumed, with just the slightest sting of hurt, that someone was able to contact Jaqen and Jean-Paul. She'd settled in to the office, and she'd settled down as well. She no longer made a point of looking at each person who came through the door, in hopes that person was Jaqen. She no longer checked email and texts obsessively. *Leave obsession to Sansa*, she thought. The office hummed along: the schedules were set, the jobs came in, and the photos were published. She ate with Gendry occasionally, and that was all. Along the way, she'd had the photos she'd taken during her birthday weekend developed, and they were spectacular. Well, half of them. The filter Jaqen had given her for *Needle* was a neutral density filter, and it was absolute wizardry. It darkened things somewhat, increasing contrasts and somehow saturating colours, not to the point of luridness or vulgarity, but rather, it just made things look somehow more real. The printer had not accounted for the darkness, so she earmarked certain photos taken in the forest with Robb for re-printing, but otherwise, it was spectacular. During the two weeks following her birthday, she went back to look at those photos rather more than she ordinarily would have; somehow, these, and the photos she'd taken of him felt more real to her than he himself did.

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On the 23rd of July, she returned from a morning's shoot, having been sent to capture 'London on the eve of the Olympics' for a web-based news agency's photo slideshow. Arya was extremely pleased with herself, having managed to traipse around London photographing major sights just as the morning's fog burnt off. Press accreditation had enabled her to wander into the Olympic Village, and she'd enjoyed photographing both the site and some of its denizens. She arrived at JHWire by 10 am to find no one at his or her customary post. Not uncommon: it was an active office, and with the
lead-up to the Olympics, Arya figured everyone had somewhere to be. She settled into her workstation, downloaded the photographs from her Nikon, and found, as she had suspected, her own Olympic gold. She felt a tiny shiver of pride as she scrolled through the photos in Lightroom. There – the Gherkin ringed in fog, the east side lit up by the dawn. And there – the Union Jack fluttering over Parliament's Victoria Tower, an impossibly blue sky shot with high cirrus clouds above it. And there – the vivid colours of the Olympic rings on the lawn, the buildings of the Athletes' Village beyond a gentle blur. She cropped a little from that last picture, but it was as if the day had infused her camera with magic: everything she had shot was crisp and sharp and framed perfectly. She stretched and yawned, for she had woken at five to accomplish this. She wandered out of her workstation and made herself a cup of tea, and heard voices trickling through to her, as the doors that led to the gallery space were abruptly opened. Curious, she moved to see what the fuss was. No wonder no-one was around, she thought. It isn't Thursday, so what can everyone be doing?

Although whatever meeting had been held had clearly been adjourned, it was as if everyone was reluctant to leave, held in their places by a warm voice with a pleasant but unquestionably foreign accent, currently telling a story. She moved a little closer and saw that tell-tale messy red hair, willing him to turn and face her. From the slump of his shoulders, she could tell he was fatigued beyond reasonable measure, and he was positively grimy. She scanned the faces and saw amongst them, Jean-Paul Biter, whose face bore three weeks of greyish beard and huge shadows under his eyes, and a stranger: a tall, lithe woman, whose natural tan was made darker by the heat of the African sun, whose blonde hair was made lighter by the same process. She was also filthy, but she was stylish, and that ameliorated her grungy condition somewhat.

He did turn then, and for the first time in weeks, Arya saw Jaqen H'ghar. His face was stubbled, his skin weathered. He was smiling, and when he caught sight of her, his smile deepened, the crows' feet around his eyes crinkling.

'Ah, it's good for a man to find his way home,' he sighed, dramatically, and hung on to his mother's shoulders.

Rachel hugged him then, and everyone tittered as she announced that she was off to put her son to bed.

Arya watched them retreat, then scurried back to her workstation, flustered. She went through the photos she'd taken that morning again: a fruitless effort, but one that allowed her to gain control of her heart and breath and the colour that had risen in her cheeks. Just when I had gotten used to his presence, he left. And just when I had gotten used to his absence, he comes back.

What's a girl to do?

A/N: Thank you all so much for finding this story or coming back to it after my lengthy absence. You've been very kind: thanks for all the well-wishes. Updates might be a trifle slow at the moment, but I'm getting into a routine of it again.
In the evening on Arya's birthday, she'd stolen away and emailed a thank-you note to Jaqen. She had pressed the “send” button after writing and re-writing it to the point where she herself had gotten tired of over-analysing and was fairly filled with embarrassment that she had taken so long over something that was so short.

It read something like:

*Dear Jaqen,*

*Thanks for the filter. You really shouldn't have, but I appreciate it. I used it today and can't wait to develop the pictures and see what it does.*

*Hope you are well.*

*Arya*

Yes, it was that kind of letter. Whilst in the process of imbuing her prose with sagacity and wit, she discovered she had none, and left it simple, short, and without the risk of ridiculousness.

She had gone over the morning's pictures yet again, afraid to venture out from her workstation into this new world of awkwardness and discomfort (and excitement and interest) that had been formed from Jaqen's unexpected arrival. She did not hear his voice, and the chatter in the office had died down as people went and sought out their next assignments and generally got on with it.

A soft buzz startled her, but it was just her iPhone signalling she'd a new email. She opened it and read:

*Lovely girl,*

*Might a man get a cup of tea? Upstairs. The door's open.*

*JH*

*P.S. Glad you liked the filter. Did you ever figure out what it does?*

He had written this in response to Arya's email, so she had the dubious pleasure of reading her wooden-sounding thank-you note once again. She winced, and made her way out of her workstation to the small tea room the staff shared. It had a fridge, which contained a decaying courgette to which no-one acknowledged rights, a few lunches, and Margaery's enormous stainless steel bottle, which contained chilled water with slices of fruit, or so she claimed. Privately, Arya thought that it contained vodka, but she'd never sniffed it to check.

The water took an eternity to boil, and Arya still hadn't selected the tea (from a choice of three) when it did. Finally, she lost patience with herself and made him a cup of Earl Grey. *Everyone likes Earl Grey,* she mused, cursing herself for the paralysis brought on by tea selection. It steeped the requisite two minutes, and she carefully removed and disposed of the tea bag.
As she made her way upstairs to Jaqen's office, Arya felt a growing sense of trepidation, coupled with a similarly increasing sense of excitement. He's back. He wants to see me. Her heart was in her throat, and she had to take deep breaths so as not to spill the mug of tea she was carrying.

She walked into his office, but he was nowhere to be found. A crack of light framed the Queen's portrait. So it was a door, she thought, nudging it open with her foot. She hesitated then, listening for him. No signs. She knocked lightly. Nothing. Shrugging, she went in. Bravery can be pulled from the smallest crevices of our minds. She was in a hallway. Down the hall to the left, doors. Down the hall to the right, an opening. She chose to go to the right. The floorboards, stained dark, squeaked under her feet. All around her were photographs. Portraits. It felt like a thousand. Mostly black and white. People of all sorts. Arya looked straight ahead, fearing that she would never want to leave the hallway if she stopped to look at those who were looking at her.

The cat was sat at the end of the hall, serving as gatekeeper. Its eyes narrowed as she passed, but it made no move towards her. She'd found the lounge. The table had been finished in dark ebony and had four matching bent plywood chairs. Gear was piled onto the table, and Jaqen's leather jacket had been slung carelessly onto a chair. Papers and gear were piled haphazardly on a squat, light wood coffee table, which sat on top of a wool rug in various shades of beige and cream, and behind that, a sofa. It was a brown leather jobbie, all ugly and modern and angular. Jaqen H'ghar lay on the sofa, one foot on the ground and one stretched out past the end of the sofa. His pants were ripped in places, and what Arya presumed was once a white t-shirt was now quite irredeemably grungy. He was fast asleep.

His forehead was bathed in sweat, but his forearms were dotted with gooseflesh. His nipples had hardened, their outlines clearly visible against the thin fabric of his shirt. Blushing with shame, she returned her attention to his face. He looked younger as he slept, and oddly solemn without his characteristic smile. Arya set the tea down on the table, crouching down beside him. I should check to see if he's feverish, she thought, knowing that she was weaving a story for herself. I want to touch him, or run from him. One of those. She reached out a hand and touched his forehead. It was cool. Not running a fever, she thought.

There was something both innocent and seductive in his vulnerability. Arya itched for Needle. And she felt a bit of the voyeur's guilt. But it's not like I am staring at him while he's in the bath or anything, she mused. He wanted me to come up here, so it isn't a bad thing to look at him, is it?

Her fingers ghosted over the white in his hair. He stirred, and she shot upright, startled. Time to get going, she thought, and turned.

A hand grabbed her wrist, and she bit back a yelp.

'A girl comes all this way and doesn't even say hello?' He smiled at her, as if in apology for startling her, and released her hand far slower than the occasion demanded. Almost a caress. She blushed uncontrollably.

'Sor-hi-sorry,' she stammered.

'Whyever would you be sorry?' he baited her, looking as if he knew exactly what had transpired in his sleep. 'For bringing me cold tea, perhaps?' he teased. No, for my guilty fingertips and guilty mind. He swung his legs around and came to a sitting position on the sofa, indicating that she should sit beside him. Apprehensively, she did, and he reached for the tea.

'Still hot, I see,' he sipped as he spoke. He was smiling into the cup. Arya made a little noise of displeasure and he chuckled.
Jaqen took a red file folder from where it lay underneath a newspaper and opened it.

Her photos. The two portraits Izembaro had assigned to her had been a welcome change from the dreary dullness involved with the House of Black and White. Eleni had been pleasant enough, but the waif really did manage to find ten thousand photographs to catalogue.

'Can we discuss them?' he asked. 'Am I interrupting your day?'

'No, not at all,' she replied, hearing her mother’s ladylike graciousness in that response.

He went over both in detail. The first portrait was of a girl, blonde and quite generic in her facial features. The mother had commissioned this and seventeen other portraits from different photographers on the occasion of the girl’s eighteenth birthday, which had just passed. Ostensibly, it was to honour the subject herself, but Arya and the girl had gotten to talking, and it was clear that the photographs were meant as the last, desperate attempts of the girl’s mother to reconcile with the girl’s (moneyed and titled) father.

So Arya had shot her half in sunshine and half in shadow. She had not bade the girl to smile or pose in any way at all, but had merely asked her to reflect what she was thinking about it all. What had resulted was a perfect mixture of expressions on the girl’s face: a feeling of longing coupled with the girl physically attempting to hold back her tears. There was fear on her face, a little bit of resignation, a tiny sliver of hope.

The mother had hated the photo. The girl herself thought it was brilliant. Izembaro did not believe what Arya had done at first. Even the father had come by to thank Arya, startled at discovering the photographer’s youth.

Jaqen made a few framing suggestions for Arya; she had come close to cropping out the girl’s feet.

The second photo was completely different. A footballer had been thrown out of a game and then suspended for a month after pushing a referee to the ground. It had been widely reported, and Arya had seen it on the telly and heard Jon and Sam discussing it. Common knowledge. That was one thing, but the lean and hard man looking every inch the chav was another. He had arrived at JHWire complete with entourage and demands. The manager was a slick bloke with a supremely condescending attitude. The friends were clones. And the girlfriend was something else entirely.

Ken Izembaro had no intentions of giving the shoot to Arya, since he knew very well how difficult it could be to shoot sportsmen: often jumped-up wannabe Becks with the attitude and ego of American football stars, but talent that often fizzled out after a season or two. But this guy was being difficult, and he found he wasn’t getting the result he wanted: the footballer’s endorsers required a brand-new image, but the man himself was quite content with his current one. So a frustrated Izembaro called for Arya.

She had, in a fairly spectacular way, failed to deliver on a men’s fashion shoot the week prior. It just didn’t work out for her. The flash system, due to a faulty lead, was not popping off as it should have, and the models were growing restless and sweaty. Izembaro had to take over, troubleshooting as he went and finding the technical failure. He had called Arya back in, but she had truly lost her nerve and, although they shot together, most of her pictures were unusable. Arya had been quite unhappy, but Ken assured her that sometimes such things happened. Technical things failed. He was stern with her, remonstrating with her about giving up too soon, and she made her peace with it.

He called Arya in to the shoot with the footballer not to humiliate her, but to show her another side of failure: a difficult client. And the failure was his. He had discussed with her this possibility: sometimes we simply fail to photograph things well because we don’t empathise at all with our
subjects. He had asked her if she wanted to have a go, and Arya, actively looking for redemption, indicated that she did.

Arya knew something was up when Ken didn’t leave her be, but entered 3B with her.

*Oh, brilliant. An audience,* she had thought. Izembaro didn’t introduce her, but grunted towards the footballer, who she found leaning on a stool. The footballer was wearing a navy, shiny tracksuit with gold stripes down the arms. He had gold rings on each of his fingers, diamond studs in his ears, and a heavy gold chain hanging around his neck. His trainers were a stark white. And he wore a Louis Vuitton cap perched askance on his head.

His girlfriend was a horror. Her slick hair was pulled back so tightly it gave her the impression of almond eyes, which she’d furthered by liberal application of liquid eyeliner. Swoopy cat eyes in a face with an orange cast. Enormous silver hoop earrings reached nearly to her shoulders. She was wearing a complementary tracksuit, in pink velour with the same gold stripes down the arms. Instead of trainers, however, she was wearing black stilettos. Her fingernails were mesmerising: thick acrylic nails, squared off at the end. Painted half black, half pink. Arya had paused, wondering how they didn’t fly off at the slightest provocation.

She focused the Nikon on the footballer. He complied sluggishly with her directions. Each time he turned, he would smirk at her, jutting out his pelvis. This would, in turn, anger his girlfriend, which would make him smirk even more.

The hat wasn’t working. She told him to doff it. He did. The chain wasn’t working. Again, he doffed it on her command. The earrings. The rings. If only he could take off those tattoos, she had mused.

Something had begun to happen. He stripped away the layers of the identity he’d constructed for himself, and each time he did, he became more vulnerable. He became less a chav and more a boy. A dumb, spoilt, scared boy, but a boy nonetheless.

She ended up photographing him in his underclothing: cheap unfashionable white pants. He had reverted entirely to ‘boy’, and both his bravado and his tension showed in the photograph.

Arya had been remarkable. The girlfriend was screeching at her, held back from doing Arya physical damage by the footballer’s manager. Arya didn’t pay her any mind, and just worked on maximising the light and shadows as they played across the boy’s well-muscled chest. He was exposed and naked and free of pretence, and he didn’t like that. But the camera did like it.

They walked away with pictures of a beautiful boy with trepidation in his eyes. The footballer couldn’t meet Arya’s eyes after that, and later that week Sam had said that he’d seen a report where the footballer had made a full apology to the referee he’d concussed.

Jaqen looked at this photo for a long time, then asked, ‘Why did you take his clothing off?’

‘Maybe I like muscles,’ Arya said, having gathered the courage to tease back.

‘Maybe all girls like muscles,’ Jaqen replied. She laughed, for he was flexing his biceps. Subtly.

‘But seriously,’ Arya began, ‘his clothing was such a part of him that there was no way to see the real person without removing it or changing it. We didn’t have the option to change his clothes, so I thought he should get rid of them.’

‘Mmmm,’ he responded.

‘Is it all right?’ she asked. *Am I fishing for compliments?*
'More than all right,' he responded. There was something so intimate about these four words of praise that she resolved never to ask if something was all right again, for she found herself leaning against him as they looked at the pictures together. Somehow the inches between them had lessened, and then disappeared, for she and he were pressed together, knee and hip and shoulder. The side of her left breast brushed his elbow.

Kind blue eyes met stony grey eyes. *Is he about to kiss me?* she wondered even as that other voice, the one she didn't like very much right now, suggested that the notion was completely absurd.

‘Let me show you some of what I’ve been shooting in Africa,’ he said, softly. He reached for his computer.

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*A/N: Thank you, everyone, for favouriting and reviewing and everything. It's lovely to see words of encouragement.*
Cold Comforts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cold comforts

It would have been, possibly, some comfort to Arya to have learnt that Jaqen H’ghar, a photographer at the pinnacle of his career, a seasoned world traveller and a rather handsome bloke, was deeply uncomfortable and self-conscious. He felt like an awkward youth in the first flush of lustdesireattractionlove. And if you’d asked him why, he would have been tongue-tied and helpless to answer. It was just what it was: he had felt nothing like it before or since. It was both intriguing and bewildering. Irresistible and unconscionable. And, thankfully, in the moments before he nearly snogged his young intern silly on the sofa in his lounge, some vestige of control from his cerebrum reasserted itself over the part of his brain that saw nothing wrong with events unfolding as nature seemed to intend.

Some little synaptic cluster within his frontal lobes sent a terse message to the rest of him.


Something in his limbic system responded with an affronted Seventeen, I'll have you know!

To which the first responded with an even more shrill cease and desist order.

A compromise was reached and he pulled his eyes and face away from Arya's, though he still was sat rather close to her.

He pulled up the photos in Lightroom on the computer and began to narrate his journey.

Arya was torn between relief that nothing had transpired between them and disappointment: an ambivalence that left her unsettled, but which soon passed as she became absorbed in Jaqen's work. And he felt warm against her. That had not changed.

They had chugged around the coast in a fishing vessel they’d hastily chartered. The captain was a friend of a friend of a friend. It was all right. They’d acquired a writer from National Geographic and, whilst enjoying the slow journey in its own right, shot photographs to accompany a story on the pirate scourge that was ruining the Ghanaian fishing industry.

It took three days to arrive in Accra, and a further three, by land, to reach the southern border of Mali via Burkina Faso.

Arya was amazed at the pictures that accompanied their journey. Just this could have been the story, she thought.

‘We definitely killed two or three birds with one stone,’ he chuckled. ‘There are a lot of stories in this part of the world that remain untold. Many places that Westerners will never see.’

‘Will I see them?’ she asked. ‘We are traveling next year, aren’t we?’

‘We’ll see,’ he said cryptically. She made a moue of displeasure.

‘We shall definitely travel,’ he clarified, laughing at her expression. ‘To here? I don’t know if it will
be something to go back to right away, so probably not.’

Soberly, Jaqen reflected on the travel situation. He’d never had nor wanted to have a female intern before, given the rigours of the job, the travel and the cramped, makeshift quarters. His attitude was less anti-feminist and old-fashioned than it seemed. He was practical. He didn’t want the bother. And frankly, women like Sonja Yoren, who possessed a (somewhat excessive) spirit of adventure and who travelled comfortably no matter what the conditions, were quite few and far between. And now he had a female intern. Whom he fancied like mad. A long location assignment with her would test his resolve, not to mention his innate sense of professionalism, greatly. A familiar image of his father appeared, unwanted, in his mind. ‘Suffer silently, boy.’ Perhaps, Jaqen thought, it was the only sage advice he had ever given his son, however unintentionally.

‘Jaqen?’ Arya prompted. He appeared to be lost in thought, his hand tracing his scalp near the white of his hair. ‘Should we do this another time?’

He turned towards her, smiling. ‘No, lovely girl. Now is good. I was just woolgathering.’

She smiled in response, and he showed her the rest.

He had taken few pictures of the armed conflict, though there were several of soldiers, both army and rebel forces scattered throughout the rest of the photographs. Jaqen had instead chosen to focus mainly on the civilian population, displaced by famine and unrest. Here they had teamed up with Agence-Presse, who had sent a writer, a wildly gesticulating Parisienne. She and her husband had become rather sick of their teenaged daughters, who had of late decided to behave rather badly. They all laughed heartily at her predicament: the only escape from domestic strife was on assignment in a war-torn country.

‘She reminds me of a lovely girl I know,’ Jaqen teased, and Arya grew perhaps a bit jealous.

‘Oh?’ she responded, archly.

‘Yes, she’s petite and tenacious. She managed to gain an interview with one of the rebel forces’ leaders, and sort of dazzled him.’

‘I don’t think he’ll ever recover,’ he added, in mock seriousness.

Arya snorted, and looked at the pictures.

Jaqen had a near-magical ability to insinuate himself into human moments where he was clearly an outsider. This is why he is the best, Arya thought.

She grew visibly upset at one of his picture-stories. Just women doing laundry. But such an ordinary domestic task grew in meaning. A single faucet, jetting cold water into bright-coloured buckets. A line of thirty women waiting, then washing meager belongings in buckets. The dirty, discarded water pooling around their feet. The wet things were laid out and sun-dried on the hard ground.

Arya had to do laundry. She threw her clothing in a machine every week and pushed a button. In an hour and a half, it was dry. Half the time she didn’t fold anything, just stuffed it into a chest of drawers. She took no pride in it. And saw that, for these women, this was one of the only ways for them to retain their sense of pride. The washing was one of the few things that remained to them.

For her birthday, Arya’s mother had given her a dress. Brown. Silk. The fabric rich and shiny, like a pool of melted chocolate. She’d tossed it into a corner after discarding it in her mind. What use is this? she had thought. And what a bother to clean it. And so not me.
She felt paralysed by guilt, lingering long on the set of photographs depicting the Malian women doing laundry. Jaqen placed his hand on the middle of her back, rubbing it gently to comfort her, shaking off the erotic overtones of such an act.

‘I felt such self-loathing here,’ he said, breaking the silence. ‘It happens. Both my life of comparative privilege,’ he gestured around the apartment with his free hand, ‘and sometimes I can’t shake the feeling that I’m exploiting people.’

‘But you’re not,’ she exclaimed.

‘I don’t intend to,’ he replied, gently correcting her.

His hand remained in its place on her spine as they moved through the rest of the pictures.

‘Will the situation there get better?’ she asked.

‘Not for a long time,’ he responded. ‘I expect an escalation, but I’m not an expert.’

As they finished, footsteps sounded in the hall. Bare feet, padding softly.

Arya saw the tanned knees of a tall Swede wearing what could only be a man’s white t-shirt.

‘I’m up,’ Sonja Yoren said, yawning.

‘You must have been knackered,’ Jaqen replied, rising. His hand was still light and warm on Arya’s back as she rose with him. ‘There’s coffee, not to worry.’

‘Sonja, this is my intern. Arya Stark.’

‘Arya,’ he continued, ‘This is Sonja Yoren with Reuters.’

Jaqen attributed the sudden tension which he could feel in Arya’s spine to having been surprised. Had he known that she had managed to work herself into a sudden tempest of jealous rage, he possibly would not have acted in such a casual fashion, or perhaps would have explained Sonja’s presence in his apartment as due to a plumbing problem in her own.

‘A pleasure to meet you,’ Arya said, extending her hand to the tall, blonde Swede. Good manners prevented her from slapping the cow, and instead, she shook hands with a far firmer grip than usual.

Possibly a tiny fugue state resulted, for Arya couldn’t for the life of her remember how she managed to extricate herself either from Jaqen’s apartment or the warmth of his hand on her back.

Later, at home in the room she shared with Sansa, Arya stood in front of the mirror. Her face was like thunder, and her hands smoothed the wrinkles in the brown silk that seemed to wrap around her body like a mother’s comfort. Her skin was never whiter nor smoother. The drape of the neck somehow perfected her breasts, and the cut of the fabric added a roundness to her hips. It was a dress for a woman, not a girl.

Sansa walked in, the question on her lips silenced as she saw Arya on the phone.

‘Hi Mum,’ Arya said, with false brightness. Tears lined her eyes.

‘I never thanked you for the dress. I am just trying it on now. Sorry it’s taken this long, but I love it. It’s just so beautiful.’
As her sister’s face crumpled, Sansa handed her a wodge of tissue and took the phone from her. While Arya sobbed silently into her sister’s shoulder, Sansa made small talk with their mother for a time, then hung up the mobile and, wordlessly, rocked Arya until she was quiet and still.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for reading! I sincerely appreciate it. Please do comment and let me know how it's going for you. Yes, I will be delving into the various family members' lives (Sansa's sticky little situation does merit some attention, and I know that.) I haven't planned this out at all, so I'm not sure how long it's going to be nor how things will end up happening or not happening.
Arya Stark's night was dark and full of terrors. Shifting, unformed monsters and relentless anxieties populated her nightmares, leading her to thrash and moan in her sleep. When she finally woke, her limbs were sore and the t-shirt she slept in was soaked in sweat.

Her anger had burnt, white hot, through the night, and had given way to sheer exhaustion. She rose and plodded to the shower in hopes that the power shower's pounding water would, at least, clear her head. The water stung her cheek, which she'd scratched in the night, but finally she exited the shower feeling a bit better. She towelled off and dressed. A somewhat truncated walk with Ghost served to further revive her.

She was early to work: somehow, her family had smoothed her way that morning. There were no confrontations over who had the right to the first toast out of the toaster. No fights over filling the kettle. It was as if they knew to let Arya be. Of course, Arya thought. Sansa must've played informant.

Still, it was nice. To have unspoken support and no fuss made was a great favour to Arya, and she vowed to do something nice for Sansa if she could.

She met Gendry, another early bird, in the tea room. She made a cup of tea, absently, while chatting with him about the upcoming Olympics and their respective roles within such an historic event.

She admitted her trepidation as she sipped her tea. 'I've never shot sporting events,' she confessed. 'I've really no idea where to begin.' Earl Grey. The tea she'd made for Jaqen. Bittersweet bergamot.

'You'll have Jaqen and Ken!' Gendry reproached her

Arya grunted, not willing to articulate anything that might give her away. I won't have him. Sonja Bloody Fucking Yoren will have him.

'Ah, you'll be fine, love,' he said, that last word hanging in the air, thicker and more persistent than it had any right to be.

Gendry quickly switched the subject. 'Well, I've got a job to do for Yoren, and it'll take me the better part of the day.'

'What job?' Arya blurted. Her heart sped up at the woman's name.

'There were plumbing problems,' Gendry said. 'She had put her clothes on to wash and started the shower in the flat she was staying at. You know, the flats behind the House of Black and White.'

'Yes,' Arya responded, a trifle impatiently.

'Pipe burst,' he said. 'She had to ring Jaqen and borrow a shirt and a shower!' He laughed then, an honest peal ringing out at the absurdity of it all. Arya forced a smile.

'But on a more serious note, one of her camera bodies got wet, and it had a memory card which can't be read, so I've got to take a stab at getting the photos off.'

'Ahh,' she nodded. 'And that is possible?'
'Probably,' Gendry said. 'Last year, Jaqen dumped a camera off a boat. He dove in and got it, but the body was rubbish. Lens was fine, memory card was unreadable. I bagged it and brought it back with me. I tinkered for days until I figured something out. But you know me...I'm as stubborn-'

'-As a bull,' Arya finished for him, smiling. Her mind returned to Jaqen.

Plumbing. It was the plumbing, not some wild sex romp. What little remained of her anger fled, to be replaced with embarrassment. She spent the next several minutes mentally chastising herself, but she was still afflicted by a certain uneasiness.

Despite our supposed enlightenment, the heart seeks to capture and enslave. In matters of love, we are possessive creatures. We want to belong to others and we want them to belong to us, in turn. Arya was learning that love is nasty and messy and full of fire and blood. Arya Stark had admired Sonja Yoren for years, looked up to her and longed to be like her. And in the space of an afternoon, with Jaqen the catalyst, her feelings had transformed into hatred. Blind rage. She could have, in the moment, slipped Yoren poison, or slit her throat, and not felt an ounce of guilt. In that moment. Not in this one, for Arya began to feel guilty for her thought-crimes.

A sense of relief began to permeate her whole being. She really hadn't wanted to focus her hatred on Sonja Yoren, after all.

But they'd been so easy together. Like lovers. Or friends, Arya's more generous side asserted. No, like lovers.

Like lovers.

And those green tendrils of jealousy twined around her heart a bit more, the way they had done when she thought Jaqen and Margaery were an item.

She seethed.

And then she stopped. This is bollocks, Arya told herself. He wouldn't play around with me.

Men play with women all the time.

But not him. He is too careful with me.

He was too careful. He was deliberate, inquisitive, and gentle with her. Jaqen H'ghar had registered his interest.

It was an epiphany. And it made her just a little bit happy, deep inside.

Although Arya was anxious about the events she'd be covering for JHWire for the Olympics, she noted that they'd given her nothing of any importance. She was shooting a few track events, but only, she noted, when accompanied by Rorge, Izembaro, or Jaqen himself.

She was going solo on the shotput, weightlifting, rhythmic gymnastics, and wrestling.

Great, she snorted.

However, anything was better than doing more scut work for Eleni. The waif was a slave-driver, and had now roped in Rachel and Margaery for closed-door meetings, as well as Gendry for the muscle. Arya was working as fast as she could to catalogue photographs and was now also flagging her top picks in the database.
It was around noon when she spied Jaqen, who came around to where she was helping a very reluctant Gendry build sleek black frames for certain prints. Jaqen walked in just as she had slugged Gendry in the shoulder for teasing her yet again for her sloppiness, when it was he who had been far more the careless one. They had been laughing and japing, but both stopped, for Jaqen's characteristic smile curved down in a hint of a frown.

In one hand, he carried a steel lens case. Large. In the other hand, he had his own, well-battered, dusty camera case. He'd slung a tripod bag over one shoulder.

'Arya, would you come with me to 3B?' It was an order wrapped in a polite question.

'Yeah, get going, Arya. I can't keep filing down these corners because of you,' Gendry said, ducking behind the table in case of retaliation.

'Ugh, stop making me look bad,' she said over her shoulder as she followed Jaqen.

'Get your Nikon gear,' Jaqen said to her. She smiled, and ran to get it.

He put the tripod bag and the large case on the table in 3B.

'You'll need fast glass for sports,' he said. His tone was businesslike, but she got the impression that he was not pleased.

'Sorry, I hit Gendry because he was making fun of me,' she said. 'It's unprofessional. I apologise.'

'No matter,' he said, but he was not appeased. 'You'll have to carry a lens like this with you. I suspect the case will be too heavy, so we'll find you a holster,' Jaqen carried on. He indicated that she should try to lift the steel case off the table. She did, but it was not without effort.

'Sorry, I really couldn't carry this all day,' she said, ruefully.

'No matter,' he said. 'I rather thought you couldn't.' He withdrew the Nikon body from the bag.

'Now, put it all together.'

Arya opened the tripod bag, withdrawing a hefty monopod, and then opened the case. The lens was a huge telephoto. Not as big as some she'd seen, but enormous all the same. She mounted it on her Nikon body and set it up. The telephoto had a special mount halfway down its length for the monopod. It looked ridiculous.

Jaqen handed her the final piece. 'Motor drive,' he said.

'I've never used one,' she confessed. He shrugged. 'It connects easily.'

She snapped it into place.

'Just so,' he said. 'Now, come outside.'

He indicated that she should carry the camera and lens as it was, mounted onto the monopod. It was heavy. She began to sweat in the sunshine as they walked down the street. *Bollocks, it's hot. I hope I don't stumble and break this lens. He would kill me!*

He stopped her, just as her arms were beginning to shake from fatigue.

'Very good. Now, see that street?' He pointed to the south, where the road curved in from a roundabout. It was a considerable distance away.
'Yes,' she said, looking at him, questioningly.

'I want you to shoot the traffic.'

Arya looked at Jaqen H'ghar as if he were an absolute lunatic. 'You want me...to shoot traffic?' she parroted back.

It was a brilliant face, one only found on teenage girls. He smiled in spite of himself.

She was a lovely girl. And he couldn't blame her if she liked Gendry. Gendry was a good man. A much younger one, as well. She would still be a lovely girl, even if she weren't ever his lovely girl. He was rueful, but had shaken off his jealousy.

'The traffic, lovely girl, is comprised of automobiles. At this roundabout, automobiles move at a rather alarming rate.'

'Just think of that Vauxhall, the blue one, and imagine it's Usain Bolt or Jessica Ennis.'

Arya didn't know what to say. He was encouraging her, so she took her position behind the camera and began to take pictures of cars. She was somewhat indifferent at first, but soon became absorbed in her task.

The motor drive, really nothing more than a battery that allowed her to shoot in power-hungry continuous mode, made the Nikon feel unbalanced. The telephoto was grotesque, and while she saw clearly the cars in the distance, the slightest whiff of breath, shake, or tentativity in her trigger-finger led it to go out of focus.

Crowded beside her on the narrow footpath, Jaqen had taken his own camera out and was shooting the same cars she was. The telephoto he was using was not quite the same grotesque enormity as hers was, but he was not using a monopod or tripod. She saw, out of the corner of her eye, that he had braced his left elbow against his hip, his left hand holding the lens. He had hunched down slightly, and she could see that the triangle posture allowed him to anchor the lens with his body.

_Smart_, she thought, as she randomly clicked. He shot her a dirty look.

'Focus, Arya.'

_I'm trying._

She could smell him. A sure sign he stood too near. And he smelled good again. Yesterday, not so much.

The soft clicks of their shutters were completely out of sync. Arya grew more worried with each shutter release.

_Click clickclickclick. Click clickclick_

She was taking frantic bursts of pictures, though some of that was attributable to shooting on continuous mode. She glanced over: he wasn't using a motor drive.

'No motor drive,' he said, having noticed her eyes wandering. 'But i will use one when I'm at an event. Too much power used for this kind of shooting.' Click. His eyes never left the viewfinder.

_Clickclickclickclick. Click._

'Check to make sure the image stabilisation button is toggled on.'
She did. It was.

Arya grew frustrated. She knew she was shooting absolute rubbish.

He held his position perfectly even as the sun grew hotter.

Jaqen reached into one of the pockets of his camel-coloured canvas jacket, the kind favoured by photojournalists, and withdrew two sun shades. He handed Arya one and fitted the other to his telephoto. She followed suit, happy to break rhythm. Her arms were killing her.

They continued. She was still woefully out of sync with him. *It could be that we are shooting different cars,* she thought. A flame of hope was lit.

Alas, it was not to be. He grimaced and put his camera down on his bag.

'Are we finished?' she asked.

'No, lovely girl. I am finished, but I suspect your framing is off,' he replied.

'Oh,' she said. Defeated. 'Will you help me?' she asked, her tone resigned.

'Help was not promised,' he responded. She groaned before she turned and saw the smirk. He was teasing.

Jaqen came and stood behind her. Arya tried to step back from the camera, but he placed his hands on her shoulders. 'Stay,' he said softly. 'I'll show you.'

Over her shoulder, he leaned in and looked through her viewfinder, then switched it to live-view mode so they could both see through the LCD screen on the back of the Nikon.

'Place your hands on the camera,' he said. She complied.

'Good,' he said, leaning back some. 'Now show me.'

It was becoming hot out, and a man was rather too near. A trickle of sweat ran down Arya's back, and she fought not to shiver.

*Clickclickclick.*

He brought his right hand up and placed it lightly upon hers, his forefinger on her shutter finger. Her breath hitched a little and she hoped he didn't notice.

His finger's light pressure on hers taught her when to depress the shutter release.

*Clickclick.*

'Better,' he said.

His left hand came up, gently guiding hers.

'Frame it so the car comes into the perfect position slightly to the right, but shoot while it is mostly out of frame.'

*Of course!* she thought, sheepishly. *You have to anticipate the car before it comes into frame.*

'The car is too fast for you to frame in the moment,' he continued. 'So, you must be in front of it a little.'
His words were spoken into the shell of her ear. Arya wanted him to never stop speaking, such was the thrill from feeling his voice in her ear. She wondered, vaguely, if it affected him as well.

As for Jaqen, he was feeling rather less rueful than he had been an hour ago.

'There,' he said, 'The blue Peugeot!'

*What kind of eyesight do you have to know it is a Peugeot from that far away?*

'I see fairly well,' he said, with false modesty. She was unaware that she'd spoken aloud, and laughed, turning her head to look at him.

He really was too close. A distance of a few inches, when eyes aren't met, is fine for whispered instructions or confessions. However, when soft blue eyes meet grey ones under their smattering of dark lashes, when those blue eyes dwell upon the pink of the lip, the tilt of the chin, the distance narrows and becomes an arena for something more intimate.

'Sweet girl,' he breathed. 'Arya.' It was a warning, but whether it was spoken to himself or to her, she didn't know.

She was acutely aware of his body pressed against her bottom. Some reckless part of her was tempted to lengthen her neck and stretch it back to rest her head on his chest, inviting him to bend further towards her.

Another part of her saw Sonja Yoren striding along the footpath, holding what looked to be Arya's camera bag, another bag, a coffee cup, and a set of car keys.

'Isn't this cosy!?' Yoren snorted.

'Is that my bag?' Arya asked. A blush crept up her cheeks. *Eyes front! Eyes front!*

'Yes! I took the liberty of bringing the rest of your gear.'

Jaqen's hands returned to his sides.

'You can't teach her to shoot sports like this, Jaqen. She'll never be able to hold up the lens for an hour, let alone a day! Come on, Arya. Let's go shoot some men running up and down a field chasing after a little ball,' Yoren smiled at her.

Jaqen chuckled. 'Go, go.' He dismantled the monopod, handing Arya's camera to Yoren, bending down to remove the lens he was shooting with from his own camera body.

'Here,' he said to her. 'This will suit you better.'

Arya thanked him shyly, feeling the blush creeping up her cheeks again. *I hope Yoren hasn't noticed this little scene.*

But, of course, Sonja Yoren, whose instincts for a story were as finely tuned as anyone in her profession, had noticed.

It all fell into place. She knew that Jaqen never strayed. When he had been on with Mel, he was unswayable, unseduceable. When he was off, he was rather persuasive himself. *But was he on with such a young girl?* Yoren shook her head. That was the part she couldn't quite understand.

The day before, Yoren had seen both the girl's ire and Jaqen's frank incomprehension. *What an idiot,* she thought.
But Jaqen had asked her to mentor little Lady Arya Stark, and she never thought to refuse. Sonja Yoren was confused, but also curious as to what such a child could have done to a man who barely blinked when IEDs exploded over his shoulder. A man whose heart only started beating when war and strife were around him.

A seventeen year-old from an old English aristocratic family was hardly the type to get wound up over.

Sonja Yoren was rather looking forward to spending time with Arya Stark, who, however, did not return the sentiment.

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A/N: Many thanks go to everyone who reviewed and favourited this story! I'm pleased you're still reading and following it: I think my greatest worry is that we all lose interest! I've completed the next chapter - just formatting it now.
Sonja Yoren, in a little hired Renault, drove with Arya to a boys’ school just to the southeast of JHWire.

They shot a rugby match on the school fields.

Three hours later, they’d swapped moods. Arya Stark was almost high with excitement at working with Sonja Yoren, who’d turned out to be as insightful a teacher as she was a journalist. Yoren had been positively garrulous in her attempt to coax intimacy from Arya, telling her stories of unfathomable adventures and incredible treks. Arya had soaked it all up, and had told Sonja stories of her own life at Winterfell.

And Sonja became aware of two facts:

One, that Arya Stark was not a toffee-nosed little aristocrat whatsoever. She was intelligent, a little untamed, and had an effortless, natural instinct for the camera.

The second fact was that said effortless, natural instinct did not extend to sports photography.

Yoren herself was not particularly good as a sports photographer, a fact she used to console a very frustrated Arya. Arya eventually began to reconcile herself to the fact that she would have to put some serious time in before seeing anything remotely good, sportswise. And with a shrug, she put away the telephoto and went to talk to some of the players. Yoren saw her, leaning out of the stands to capture something (thankfully not moving), and later, spotted her speaking to one of the rugby chaps and another student, snapping photos.

As the day grew longer, she thought she saw glimpses of some of what attracted Jaqen to the girl: a rawness, an innate talent much like his, an honesty, and lying beneath it all, a sadness uncommon in one so young. She was stark, Sonja thought. Like her name.

And there must be chemistry. With him, there’s always that, she thought. Dangerous. She’s so young.

Sonja dropped Arya off at the office in time for Arya to hear the big JHWire announcement. Tired, for it had been a rather long and fruitless day, she sat in the meeting room, crowded with everyone else, in front of Margaery's PowerPoint slides.

They had planned...well, Margaery and Eleni had planned a gala fundraiser opening for the House of Black and White.

It would be held during the Olympics, since so many members of the international media were there already. They planned to invite the aristocracy, the old money, the nouveau riche, the footballers, the rockers, the tv presenters, their own clients, and all the other glitterati that graced the pages of Hello!. By the end of the evening, they expected to sell most of the prints that would grace the exhibition, which would stay open for a month following.

Margaery spoke with a bit of smugness. Well-deserved smugness. She expected them to raise quite a lot of money, which would go to UN efforts in the Sahel. And it would serve as a celebration of their work: they were invited to bring family and friends and anyone else whom they wanted to bring along.
And it would put the House of Black and White on the map. Margaery fully expected (and projected, much to Arya's yawning dismay) rather a lot of revenue for JHWire as part of this.

Ken Izembaro was well-known as a fine art photographer, stunning the art world five years ago when he'd folded his own studio and joined the rough and tumble JHWire photojournalists. But now, a strain of realism had infected art collectors, who seemed to be begging for more photojournalistic art to hang on their walls. Arya saw Izembaro looking a bit pleased with himself.

The gala opening would benefit the displaced persons in the Sahel, but it was going to make JHWire an insane amount of money.

Arya looked around the room. No one, save Margaery, seemed particularly to care about the money: they were excited about something else, or so it seemed to Arya. The photographers lived well anyway. Being part of an elite cadre of journalists helped with that, as did their many side projects.

'Well, we'll be able to fund shooting whatever we want,' Jaqen summed it up. Everyone grinned.

'Yeh!' Rorge exclaimed.

'Antarctica again?' Jaqen asked.

'Oh, not the penguins again,' Jean-Paul groaned.

Margaery reproached them and returned to her presentation.

Arya's phone vibrated in her pocket. Surreptitiously, she pulled it out.

A text message.

‘Lovely girl - I have been so remiss. I believe the jet lag took me last night, else I would have been certain to send you a text. Forgive a man his sin?’

Arya snorted. Jet lag, my arse.

Another vibration. Another text message. This one came during one of the few pauses in Margaery's presentation, and she took the opportunity to shoot Arya a dirty look.

‘How was shooting with Yoren? Did you like shooting boys with her more than shooting cars with me?’

Arya's eyes widened. I can't respond to that.

Jaqen responded intelligently to some minor point Margaery had made about logistics for the gala. My God, this man can multi-task!

Another text message. Arya held her phone close to her body to muffle the sound of the vibration.

‘You realise that we have unfinished business...’

Arya gulped.

‘we do?’ she wrote and hit send.

‘Oh, yes,’ he responded. ‘You don't remember?’

A split-second later. ‘A man could feel hurt from such callous disregard.’
Margaery was glaring at her now. Arya refused to meet her eyes and instead, stared at the interminable PowerPoint slides, nodding her head at appropriate intervals to show how closely she was paying attention.

Her eyes darted to Jaqen, seated some way down the table to her left. He was not looking at her, but he was smirking, as if he were trying to suppress a full-blown (and wholly inappropriate) smile off his face.

‘Are you *bored*?’ Arya texted.

‘Exceedingly,’ was the instant response, followed by:

‘powerpoints make me sleepy. :)’

and

‘but you still don't remember...’

Arya sighed.

‘What am I meant to remember?’

‘Our unfinished business’

‘*what* bloody business!?!?’

‘But you seem upset...perhaps we should talk about it later.’ He followed this up with:

‘i'm coming to your house tonight anyway, after tea.’

He had her rather wound up.

‘what. is. the. unfinished. business!!?!”

‘so you don't care why a man might come over to your house after tea tonight? what if it were something related to you?’

‘all right, tell me. tell me everything. just...stop!’

‘i'm confused. do you want me to tell you everything or just stop.’

‘has anyone ever told you you're *incredibly* fucking annoying?’

he laughed out loud, which was a blessing, since Margaery turned her reproachful disdain onto Jaqen, who almost was successful in making her believe her last witticism was funny. Almost.

‘yes, my umma tells me this rather a lot...perhaps not quite so colourfully'

‘but, lovely girl, I digress’

‘it is something related to you. your brother.’

‘you're coming over to play with Jon?’

another laugh. this time, Jaqen fell into a fake coughing fit, and texted:

‘a sweet girl is not sweet at all! twice!’
‘you started it.’

‘so i did. I had to, we have unfinished business.’

This again. Arya racked her brain and tried a new tack.

‘You'll be taking me somewhere interesting in the spring? Afghanistan?’

‘no, lovely girl. not afghanistan. there's too much risk.’

hmph.

‘Iraq? Kurdistan is lovely in the spring...’

‘ha, no. again, too much risk.’

She was getting annoyed.

‘Africa?’

‘Noo, just been: can't go back for another while’

‘wherethen? the bloody cotswolds?!’

‘hmm, good idea. lovely in the spring. but, sweet girl, this isn't the unfinished business I meant.’

‘WHAT, then?’

‘Your third picture. I shall astonish you with a front cover. Name any subject, any paper, any time.’

Arya was boiling mad now. He wasn't serious about this at all. THIS was his ‘unfinished business’? She would end up in the bloody Cotswolds taking pictures of thatched chocolate boxes.

‘You. I name Jaqen H'ghar.’ Without hesitating, she sent it.
Arya walked home, the camera bag heavy on her shoulder. She'd learnt something: she'd pressed more than just one button when she had hit 'send' and sent Jaqen H'ghar his own name.

It hadn't been vicious, exactly. More like a calculated strategy, albeit a rather hasty tactic concocted whilst Arya was exceedingly pissed off by what she perceived to be Jaqen's inability to treat her as if she were any other intern. Never mind the wry voice inside her head, which she was trying to ignore: *do you really want to be treated like everyone else?* it asked.

She had known he was reclusive; he declined far more interviews than he accepted. There were never any photos of him circulated. She had learnt that much of the time, he simply didn't receive credit for photographs that might arouse further interest in him. 'JHWire staff photo' was code for 'Jaqen H'ghar.' For some reason, the press, ordinarily a rabid pack of sleuths, had taken his need for privacy seriously.

And she wanted him to take her seriously.

Jaqen had stood following Margaery's dreadfully chipper presentation. Although he was never bereft of his characteristic smile, Arya could tell it was a little forced. Or rather, it was simply how he schooled his face to cover the shock that was just beneath the surface.

He spoke about the opening of the *House of Black and White* and what it meant to him. He spoke about the upcoming Olympics and how excited he was that they had such an opportunity and didn't have to leave the back garden for it. He made some schedule changes so that they would cover nearly every event: evidently Margaery had planned a photo book for the occasion.

Finally, he paused, sipped some water, and looked directly at Arya.

'Let the games begin,' he said, his eyes half-hooded and his expression inscrutable.

Everyone rose to leave; Arya was first among them. Her natural instinct for bolting rose to the fore, and she gave in to it.

Jaqen did indeed call on Jon, arriving promptly at half eight that night. Just before they ate. It had been all planned out between the two men, who were celebrating something, it seemed.

Jon was gracious, welcoming, and a perfect host, nearly. For once, Arya wished her brother had poorer manners, or a private office, or anything. However, it was not to be. She was sat across from Jaqen H'ghar and his ever-present smile, which reached eyes that Arya thought bore traces of a new respect, coupled with not a small amount of reproach. There was no escape for her from Jon's house. Her last refuge was gone.

Unfortunately, Jon and Sam had decided to cook. It fell to Jaqen to rescue them, pulling what had once been a chicken from the oven with a pair of heavy, padded mitts.

'Do not, under any circumstances,' Sansa whispered in Arya's ear, 'try that soup,' she motioned to a large pot bubbling away on the hob.

'What's wrong with it?' Arya asked.
'It tastes rather like a pot of boiling piss,' Sansa declared, in an uncharacteristically coarse way. *Sandor Clegane must be rubbing off on her*, Arya mused, groaning at her own horrid pun.

Arya made Jon try it. He grimaced and motioned to Sam, who quickly exited for the nearest takeaway.

On Sam's return, they all ate together. Arya noticed a quiet camaraderie, known exclusively to men, which had developed between her brother and Jaqen. *A complication*, she thought. She envied those with secret lives, with each compartment separate from the others. Rather like her sister's, though she wasn't quite sure, on further reflection, if she more envied Sansa or pitied her.

Jon, beaming proudly, finally announced to his sisters that JHWire was the latest client of The Wall, JHWire having employed the web-based security firm to create, manage, and host a very large and valuable image library.

'And Arya played such a big part in helping make this project happen,' Jaqen said, bestowing the full force of his smile on her. She withered in guilt. *I can't believe I named him.*

After their meal was over, Arya headed for the garden. *I am not trying to escape,* she told herself. *I am overly warm and wish for some air.*

She shed her light sweater, for indeed the night was too warm for it. Humidity hung heavily in the air, a portent of rain.

She walked down the stone steps to the grass, kicking off her trainers, and enjoyed the feeling of the soft, green blades between her toes and the air caressing her bare arms.

Ghost lay at the end of the garden, his eyes aglow with the reflected light from the house.

Arya smelt Jaqen before she saw him. *What am I, a wolf?* she thought to herself.

'You wound me, sweet girl,' he said to her, his breath tickling her shoulder.

She turned to face him. Again, he had drawn so close as to unnerve her.

*Idiot, he wants to spook you!*

'Oh?' she half-whispered, half croaked.

'You named me!' he said. He looked oddly proud. 'Unname me, sweet girl.' He paused. 'Name another name, then.'

'Why should I?' she countered.

'Why do this thing?' he asked.

'You don't take me seriously,' she said, recalling that she'd been rather pissed off with him.

'Don't I?' he questioned. 'Do you really think I treat you like a little girl?' 'Haven't I done everything you asked?'

'Noo! Yes! I mean...' Arya was rendered inarticulate. 'But...'

'What more would you have me do?' he asked, a trace of weariness crawling into his tone.

Later, she would remember this question, and in agonised embarrassment realise that he was
speaking of the travel portion of her internship, but in the moment, she was aware of nothing save the
gooseflesh pimpling her arms as she faced down Jaqen H'ghar in a more or less transparent vest held
in place by the thinnest of straps.

As she pondered his question, whilst stood far too close to him, the true meaning of it had fled her
mind. Rather naturally, as these things go.

'Kiss me,' she blurted.

*Bollocks!*

Again! In the same garden where she had, drunkenly, asked him to kiss her a month ago.

And she had no excuses this time. No external forces to blame, no *in vino veritas*. And it really was
so unprofessional a thing. That part of her brain that was still sane and rational recoiled in horror at
the massive, practically pulsating lump of sheer unmitigated desire the rest of her had suddenly
become.

He smiled, suddenly intense. *He likes this*, Arya thought.

'Unname me...this is no joking thing!' His smile took away the seriousness of his tone.

'No? Then why joke with *me*?' she asked. 'And the answer is still no.'

'Aren't we friends?' he asked.

'Are we?' she wondered, out loud, unconsciously aping his question-answers.

'Friends...well, aren't "friends" what a man terms things whilst attempting to preserve a girl's honour?
Jaqen answered absently, emphasising *girl* slightly. The forefinger of his right hand had moved,
seemingly of its own accord, to her left clavicle, tracing its length.

'Stop,' she began. His finger withdrew, as suddenly as if it had never been there.

'No, I meant stop trying to preserve my honour,' she said, breathless. He chuckled.

'Not an option, sweet girl. Imagine the ramifications...now, unname me?' No sooner had he spoken
than his body ignored his words, for he resumed his attentions to her collarbone.

She imagined. There was everyone at JHWire. Her mum. Jon. Jon's anger was rare, but it was
incandescent when aroused. Everyone she knew, except Sansa, would be furious with her if they
knew about this growing thing in her heart, and his. Yet she pressed on, emboldened by the night,
spurred on by his gentle touch.

'It can be a secret, can't it?'

'I don't think so, Arya,' he said, softly, sadly. She growled at him, her anger returning in strength.

*I am not a child*, she screamed in her mind, conscious that screaming, mentally or otherwise, was the
action of the child she purported not to be.

'Fine. I still name you. I name Jaqen H'ghar,' she reiterated angrily.

Arya's growl turned to a whimper as he bent his mouth to her collarbone. She felt his light, soft
breath on her neck.
'Ah, well. Perhaps I have been a faceless man too long, sweet girl.'

His lips softly ghosted over her collarbone. She felt his tongue on her flesh, and felt a queer, heavy kind of ache begin in her lower belly.

His phone rang, startling them both. A ringtone that was different from his usual. She'd never heard it before.

'What?' he hissed as he answered.

He switched languages.

'Ne? Ne oldu olub? Sakin olun.' He waited. His smile disappeared, and his face grew sad.

'Siz harada var? Men evde deyilem. Yeah. Gendry siz getirecek.'

He hung up, and dialed another number.

'Gendry, Mel is outside. Bring her to Arya's house, please. Hire a cab. I think I'll have to take her to A&E.'

Arya grew cold, and began to feel out of place, an intruder in her own space. She began to pull away from Jaqen, who, rather than letting her go, pulled her close to him. He ended the call on his mobile.

He embraced her. 'I'll need to be away for a while,' he said, kissing her hair softly. 'But not too long.'

I owe a debt of gratitude to Kilimiria, who has drawn fanart in honour of this story. I am gobsmacked! Please go look! http://bit.ly/14qWRKF. Thanks to you all for reading, reviewing, following, and favouriting. And drawing! I'm always encouraged by your feedback: it keeps it fun for me.
Chapter Thirty-Three
An Elegy for the Past

It had been a trying day. Exhausted, Arya Stark still lay awake in the night, thoughts tumbling through her mind. Outside, fat raindrops began to pelt down, sporadically.

'You do know he's attracted to you, right?' Sansa said, her voice puncturing the silence of the room.

Arya said nothing.

Sansa needed no encouragement. 'Even if I hadn't seen him snogging you in the garden, I'd still have known.'

'What?' Arya sat bolt upright in her bed. 'What did you see? We were not snogging!'

'You were well close to it, if you ask me,' Sansa countered.

She continued on. 'That ex of his is barking.'

Arya jumped down from her bunk, preparing to do damage to her sister’s pretty face.

'Don't worry, Arya,' Sansa said, oblivious to the danger. 'That woman is definitely going to stay an ex.'

'I wasn't worried,' Arya muttered, shoving in beside her sister.

After a moment’s hesitation, Arya gave into her curiosity. 'But how can you tell?'

'You just can...he is done with her. Holds her at arms’ length. Wouldn't go near her. And miscarrying her married lover's child doesn't help.'

'But she is so beautiful,' Arya said, giving voice to one of her ever-churning subconscious fears.

'And you're a Stark of Winterfell,' Sansa said. 'Do you really think that woman could hold his attention forever? A man like that does not want a high-maintenance bint like her. Not when he could have my sister.'

'Oh? Could he have me? Am I just someone for the taking?' Arya scoffed, unassuaged. Yet she felt a flame of secret pride flicker into being, the kind that kindles when someone more or less unsympathetic to our causes agrees with us over a complete longshot.

'God, Arya. Stop being stroppy.'

'Jon might want that Melisandre woman, though,' Sansa continued, soberly. 'You know he likes the ginger.'

'She dyes it,' Arya said crossly. And both girls began to giggle. The rain had picked up, becoming a soothing, percussive drone.
Earlier that evening, after Jaqen had ended the call on his mobile, he and Arya had gone back into the house. Arya quickly retreated back into the garden to retrieve her jumper and trainers, for she saw Jon’s face setting itself into a thunderous expression of disapproval when his eyes flicked to her thin vest. She came back into the house for the second time exactly as she’d left it, sweater arranged appropriately on her body, the laces of her trainers tied. Tightly. Jon’s expression didn’t lighten, and she sighed. Another fight on the horizon.

Melisandre had arrived on their doorstep a few minutes later, her hair unkempt, mascara-dyed tears streaking down her face. She was wearing a pink floral skirt, the back of which was bloody. Traces of dried blood were on her bare legs. She appeared to be in no danger, for the bleeding had stopped.

Melisandre had fallen pregnant two months prior. As Gendry broke this particular bit of news to all assembled, having not the foresight to couch it in some sensitive way or even in a quiet tone, Melisandre turned suddenly and slapped him hard across his left cheek.

‘Fuck,’ he swore, but long experience had taught him that to react in any other way was as fruitless as it was dangerous. He moved away from her, toward Arya.

‘I told you,’ he said, in a hushed, angry whisper, ‘that she was fucking mad.’

She remembered Jaqen’s bruised cheek after he’d encountered Melisandre’s wrath. Was he as insensitive a git as Gendry just proved himself to be? A great ambivalence rose up in Arya. Jealousy warred with pity for the beautiful, pathetic woman stood at her front door, facing both a roomful of strangers and an ex-lover.

Jaqen was similarly paralysed by his emotions. He felt wary, as if this was yet another of Mel’s tricks. And sad. And mostly, he just wanted to escape the situation. Absurdly, he found his mind wandering. How was the revolution faring in Egypt?

In the absence of anyone having anything useful to say, Sansa took charge, fetching Melisandre some sanitary towels, and directing Arya to provide Mel a pair of her own track pants. They had shown her to the loo so she could get cleaned up. Jaqen had then taken her to A&E.

| Lying in bed with her sister, Arya was struck by how calm and decisive Sansa had been, and mentioned it. |
| Her sister hesitated. |
| 'Sansa...you?' Arya was shocked. |
| 'No...Mum. Twice. Between Bran and Rickon.' |
| 'But I never knew,' Arya spluttered, shocked for a different reason. |
| 'No, well, you wouldn't. You were off somewhere. Outside, probably.' |
| 'Poor Mum,' Arya whispered. 'Was it like tonight?' |
| 'Considerably less hysteria...Mum knew both times that it would happen. I just helped her a bit.' |
| 'Sansa,' Arya began. |
| 'You want to know about Sandor, don't you?' Sansa supplied. |
| 'Can you tell me why...how...just anything?'
'Not all of it, but you know Joffrey has problems, right?'

'An understatement.'

'I realised I was in love with Sandor the day Lady died.'

Arya was at a loss. Theirs was not the sort of confessional relationship that other sisters shared. She found she could not continue, nor could she read the subtext in which her sister’s words were cloaked.

And Sansa did not press on, about that, anyway. 'Promise you'll be careful when you're with Jaqen, Arya.'

For a moment, Arya toyed with pretending to misunderstand her sister’s ever-so-deliberately placed ‘with’. 'Aren’t you going to tell me to wait, to make sure I'm in love with him or summat?'

'That's rubbish. It's not 300 years ago. Just be careful. Use protection. Has Mum...?' Sansa was referring to the Stark family tradition of supplying, not-so-secretly, their children, as they came of age, with prophylactics. ‘She gave me the, uh, gift-tin when I was fifteen.’

_and I am two years older. What does that say about my chances?

'No...other things on her mind, I guess.'

'I have some condoms in my night table. You can take what you need. Mum sends me them regularly, like I couldn’t go out to the chemist and get them myself. But Arya, don’t expect magic the first time.'

'She probably buys in bulk because of Theon,’ Arya quipped, then winced, for not much had been heard from Theon in a couple of months. Robb had gotten a few texts. The rest, nothing.

'I don’t expect magic at all,’ Arya scoffed, ‘since it won’t happen. This isn’t the first time you’ve mentioned it, though. Was it horrible for you?'

Sansa did not reply for a while, and Arya realised it was because her sister was laughing silently and very hard. ‘Yep,’ she coughed out, finally.

'I don’t get it,’ Arya said, puzzled.

'Um, it’s just...Sandor’s a large man,’ Sansa said.

'Oh for fuck’s sake, Sansa. I didn’t need that image, you daft cow.’ In spite of herself, Arya began to laugh again.

‘Jaqen’s the boss, you know,’ Arya continued, lightly, when their laughter subsided. ‘He won’t let it get out of hand.’

Sansa’s light laugh tinkled in her ears. ‘Looks as though he is having trouble keeping it in hand.'

Arya snorted at Sansa's choice of words, prompting her sister to elbow her in the ribs before continuing. 'Boss or not, people have trouble saying no to themselves, Arya. It gets easier and easier to believe the stories we tell ourselves...stories that smooth over any obstacles in our way.'

'Personal experience?’ Arya asked.

'Personal experience,’ Sansa confirmed, but said no more.
Jaqen H'ghar lay atop the duvet on his bed, dressed to his boots. Melisandre lay in his arms, clad in the grey track pants she'd borrowed from Arya Stark. She had washed her face and looked almost human again as she slept.

They'd spent two hours before she could be seen in Casualty. The gynecology registrar, smooth and handsome, examined her perfunctorily. Despite her sliding unctuousness, he paid her no heed whatsoever, even when she shifted into little gestures of feminised helplessness when she saw her first tactic falling on deaf ears. The man was tired, Jaqen saw it in the greyish skin beneath his eyes, which was exaggerated by the humming fluorescent light overhead. And physicians always don that peculiar clinical veil when seeing people in order to not see them as people. Or perhaps it was Jaqen's presence that put him off Mel. The concerned boyfriend/partner/husband.

She clung to him in sleep, finding a familiar comfortable place, even as he lay awake, dipping into the pool of memories.

There was a little shaded garden next to the stone wall of the school where he had met her. It smelt of decay.

He had trouble with Italian, thanks in large part to his schoolfellows stealing his books. She shared her books with him, speaking with him, reading with him. In return, he taught her what Azeri he knew. At seven, he still had the familiar crushing headaches, and his hair still grew white in places on the left side. The other children still made fun of him: he was a curiosity from a far-off place. She was three years older, and protected him. She went so far as to buy a bottle of hair dye as close to his peculiar auburn as she could find. Melisandre's mother had allowed it, but had put her foot down at the white streaks Mel was prepared to incorporate into her new look. She had kept it red ever since.

They were friends before anything else occurred. She had always defended him, and as he grew tall and inherited his share of what he presumed to be his father's strength, he was able to defend her. He was an intelligent boy, quick to learn. Artistic, as his mother found out early, and, subsequently, placed a camera in his hands. He took thousands of pictures. Of her: Melisandre as she grew into a striking, singular beauty. Of everything else: he had wrung out all the photographs from his environment, exhausting his surroundings.

The headaches lessened in frequency, though not in their severity when they did occur. His memories of the time before grew dimmer.

They became lovers at the tender age of fifteen. Too young, he had thought, even then. She had had other ideas, coaxing him one step after another, further into adulthood. He learned elation under her skillful fingers, satiation from her mouth, and was hopelessly disappointed to learn that he was not her first, for wasn't she his only? He loved her single-mindedly and pure-heartedly. And knew from the first time he entered her that he would never be enough for her.

And, bit by bit, he began to wall off his heart from her as she continually laid siege to it with tearful confessions and eyes that glittered with ever greater ambitions.

She went with them to London. His mother disapproved. He began to go away more than he was home. They broke up constantly. And a few months later, she would find him again and work her way back in again. She was very pious, and yet seemed not to see what she was doing as a sin.

She accused him of childishness. That part was true, he reflected. He had never really felt grown-up. Never lost the wonder of childhood. The things that he observed as a child were still the things he observed as a man. He felt great joy in simple pleasures.
When she began seeing seriously her boring, fiftyish, married banker, it dawned on him that this was a losing proposition. She made him feel like a whore hired for the night. Used and left. Used and left. Love, the currency in which she paid him, became a little more devalued with each night she passed in his bed. The cycle repeated, and each time, she left him a little longer.

Even her cat hated her in the end. And now it lay in the bedroom doorway, sporadically hissing at her.

As for Jaqen, he lay awake in the stillness of the night, finding peace, even as tears trickled down his face as he thought of the years of their lives that had passed, interwoven, and of the unravelling that had occurred.

He awoke to find her hand sliding into his open trousers, trousers that were assuredly not open when he had gone to sleep. He disengaged from her, rapidly.

'No,' he said. In English. He resolved not to speak Azeri to her ever again.

'I just wanted to thank you,' she answered, licking her lips either in avidity or some false attitude of coy seduction. He knew not which.

'No need,' he said. 'Go home.'

He rose from the bed, fastening his trousers. He moved to the kitchen to make coffee.

'I see you've found another red-haired girl,' she sneered at him. He did not offer her a cup.

Momentarily, he was at a loss.

'The girl who helped me yesterday?' Melisandre supplied.

'Oh, Sansa Stark?'

'Sansa...pretty name,' Melisandre said, smiling. 'She won't hold your interest for long,'

'Or at all,' he said. 'since I can think only of her sister.' He felt cheap and guilty, instantly. *I should not have said anything.*

'That boy...thing?'

'Not a boy at all, Mel. A lovely, lovely girl.' Pricked to defend her, the voice in his head became louder. *I should not have said anything.*

'You're insane...'

'An accusation you should be familiar with, having had it levelled at you so many times.'

'We'll see what the little--'

Here, he interrupted her. 'I wouldn't mess with the Starks. They're connected with the Baratheons, you know.' *God, I should not have said anything.* The voice was roaring now.

'You wouldn't want to hurt your chances with dear old Stannis, would you?'

She blanched.

'Now, will you please go? Or do I have my mother throw you out?"
Melisandre tried a new tack, sliding her hands to her abdomen, tears welling up. 'How could you be so cruel...' She reached for him even as he turned away from her. 'I don't mind if you fuck the little boy, girl, whatever.' Her hands snaked around his waist.

'Get it out of your system, this new taste for virgins,' she said, her voice having taken on a cajoling tone. He picked her hands off his body.

'Do what you need to do and then let's get back together.'

It was funny, he thought. She couldn't even rouse his ire, let alone any vestigial lust.

He had taken care of her, as an old friend would have. But it was the last time.

She must have seen his eyes shutter and become unreachable, for she grabbed her handbag and left. 'May God bless you,' she said, but he was beyond hearing.

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It was really not a good day.

Rorge saw Mel leaving Jaqen's quarters, for naturally she wanted to give the impression, to any unsuspecting passers-by, that she and he were together again.

And Michael Rorge, husband, father of two rather snotty teenagers, and rough Geordie, gave Jaqen a piece of his mind in the way only the son of a millworker can. Having expended the full force of his effort, not to mention having thrown his entire, extensive vocabulary of maledicta at Jaqen, he rather sheepishly apologised, once he realised the mistake he had made.

And Jaqen received a letter from the Inland Revenue he couldn't understand a word of, but knew it couldn't be good.

And he had had an email from Jon, containing Arya's school prospectus. She was due to start term in September at Hoxton's Sixth Form College. Jaqen chuckled, even through his anger. As subtle as his sister, he thought. Jon's warning--my sister is too young for you--was couched in the guise of an innocent school calendar.

Jaqen wondered how Arya would react if she knew. And decided not to tell her. Jon would pick his own fight with her in time.

He browsed through the prospectus. A good school. Mostly attended by those in performing arts -- young actors and the like-- who couldn't necessarily keep to the schedule of a regular school but who still wanted to go to university after. Would Arya go on to uni? He wondered as he read through and made a list of courses that would be useful to her.

At page 36, he paused to write a name down in his notebook. He underlined it twice, as weariness gave way to elation.

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Arya had seen Melisandre leave. She had seen how Mel's bottom rounded out her own track pants in a way hers didn't. She had seen Melisandre's languid sway, connoting pure satisfaction. A sleep well slept after a night of sweaty lovemaking.

Which made no sense, even to Arya's rattled mind. The woman had been bloody and frightened the night before. Melisandre strolled around to Arya's desk, where Gendry and Arya were sat, interrupting only with a hard look before leaving. Which of us was that for? Arya thought.
She and Gendry retreated for tea, but still heard, mortified, the altercation between Rorge and Jaqen.

'It was like this before,' Gendry said. 'Not a minute's peace. It was a wonder we did any work.'

'Will they get back together?' Arya asked.

'I doubt it,' Gendry said. 'But I've doubted it before. She has some kind of ability with him. Or he has a weakness for her. I think he'd need someone new in his life before Mel'll lose her grip, frankly.'

Someone new indeed. Memories of the night before flooded through her. His mouth on her. A frisson of remembered desire pulsed through her, electric.

Arya blushed. Gendry mistook it for embarrassment at the subject. 'Right, enough gossip,' he said, concluding their interaction. They returned to their workstations and got on with the day.
Chapter Thirty-Four
Model release

Arya Stark had never been more exhausted in her life. Her shoulders and back ached. Her feet were sore, as well as slightly damp. A dull pain radiated from the left side of her bottom, which accounted for her current, odd slouch in the chair at her workstation. It was 3:15 on Saturday morning, and she had been tasked with the administrative burden of matching model releases to her pictures, and tagging them with as much information as she could.

She had been the luckless one at JHWire. *The intern always gets the shite jobs*, she thought to herself, grinning. If this were bad, she was perfectly fine with it. Just being included was joy enough, and she had had an actual photographic assignment for JHWire at the opening ceremony of the London Summer Olympics. She grinned. Her press pass was staring back at her whence it sat on the desk. Her name. Arya Stark. JHWire Photojournalist. Not intern. Photojournalist. *Was this another gift from Jaqen?*

Jon had texted her 19 times since she had last been home, some 21 hours previously. Almost a text an hour, though the last eight had come in a flurry in the last half hour. She had responded as quickly as she could to him, though her phone had been stowed in her camera bag while she was at the opening ceremony. He wasn't worried, but it was clear he meant to wait up for her return. His overprotective side is showing through, she thought.

While her compatriots at JHwire had shot the action, Arya had been left largely to her own devices. Her assignment had been "crowd reaction". She had managed several shots: (rubbish) longshots of the mass of the 80,000 audience members; (not half-bad) shots which used the architecture of the stadium to frame the crowd; and, when she grew bored, she shot the members of the audience themselves.

At some point, Jaqen had texted her with terse instructions. *Find a cab and go back to JHWire when the OC is done and wait for us. We should be back around 2*'. She had done just that, though neither Jaqen nor anyone else had shown up.

Much earlier, on Friday morning, Arya had arrived at JHWire to find Izembaro waiting for her with a sheaf of little yellow papers. He had thrust them at her, as if reluctant to hold them any longer.

'Model releases,' he had said. 'You'll need these. Anyone with a face.'

Rorge had stopped by later to wish her luck. And to tell her not to forget the model releases. About an hour before they were to leave, Arya was astonished. Several more JHWire staff had reminded her about model releases: Eleni with attitude, Gendry with kind concern, Umma with biscuits. It had become the theme of the day.

Arya could not help but laugh when Jaqen drifted into her office. He was different. His customary playfulness was gone, replaced by something harder-edged. More driven. *He's looking forward to this*, she realised.

'Lovely girl,' he said, taking the model releases and tucking them into her camera bag. 'You must not forget these. If a person is affiliated with the athletes or is a public figure, you don't need them. But otherwise, you must get your subject to sign...What is so funny?'
'It's just about the sixth time someone's reminded me about model releases!' She told him, chuckling.

He smiled with her. 'Good, then you won't forget.'

'No, I won't forget.'

'Are you excited?' he asked.

She nodded, unable to speak the half-truth: 'Yes, I am excited.' Part of her was in an agony of self-doubt: But what if I'm rubbish at this?

'Good. So am I. It's not often we get this kind of assignment with so little trouble to get to it.'

He sat and stayed a little while with her, going over the 30-page press photography kit. Who to shoot, what to shoot, when to shoot. He was warm, trying to calm her as if he knew that she was nervous. Which wasn't especially perceptive of him, since her hands were visibly shaking.

He traced the back of her left hand gently with his index finger.

'It's for you to learn. Don't feel that you have to get perfect shots. Just make sure that you get the model releases signed.' He smirked at his inadvertent repetition. 'And have fun, right?'

The city was swollen with both its summer glut of tourists and further, with Olympic spectators. In the air there was an excitement unusual for London, which was mostly rather buttoned-up and, occasionally, dour and sullen.

Arya moved throughout the crowd. Up stadium stairs and down again until her legs cried out in protest. She could not avoid the rain, which pelted her on and off, but she had a rain shield for her camera (in the form of a plastic bag that once had held a few biscuits).

Early on, she cracked off a shot of Gendry, huddled behind a tarped computer, looking utterly miserable. She caught a few shots of important personages. The Queen in pink lace. She shot ordinary people. All enraptured. It was a good show, even though Arya saw it play out mostly through shadows and light shifting and dancing on others' faces.

She was diligent at getting model releases.

At her desk, she browsed through her photos and flagged ones she thought were halfway decent. The model releases had almost all been compiled. Sixteen of them and counting. When did I shoot sixteen people?

She glanced at her watch. 3:30 am. Jaqen was still not back. JHwire was quiet; apart from the noises she made shifting in her chair to ease the aches in her body. The occasional soft chirp of her hard drive broke the monotone hum of the fluorescents.

A hand on her shoulder woke her. It was 4:09. The office had come to life again, while she had drifted off, face pressed to the keyboard. Furiously she rubbed the sleep from her eyes and surreptitiously surveyed the desktop for drool. Relieved to find none, she only then was able to meet Jaqen's eyes.

He looked utterly shattered, but broke into a broad smile when he saw her face. 'I see your work here has left quite an imprint.'
'Huh?'

He reached out and stroked her right cheek for a moment, which was crisscrossed with red gridmarks from her keyboard.

'Oh God!' Arya exclaimed, frantically rubbing her face.

His peal of laughter was heartfelt. 'Dangers of the business!' he said.

Jaqen moved to sit. Uncharacteristically graceless, he扑flopped into her guest chair.

'I am sorry for keeping you so late,' he began. 'We were searching frantically for a certain type of photo. You don't happen to have any protest or dissent shots, do you?'

Yeah, because there was a lot of dissent in audience members that paid hundreds of pounds to sit there for four hours. They were sore-arsed perhaps, but that's about it.

Something of this may have showed on her face, or perhaps it was her skeptical arched eyebrow that made him laugh. 'I know,' he said. 'Faint hope. A desperate man asks silly questions.'

'I just have crowd shots,' she said. 'But it's late. You probably don't want to go through them or...' she trailed off, for he had already pulled his chair up close to her and had clicked open her lightroom.

'Oh God!' Arya exclaimed, again. 'Jon!' She reached for her mobile.

'I talked to your brother,' he said as he began to search through her photos. 'He was getting worried when you didn't respond for a while,' Jaqen grimaced. 'But I told him it was all fine. I told him that I wasn't any threat to your virtue...tonight.' He yawned. 'Too tired.'

Arya laughed in spite of herself. Now Jon's going to want to have another talk with me. Great.

'There!' Jaqen pointed at the screen. 'That one. It's not precisely what they want, but we have no other options.'

'Not that one,' Arya reiterated.

The photograph in question was of a young child. Arya had captured her attempting to leave the stadium, having had just about enough noise and spectacle for one evening. The child's face was scrunched up and she had begun to wail. Behind her, her mum was in pursuit, a giant whirlly lolly in hand. Arya watched and photographed the half-coax, half-chase, and had helped the mum recover her child.

'Perfect,' Jaqen said. 'Excellent. It's whimsical and fun and still shows someone not enjoying herself. Look, even the lolly has the Olympic colours.' He was pleased.

'Not that one,' Arya reiterated.

'Why?' he said, looking back at her.

'Model release,' she said, timidly, and watched the anger begin to gather on his face.

'What?' he asked, quietly.

'I did get it,' she explained quickly. 'But I cannot find it. It's not with the others.'

'Fuck,' was his succinct response. 'Did you drop it?'
'No,' she shook her head. 'I couldn't have. I would have seen it.'

'Where is it, then?'

'I don't know.'

'Have you looked everywhere?'

'Stop badgering her, Jaqen, and find the bloody release instead,' Rorge called out, helpfully.

Jaqen put his hands over his eyes. 'I'm sorry. I'm being stupid. Bag?'

They turned her camera bag out on the table. He helped her quickly rifle through everything, though she balked when he opened the small pouch containing her emergency supply of sanitary towels, which she'd placed to the side, well away from him.

An audible crack sounded as she slapped his hand away.

He winced.

'It's not in there, Jaqen,' she growled.

'What the fuck are you two doing?' Rorge asked, laughing.

'My hand went somewhere it wasn't supposed to go,' Jaqen responded, laughing.

Gendry poked his head in, blinking at the chaos on Arya's desk. 'Right. Anything I can do to help? Need a bodyguard, milady?' he asked Arya.

'No, just gotta find this release,' she sighed. He withdrew, mostly satisfied that nothing was amiss.

'Coat?' Jaqen asked. She put her hands in the pockets of her jacket, which she was still wearing. Nothing in the waist pockets. She unzipped the jacket, thinking that a model release could have found its way into the secret inside pocket. She turned away from his impatience and frustration, which she could feel in his breathing (rapid and shallow) and in his body (his left foot beat a steady tap-tap-tap-tap rhythm on the floor). There was nothing in the breast pockets.

Just as she found that the breast pockets of her jacket yielded nothing, she yelped, for both of Jaqen's hands had found their way into the front pockets of her denims.

'Come on!' Rorge cried. 'What the fuck now?'

'He's just put his hands down my bloody trousers is all,' Arya called out, shimmying away from Jaqen.

Laughter sounded through the office.

He was stood with his fists closed beside him, grinning at her.

'Pick a hand, lovely girl,' he cooed. All anger was gone.

She not-so-gently tapped the left. He slowly turned his wrist and opened his hand, palm up. Her lip gloss.

She slapped his right hand. He smiled broadly before repeating the same action. On his right palm, a rather crumpled piece of yellow paper. She grinned at him before picking up the paper.
His hand snatched hers, holding on for a brief second before letting go.

'We have a winner,' he cried out. 'We have found our release!'

Arya blushed. It sounded rather naughty. His smirk confirmed that he, too, was aware of what he'd said.

'Thank fuck,' Rorge retorted from over the wall. 'Can we go home now?'

'Almost, almost.'

Arya emailed Jaqen the RAW file of the photograph, and he sent it off. Somewhere.

'Where is it going?' she asked.

'You'll see,' he said.

He sent her a text around 7:00 am. 'A6', it read, but it would be evening before she woke to see it.

_A/N: Sorry, it's been a while since I've managed to update. Thanks for reading and reviewing: these things help me keep going!_
Master and slave

It had been a fluke. Jaqen had as much told her so, and she had thanked him by surrounding herself with an impenetrable and sullen silence.

Arya had been in triumph after the opening ceremonies. Jon had spent about £40 on newspapers the next day, and had sent copies of the Guardian off to family and friends and god only knew who else. A6! Her picture, in print. And on the internet. Byline: Arya Stark, JHWIRE.

Jaqen had printed an 8x10 of the now-famous picture and had casually, crookedly pinned it to the wall of her workstation. Yet, instead of leaving her elated, his brief visit left her fuming, for he had made an offhand remark about the fact that the photo had been a lucky thing for her. He had also praised the picture, and her. He had also tried to hug her, but she had moved away, unable to comprehend how happy he was for her luck.

Only later did he realise his mistake. She had thought him dismissive. So he went back and tried to explain, but Arya was in a right strop and unable to hear his explanation.

In fact, he had become the voice of her continued self-doubt. ‘It was lucky they needed that shot.’ It was a fluke. It doesn’t mean I’m talented, she thought.

Like all self-fulfilling prophecies, she proved her doubts correct over the next few days. She was awful at live-action. Sport was not her metier. As her worst fear became reality, Arya’s anger seeped slowly away, to be replaced by dejection.

The next time Jaqen offered outstretched arms to her, around a week into the Olympics, she clung to him gratefully. Just don’t cry, she told herself. Don’t bloody cry.

‘I said this was for you to learn, and you are learning,’ he spoke, gently. Not at all smugly. ‘You are a trainee. A talented girl. We would not have you here if you weren’t.’ He held her there, his chin resting on the top of her head, until she felt the perfect stillness of contentment.

‘Go with Yoren today?’ he asked. She nodded, into his chest.

‘Good,’ he said. He withdrew from the embrace, gripping her shoulders. ‘You’re doing well, lovely girl. And tomorrow, perhaps a change of pace for you.’ He winked at her, and briefly, she wondered what such a change of pace would entail.

She nodded at him. The Olympics had lost their magic for her, and she assumed Jaqen would put her back at JHWire helping plan the gala at the House of Black and White. A punishment, but one she thought she deserved and, therefore, would take. Graciously.

She enjoyed shooting with Yoren, who had plenty of tips and techniques for Arya, and did not treat her like a child. Arya reviewed the day’s work with Izembaro, who praised her improvement to the point where Arya felt slightly irked at what she knew tomorrow would bring. Boredom, listening to Eleni, listening to Margaery, being ordered about. Planning a party. She shuddered.

The next morning, Arya arrived at JHWire to find a note beside her keyboard.

‘3B. Bring your gear, tripod, and slave.’
What tripod? Slave?

...Am I the slave?

Gendry arrived in her office a few minutes later, just as Arya was on the cusp of texting Jaqen, having been unable to find a tripod in her work area.

He brought her a scone, which she wolfed, a Manfrotto tripod, and a Nikon speedlight. *Ah, the slave,* she thought, suppressing a giggle.

'Thanks,' she said, opening the box and sliding the tripod out.

'Er, do you know what this is about?' Gendry asked.

'Honestly, no clue. He just asked me to meet him in 3B and to bring the tripod.'

'How are you two getting on?' Gendry asked. His overly light tone belied the innocence of his question, not that Arya was aware of his concern.

'We're getting on,' Arya swallowed. 'Fairly well. Why?'

'Seems there's always something...tense about you two.'

'No tension,' she said. *Other than sexual,* she thought.

'He has no boundaries. You know this already, but don't let it put you off. You know how brilliant he is, right?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'Well, I've got to go to meet him.' Laden with her bag and the extra stuff he’d requested, she set off.

*No boundaries. What did that mean?*

She walked past Eleni and Margaery, who were, as suspected, busy in the House of Black and White. Hanging, rehanging, checking off things on numerous lists. It was beginning to look very much as though an event would be taking place there, in little less than a week. Eluding their grasp, she slipped into the studio, camera bag in hand and tripod slung over her shoulder.

Jaqen was there, clad in a dove-grey shirt, denims rolled up at the cuffs. His boots were darker at the toes, bearing the marks of the morning rain.

He made a mocking gesture of welcome, opening his arms as if to say, “Here I am.” Then he sat in one of the folding chairs they kept for studio visitors.

“What are we doing?” Arya asked him, bluntly.

“Well, you named me, didn’t you?” he responded. “I’m not Rembrandt. Self-portraiture is hardly my thing.”

She was reeling.

“What?” she gawped.

“You chose Jaqen H’ghar as your third name,” he explained, mock-patiently, as if to a small child. “I am Jaqen H’ghar, after all,” he said. “So shoot me.”
Of course, he made her set up the studio, first. Without any assistance. He just sat there in the little folding chair, watching her.

A test for me.

She’d never set the studio up herself, at least not completely, always having someone to guide her, to tweak the little details. A light moved a fraction of an inch to the left, or a foot closer.

Angles. Flashes tested. Master and slaves.

She was slower than she’d ever been, partly because she was careful, but mostly because she was anxious.

He just sat there, eyes following her movements. To his credit, he was quiet. Often, in response to its vibration, audible in the silence of the studio, he pulled his phone from his denims and wrote some rapidfire text or email. And then resumed his watch.

It took half an hour for her to completely set the studio up to the way she thought she wanted it. He rose, then, and strolled nonchalantly around the studio to inspect. She followed.

He pointed at one umbrella, which she’d set up at a jaunty angle. ‘The light can get pretty hot.’ She moved the umbrella slightly. He nodded.

‘Careful. You need a firm grip,’ he said, as she adjusted a flash he’d spent a moment too long inspecting. She giggled.

‘Screw that in tightly.’ Flirt. She was laughing and blushing, and so was he.

‘Will you check it over again?’ she asked.

‘No, let's just begin. You'll soon spot where you need to adjust things.’

It was interesting, she reflected, how such a mundane task, one she'd done many times already in this very same studio, became somehow more important. She felt as though she was teetering on the brink of something.

‘What is the point of this,’ she asked, suddenly.

He grinned. ‘Please tell me you don't ask clients about the concept in this fashion.’

She became visibly distressed. She really didn't want to do this. She fought the urge to bolt. ‘No, not at all. Is that what you think?’

He smiled. It didn’t set her at ease.

(Adrenaline in the workplace must be managed carefully, and she was doing a rubbish job of it.)

She began to shoot, but she knew she was being far too tentative. Her framing was all off. It was impossible to look at him through the viewfinder of her Nikon. Her heart was pounding so hard it jarred her focus. The slave flash was unco-operative, as well, only choosing to fire at what seemed like random intervals.

‘Can we not do this?’ she asked. ‘I’m sorry I named you as my third name. Can I pick someone else?’

‘Lovely girl,’ he smiled at her. ‘It’s really all right. We have to continue.’ He stretched.
‘We have three books coming out, and the House of Black and White is going to be open for the first time. It’s time people knew my face.’

‘I don’t want to,’ she said. ‘I hate having you look at me and judge me.’

‘You’re learning,’ he stressed. ‘This is not designed to be a hard thing for you. And if you don’t do it, do you really want Jean-Paul taking my picture?’

‘Don’t you want me? I’m a little famous, you know. For a faceless man, anyway.’

She blushed. Yes, yes, I do want you, as entirely ridiculous as that is. Her eyes moved over his body, resting on his shirt. The pattern in the weave became apparent. She noticed everything about that shirt. The way it stretched taut over his deltoids. The way it accentuated the leanness of his back. The ever-so-slight padding around his stomach. (She liked that. It humanised him.)

‘Is my shirt ok?’ he asked. He noticed my staring. Oh God.

She nodded dumbly. Yes. Quite fine.

Once again, nothing worked well for her. She had set up the studio with a three-flash system, but the two slaves that were not on her camera went from being somewhat unco-operative to refusing to fire entirely. An hour of tinkering led them to

‘Just what sort of slaves refuse to obey their master?’ Jaqen quipped, but Arya could tell he was getting tired as well. It was humid in the studio. Probably getting ready to rain again. She longed for fresh air.

He probably has somewhere to be, she thought.

She checked the batteries: they were fine. The slave flashes still didn’t work. She checked the controller. Jaqen re-checked it, taking out the batteries and putting them back again. A partial triumph: one flash fired, but late.

‘Something is buggered,’ Jaqen said. ‘Unfortunately, this is it. We don’t have another slave controller available and Gendry won’t be able to fix it - we’ll have to send it out. Another time, lovely girl.’

Perhaps it was Arya’s natural impulsiveness, but perhaps it was borne of so many little accumulated disappointments she’d faced over the last while. Either way, she growled a ‘no’ under her breath to Jaqen, grabbed her bag, and halfway kicked open the back door of the studio, beckoning him into the back alley.

‘Environmental portrait?’ she asked, grinning.

He followed her, and she wasn’t even angry that he was clearly humouring her.

He was stood against the wall, the characteristic sandy brick of so much of East London’s older buildings, the colour saturated from the rain. It was cold, and his skin, which had begun to sweat in the humidity of the air and the heat from the studio lights, began to prickle with gooseflesh.

Jaqen’s hair had grown out somewhat from when she had first seen him newly shorn at JHWire. It was an ungodly mess, and Arya, emboldened by circumstance, reached up and attempted to arrange it with her fingers. She noted with curiosity that he flinched slightly when she touched the left side of his head, but made no move away from her. Her next pass on that side was much gentler, and she felt an unexpected rush of pleasure when he did not flinch away again. It made little difference. She held the light meter to his face. As she’d thought, f11.
She stepped back from him, raised her camera, tilted her flash away from him and up where it would bounce off a partial overhang of the building above him. He smiled at her, approving her action. She looked through her viewfinder.

*Not right.*

She moved back to him and unbuttoned the first two buttons of his shirt. He was passive and still, but his eyes moved over her face. She noted and approved of his lips, which had parted slightly. She stepped back again.

‘Like that,’ she said. ‘Look away from me.’ He complied, obediently.

*Click click.*

She shifted slightly. The sky grumbled thunder from some faraway place.

*Click.*

She paused, quickly checking the exposure. Spot on. Click click click. She continued. The smell of rain hung heavily in the air, and the sky became darker. She stopped up. *Click click click.*

Fat drops of rain began to fall, affording Jaqen little protection from the elements. In a few seconds, he was drenched, and Arya retreated into the building, still shooting.

‘Switch lenses,’ he called to her. ‘The 12-24’. She did so. She shot some more from the shelter of the doorway. His unruly hair was plastered to his face. His dark blue denims had turned nearly black. He began to look miserable. But never had she seen his eyes so alive.

‘You look great,’ she called to him. He laughed, and shook his head. *Click click click.*

She reviewed the photos, quickly for his sake, and beckoned him back in.

He retreated to the studio to grab his phone, and ushered her up the stairs, past his office, and into his flat. His laptop was on the table. He motioned for her to sit down, then opened the computer for her and entered the password. (She saw it).

‘SD card slot is on the left,’ he said. ‘I’m going to change. Someone got me all wet.’

She laughed. As she took the SD card out of her camera and put it in the appropriate slot, she could hear him, down the hall, speaking on his mobile. She caught bits of the conversation. Something about the slave flashes not working. Ah, he must be talking to Gendry.

She found and started Lightroom on his computer, virtuously resisting the urge to look at the pictures he had there. She imported all the pictures she had taken and ejected the SD card, placing it back in her camera.

The ones from the studio truly were deplorable, though mostly, she reflected, from the misfiring flashes. *So maybe I’m not entirely terrible.*

The outdoor portraits were good. She had found the perfect angle at which to capture his face. *I’ll remember this.* Not full profile, which would have been oddly severe, but not straight on. He looked best when at an angle, looking to the right. It highlighted his strange hair, and idly, she wondered if he would reject these pictures because of that.

He padded out from the bedroom, feet bare, clad in soft jerseys and a light top. He had a towel
draped on his head.

Arya moved to get up so that he could sit, but he waved her back down and leaned over her to look.

He began to chuckle as the pictures showed him progressively wetter and wetter. He was entirely non-linear, pointing out some flaw or other in certain photographs, then moving backwards or forwards several pictures to show her something else.

The door to his flat creaked open. Gendry. Absorbed in the slave controller that he’d found in 3B, he scarcely glanced up at first, but once he discovered Arya sat at Jaqen’s table, Gendry became rather more interested in his surroundings.

‘Hi,’ she said, lamely.

‘Did you find out what was wrong with it?’ Jaqen looked up at Gendry, then back down to the pictures.

‘Not exactly, but it’s fried,’ Gendry responded, his eyes not leaving Arya’s. ‘What are you doing up here?’ he asked.

‘I became rather wet as a result of that slave controller not working,’ Jaqen replied.

Gendry appeared surprised. ‘Arya’s shooting you?’ he asked.

‘She’s shot me,’ Jaqen smirked. ‘Come and look,’ he invited.

Gendry laid the malfunctioning slave controller down and went over to view the photographs.

Jaqen appeared not to notice, but Arya was aware of a growing tension in the room, and she could not fathom why it had appeared.

Gendry is never this silent.

‘Are they rubbish?’ she asked, finally.

‘What?’ Gendry asked, startled.

‘Rubbish. You’ve been very quiet,’ she accused.

‘No,’ he blurted. ‘They’re very good. Jaqen?’ Gendry grasped at his friend for help.

‘Very good indeed. I will no longer be a faceless man,’ he said, a trifle ruefully.

‘Then why so quiet?’ Arya pushed.

‘Uh, it’s just that...’ Gendry caught himself. ‘Never mind, weasel. I just didn’t expect you to be doing this.’ In truth, he’d been struck both by the fact that Jaqen would place such an assignment in Arya’s hands and by something in the way photographer and subject were at such ease with each other. Friendly. He flushed, and banished further thought.

‘What? Weasel?’ Arya echoed, bewildered.

‘Stoat?’ Gendry offered.

‘If I may interrupt this brilliant exchange of witticisms,’ Jaqen began, ‘we need to select one of these for the opening. Arya?’
‘This one.’ She scrolled to the one she had first settled on: the perfect angle, head facing right. Eyes deep and blue. A half-smirk on his face, for a true smile was harder to coax out of him. Nascent crow’s feet on a wet face, the cheekbone angled, the jaw jutting just so. A fine straight nose. Patches of white within the red hair, all of it smoothed down by rain.

She was hesitant, holding her breath, afraid he would not like it.

‘Yes, that one,’ Jaqen agreed readily. His hand moved to her shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze. She felt his thumb caress the bare skin of her neck for a moment. ‘I like it. Let’s go.’

‘No boundaries,’ muttered Gendry. He spent the rest of the day rationalising away the way Jaqen had been standing over Arya, the hand he’d placed on her, the casual intimacy of the photographs he’d seen, Arya’s wide, trusting eyes as she’d looked up at Jaqen. And he felt the tiniest stirrings of a rogue, mute envy that she had coaxed something resembling photogenic pictures out of someone notoriously wooden.

As for Arya, she had spent the rest of the day in the House of Black and White, as she had been dreading, and while others were out on Olympics-related assignments, she was setting up tables, reviewing menus, and, worst of all, enduring the sort of banal, idle chatter she hated: hairstyles, make-up tricks, and hot colours of nail varnish. Margaery seemed to see Arya as a project, while Eleni seemed to view Arya as contemptible. She wasn’t sure which she preferred, and was grateful for the day’s end.

A/N: Dreadfully sorry it’s late. More soon! Thanks, as always, for reading and reviewing.
If it were possible for a man like Tywin Lannister to relax, he was as close to it as possible when ensconced within his library, which was situated within his Belgravia townhouse. If it were possible, or rather, permissible, for a man like Tywin Lannister to recline, he was, again, as close to that posture as possible when ensconced within a large leather wingback chair, its empty twin opposite him, as he stared into the grate of the library’s fireplace.

The slightest sound could unsettle him these days, and the gentle knocking on the heavy oak panel of the door was more than the slightest sound, and hence, Tywin Lannister stood, his brow creased once again in its characteristic frown (what he termed his ‘neutral expression’).

‘Come in,’ he called, though he knew who it was that knocked, and why such a knock came.

If one were to view the entire corpus of Merchant Ivory films, or *Upstairs Downstairs*, or any other such tripe, one could not find a greater paragon of Edwardian butlerhood than the man who appeared within the frame of the door. For as much as Tywin Lannister kept to the old traditions, as he thought befitted his lineage, his title, and his general style, his butler clung with even greater ferocity to the customs that still adhered to his role.

It was time to leave. Tywin Lannister stood, buttoning the front of a fine, black, bespoke suit in a summer-weight wool and linen blend. He always wore a suit, and had not worn any other colour since the death of his wife some thirty years prior. He looked upon this outing with some pleasure. He had always liked Arya Stark best of all the Stark children. In many ways, he preferred her to his own children and his grandchildren, each of whom was either plainly insufferable, like Joffrey and his unfortunate mother, or just so bland as to break the mind with boredom.

Like so many young women with fair skin, Sansa Stark felt a nearly uncontrollable need to line her eyes in smoky kohl and apply pitch black mascara until her upper lashes stuck, ever so slightly, to her lower ones. She finished, and checked the time. 50 minutes. Enough time to help the clueless. A small sigh escaped her.

Within the upstairs lav, Arya Stark was having a small crisis. Although Sansa had offered her a choice of dress from her own wardrobe (a plethora of impractical garments), she had opted for the brown silk dress her mother had purchased for her. Yet, once on, the silk felt impossibly thin, exposing her vulnerabilities, and making her feel horribly awkward: adolescence distilled.

Her sister’s knock sounded on the door. Arya opened it. Sansa looked good. Like a grown-up. With her, Sansa carried a reasonably cute pair of shoes, and knelt down, despite the fittedness of her turquoise sheath, to strap the shoes onto her sister’s feet. Arya felt a wave of some unnameable emotion.

‘There,’ Sansa said, rising. ‘You’re very pretty. Just...’ With this, she took some sort of squirt bottle from the counter and misted random places on Arya’s head, using her hands to shape Arya’s short mess into some semblance of order.

‘There,’ she said, satisfied with her sister’s appearance, for the moment. ‘Oh, you absolute berk!’
Sansa cried, seconds later. In lieu of jewellery, Arya had opted to sling Needle across her body.

The girls went downstairs, Arya wishing for a brief moment that she could do this while dressed as a boy.

Sonja Yoren wasted no time in dressing. She removed a black dress from her wardrobe and put it on. It was the only dress she owned. Her one concession to vanity was a silver bracelet.

She yawned.

It was a fact that his nose was hawkish. It was also a fact that his hair, close-cropped, bore a more than slight resemblance to a monk’s tonsure. He ignored the wee wrinkled jowling that had begun to mar his jawline, for this slackening in his cheeks was a recent development, and one that he thought that perhaps could be arrested by the application of copious amounts of a buttery cream for which he had paid a king’s ransom on his last trip to Roma.

Yes, these were facts. But, he reflected, it was also a fact that his figure was trim. He was not tall, but he was trim. Few men of his age could boast that. His oxblood loafers were very good. His horn-rimmed spectacles suited him. And his grey pinstripe suit was cut in the latest fashion: slightly short in the jacket, slim in the leg. Few people knew that la bella figura could only be achieved with such a balance between perfect and imperfect.

He was looking forward to the evening. His warm brown eyes, which he did not consider in the least during his self-judgment, crinkled appealingly as he thought of his most talented and most famous protegée’s latest success. And now he was to meet Jaqen’s own discovery, and later, teach her. A girl. That, in itself, was unusual.

By the door, he selected a walking stick, silver-tipped. He used it out of affectation far more than actual need, but it had become an extension of himself, and thus, was necessary.

Gendry Waters wore a white dress shirt with French cuffs. He hesitated before opening the black celluloid box, but opened it nonetheless. The silver cufflinks inside were monogrammed ‘RB.’ He quickly affixed them to his shirt, before he could change his mind, but not without a deep sigh. He looked in the mirror as he shrugged on his sport coat. For a moment, he was transfixed: not because he was vain, but because he was surprised to find that he looked rather like his father.

Stannis Baratheon was every inch a typical banker. On his desk, a glass plaque read ‘Stannis Baratheon, VP Investment Consultancy’. He had both greying hair and a greying face, which seemed to worsen as the pound lost its footing, and pinken up when the pound clawed back some ground against the US dollar. He thought in terms of the economy: supply and demand was his bread and butter, after all. He read the financial pages before turning to the football scores. Occasionally, he dreamt he was the invisible hand which guided the market.

At the flat he kept for business purposes, which (he congratulated himself) was really rather an excellent tax write-off, he was stood in front of his wardrobe.

*Navy or black?* He chose the navy.

*Regimental or solid?* He chose the regimental.

*Four-in-hand or Windsor?* Somewhat unexpectedly, he chose a half-Windsor.
He had no choice but to lace up the brown Oxfords, having donned the navy trousers.

To say Stannis was not looking forward to this occasion was an understatement. He was most decidedly not looking forward to a gala evening, and considering that he would very likely be baited, badgered, and bothered by H’ghar the whole night, he was even less looking forward to this gala evening in particular.

It was fair, he reflected. He did deserve anything H’ghar chose to throw at him. After all, he had, through an accident of fate, (an accident in which Melisandre was rather complicit, something Stannis chose to ignore for the nonce), nicked the poor bugger’s girlfriend. He had never done anything remotely like this before. Had never cheated, stolen, and rarely lied. It was out of character, and he was remorseful.

Ah, he was reminded of the final choice he would have to make this evening: wife or mistress? A headache threatened as he recalled the bitter snarling words Selyse had last spoken to him, whilst he had been sat at his breakfast. The way she’d curled protectively around their daughter.

He picked up his mobile and telephoned Melisandre. As he expected, she was ready.

Dany was furious. Were it not for the love she bore the old man, she would never have consented to mind her brother and her annoying prat of a nephew at this do. She wasn’t exactly sure which of them was the greater child. Her brother was obsessed. With himself, though he called it the pursuit of a new aesthetic. The boy, growing restless with all boundaries, no matter how sensible, was pushing and pushing, every day testing her patience with his swaggering bravado.

She had the sort of fine, natural white hair with which many children are born but few adults retain. Scandinavian blood, she thought. She selected a dress from her wardrobe. Purple. She had thought it black when she bought it. Ridiculous mistake, but it did serve to bring out a purplish cast to her grey eyes.

Viserys, her idiot brother, had long lost his platinum locks to growing melanin, and, shocked to find himself with rather ordinary hair, had first resorted to frosting the tips, and later to bleaching it completely. She could hear him arguing with Aegon, her idiot nephew, whose hair was still light. The source of Viserys' dislike for his nephew was rooted, if you’ll pardon the pun, in his belief that his nephew was simply better looking than he himself.

It was true. Aegon was quite a handsome boy, though he had taken an especially annoying stance in retaliation to Dany's insistence he show up to this event tonight.

The little bastard had dyed his hair bright fucking blue.

Dressed, Dany sat, waiting for Viserys to finish whatever he was doing to make himself presentable. Aemon, her great uncle, his own white hair wispy and brittle with age, patted her arm. She was struck anew by how papery-thin his hands were becoming. His broad smile, a soft bow in a face of jutting angles, was enough to make her anger diminish to a manageable level. She hugged him fiercely, and this made him laugh.

Jaqen H’ghar was spiffed up. He’d combed his hair, smoked fourteen cigarettes, felt awful and vomited into his kitchen sink, then showered, dressed, scrubbed his teeth until he felt his tongue go numb from all the mintiness, and combed his hair again.

I may be a trifle nervous, he thought, reflectively.
a/n - trifle naff, innit tho? I had to do this. If you hated it, I'll apologise to you. Now, go enjoy your week-ends.
Cinderella at the Ball

Cinderella at the ball

Breaking the dichromatic colour scheme, thankfully, someone had unrolled a red carpet on the steps of the House of Black and White. The doors were propped wide open, and were flanked by rather official-looking security guards. As Arya, Sansa and Jon entered, Arya realised, with fast-growing trepidation, that this was a Big Deal.

She was forced to admit that the House of Black and White had made a tremendous leap forward in a short space of time, both as an exhibition space and as a venue for an entirely too large mass of bodies, knots of which pressed up close against one another. Within ten minutes, Arya was entirely grateful for the thin dress she wore, for she felt hot enough, and in anything heavier she felt she would have been red-faced and sweating. Jon and Sansa peeled off from her within minutes. Sansa quickly. There was no doubt in Arya’s mind that her sister was heading straight to the golden head holding court just a few feet away. She shook her head. Sansa’s entire situation was mystifying. Jon left her soon after, with more regret than alacrity. Arya smiled at him as he left. Business. It was always business with Jon. He joined a knot of people, two of whom she recognised: Mormonts. The ones she did not recognise she dismissed. Investors. You could always tell them by their clothing, and how they were always huddled together discussing finances and investments all the while looking like penguins crowded together for warmth.

Other than the JHWire staffers, the people she did know in the throng were mostly related to her, either immediately or in that nasty British way where one finds one is related--on both sides--to the person in question. The people she didn't know were either press folk or partygoers on the semi-professional circuit: young people who worked in the City during the week and spent the week-ends either making the rounds of various nightclubs or going up to the estate of some well-heeled friend’s family.

To her dismay, she saw Melisandre with Stannis Baratheon, Joffrey’s unsmiling uncle. Gendry’s uncle, too, she amended. It was sad, Arya reflected, for Stannis had always been the foil to Robert Baratheon’s excesses and extravagances. The upright, upright banker succumbing to folly and temptation, especially in the form of an unstable wreck like Melisandre, was a cause for pity. Perhaps something of this feeling was reflected in her eyes or expression, for Stannis smiled his hesitant smile at Arya, only to cast his eyes downward a smidgen too soon. Melisandre appeared nothing like the defeated, frightened woman Arya had seen a few nights before, having recovered her hauteur entirely. She stood, in a sleek red dress, her ruby-nailed hand confidently placed on Stannis’ arm. Arya turned away, thinking of Stannis’ lovely daughter, Shireen, whom she’d known practically since her birth. It was too much to think about.

Tiring of the people, she caught sight of Jaqen’s portrait, and stood there in front of it, critically analysing her mistakes, which were printed large for the world to see. At least it’s sharp, she reflected. It was a welcome distraction from the thoughts buzzing around her head.

‘Lady Arya,’ said a voice in her ear. She grinned, and caught the arm of the man who was stood beside her.

‘I’m no lady, Lord Tywin,’ she said. He guffawed.

‘You’re looking well,’ she told him.

‘I am well, Lady Arya,’ he smiled back at her. ‘Will you do me the honour of showing me around?’
he asked.

‘But of course, Lord Tywin,’ she smiled at him, taking the offered arm with some relief. Tywin Lannister, unlike the rest of his family, was an intelligent man, if somewhat stern. They had always been friends, it seemed. An additional bonus was that Lord Tywin had never loved the Baratheons, so she was unlikely to have to engage in conversation with Stannis and that woman. She caught Jaqen’s eyes across the room. He smiled at her and returned to his conversation.

She was showing Tywin Lannister a triptych of pictures of a rugby match that Rorge had taken. Although she knew the story behind the pictures, she didn’t find it all that interesting. Tywin Lannister disagreed with her assessment entirely. *Men and sports*, she thought, rolling her eyes as Tywin was banging on about the “human drama”. Laughing, she led Tywin to another grouping of pictures, ones that she appreciated more. Jaqen’s work, although she reassured herself that it was not because of him that she liked the pictures. They were just so different from anything she’d seen. The series of eight photographs was entitled *Tokmok*.

As she had gone through and catalogued the photographs in the House of Black and White over the last few weeks, she had noticed a fairly regular pattern in Jaqen’s behaviour. He would shoot in the UK for a while: a few months at most. He would then take an assignment for JHWire or a co-commission from another press agency, return, and then disappear. He would resurface, months later, with photographs from places to which no one ever goes. He seemed to favour border regions, rife with uncertainty and chaos.

The harsh sound of Joffrey’s braying laughter cut across Arya’s recounting of the tales behind the Kyrgyz photographs. Tywin sighed heavily.

‘Lady Arya, will you excuse me, please? I must rein in my grandson,’ he said, speaking in the polite, clipped way he used to express his displeasure. He stroked her cheek softly, a gesture left over from her childhood. She smiled and nodded.

‘Was that who I think it was?’ Gendry was instantly at her side. He handed her a glass of champagne. He looked wonderful.

‘If you think that was Tywin Lannister, then yeah, that’s who you thought it was,’ Arya replied, sipping gratefully at the drink.

‘God, I haven’t seen him in years. How’s he doing?’ Gendry said. Arya was rueful. *He would have been a good grandfather to you, and you would have been a good grandson to him.*

‘As well as can be expected, I think,’ she responded, diplomatically. ‘He is very lonely,’ she added, less diplomatically.

They walked around the exhibition for a while. She caught sight of Jon and Jaqen, seemingly mesmerised by a very beautiful woman with long hair so blonde it would have been more proper to call it white. A man was with her, clearly a relative, for he had the same hair. She felt the stirrings of jealousy inside her, and told herself, sternly, to put that away. *I’m too tired to bother with jealousy tonight.* She smiled brightly when she saw Jaqen turn aside to yawn (politely, hand over mouth) after hearing some extended soliloquy delivered by this mysterious and beautiful woman. Her brother looked as though he’d never heard anything so brilliant. She couldn’t resist a chuckle. With them, she saw the old man who had cut her hair, and remembered the two blondes from the photographs he had in his barbershop.

Eventually, Arya, bored out of her skull, had run out of people with whom to talk. She had poached as many of the little canapés as she could handle off trays glued to bored-looking, black-clad servers
who wended their ways expertly through the crowd. Since Needle was slung casually over her shoulder the way other women wear their evening bags, she took the little Leica out and began to take surreptitious pictures. It was a relief to stop smiling so much and start focusing on something real.

‘Cutting into my turf?’ Izembaro startled her, suddenly at her side. He was armed with his Nikon. ‘Can’t say I blame you. These things are dreadful. We’re not the only ones, either.’ She followed his pointing finger. Several of the likeminded had retreated to that place behind their viewfinders, secret places where only they could go.

‘Go on,’ he urged, grinning at her. ‘Get something good.’

After a while, she began to watch Jaqen work the room. He saw her, but again made no effort to talk to her. Arya understood. This is business, and he is busy.

Despite Stannis’ best efforts to keep away from Arya’s judging eyes, Melisandre had succeeded (when did she not?) in manipulating him so that they stood, her red-clad breast mashed into his navy suited arm, in front of Arya, at a distance impossible to ignore.

Melisandre had one of those accents. It was insanely sophisticated, impossible to place, and was coupled with a voice deep and rich. It was used often to put people in their places.

‘Ohhh, look!’ Melisandre exclaimed, smiling at Arya. ‘Cinderella at the ball.’

Stannis looked worried, the wrinkles around his mouth deepening. Fucking hag, thought Arya.

‘Good evening,’ she said, sweetly. Stannis’ wrinkles deepened. For a moment, Arya contemplated throwing his situation in his face, but the impulse passed quickly, quashed by multiple reasons. She was only a trainee and didn’t want to cause a scene. Her family was here. She had too much respect for his daughter to use her against her father.

Instead, she used Needle. ‘You’re both looking so good,’ Arya said, with as much false cheer as she could muster, and quickly, before they could object, raised the little Leica.

‘Thanks! Oh, excuse me, won’t you?’ she said, brightly. There is no weapon greater than a camera, she thought, as she stalked off.

The adrenaline still working through her system made her a bit bold, so she stalked Jaqen a little, from across the room. A woman had taken his hand and practically dragged him to his own portrait. Two of her very long-legged and short-skirted girlfriends proceeded to get out their iPhones and take pictures of Jaqen and his new friend, who was cosied up against him. Arya snorted.

His smile did not reach his eyes. When he saw Arya looking, he lifted a hand to his face and laid two fingers casually against his cheek. He smirked, and she saw his eyes crinkle, and her grin answered his.

Something disrupted her peripheral vision. She looked up from the viewfinder. A walking stick, silver-tipped, was raised, pushing Needle ever so slightly to the right.
Bewildered, she looked at its owner, who was not much taller than Arya, with a pair of meltingly warm brown eyes.

The man, for so he was, was fiftyish, and wore an exceedingly good suit. He smelt wonderful.

‘To the right, I think,’ he said.

‘Who are--,’ she began, confused.

‘Try it,’ he said. ‘Please.’ His accent was European. Italian, possibly.

She looked through the viewfinder.

And there it was. A little to the right. Jaqen, smiling at her. His own portrait a bizarre backdrop. The brilliant Tokmok series further behind him, blurred into a beautiful background

click click

‘Good,’ the stranger said. ‘Very good, indeed.’

‘Who are you?’ she finally completed her sentence, just as he had turned from her

‘We shall meet,’ he said, smiling at her with those warm brown eyes. ‘But not today.’

Eventually, Jaqen did make his way over to Arya.

‘How much fundraising have you done?’ she asked him.

‘Enough to utterly exhaust a man,’ he said. ‘We’ve sold everything on the walls.’

She strolled with him, looking at photographs with eyes made new by his presence. The noise of the scrum grew fainter, as it is wont to do for people who would rather be alone. Here and there, he would murmur something or other about one of the photographs, but mostly, they walked in companionable silence.

He leaned closer to her, thumb resting on the part of her spine not covered by her dress. Arya shivered slightly, for she sensed the deliberateness of that touch.

‘So you’ve been speaking to--”, he began, pausing as he heard some kind of commotion in the crowd to their left.

God, Sansa can be shrill, Arya thought, and excused herself from Jaqen’s side to see what had transpired.

“My sister...” she began.

“Go,” he smiled. “It’s all right.”

It was a foregone, if sad conclusion, that certain newspapers, in their reportage of the events the next morning, would obscure the true, mostly charitable purpose of the event at JHWire. While a benefit organised for the displaced persons in the Sahel was all very well and good, Joffrey Baratheon's very public snogging of Margaery Tyrell, a woman who was not his girlfriend, whilst his actual girlfriend looked on, would actually sell more newspapers.

Poor Sansa.
Sansa Stark was a terrible actress, and could barely restrain herself from shouting with joy. But, for reasons of her own, she was trying to appear shocked, broken-hearted, despairing. It was not succeeding particularly well. Rather conveniently, Sandor Clegane was there. He reached out an enormous paw and steadied Sansa, who clung to him. Tears began to stream down her face, though Arya knew they were not entirely tears of sorrow.

Sandor met Arya’s eyes, and though his face never moved, she rather thought she detected something. Relief, maybe.

Joffrey left Margaery’s side and went over to Sansa. The way he looked at her sister was so contemptuous that Arya briefly considered battery before rejecting it as too much trouble. With a nod of his golden head, he ordered Sandor to remove Sansa from the event. Sandor Clegane was all too happy to comply.

Joffrey’s triumph was short-lived. Tywin Lannister took stock. His daughter was quite soused and had not left the bar in some time, her laughter becoming louder and less dignified as she hung on every word the young man behind the bar uttered. His grandson had publicly broken up with his young lady friend (a girl whom he did not deserve in the first place). His sons...where were his sons?

He saw Tyrion engaged in a more or less lucid conversation with a very full-breasted woman who, Tywin believed, was not Tyrion’s wife. Tywin pursed his lips and frowned, for he found he could not quite remember if Tyrion was still married to...what was her name? He found Jaime, who had been tight-lipped and sad for too long, though he knew not why, arguing heatedly with a tall woman who, on closer inspection, was really rather astonishingly ugly.

He left Tyrion and Jaime where they were, since they were not behaving like idiots at the present moment. But he had the car brought round, and ushered Cersei and Joffrey into it with more than one sigh of regret. He would miss speaking to Arya, though he hoped to see her when, as the paterfamilias, he would have to fulfil his familial duty by apologising to Sansa on his grandson’s behalf.

On the drive home, however, Tywin Lannister found himself paying less attention to his flock’s shortcomings and far more attention to the fact that it seemed Arya had found herself a young...ish man.

Now there was a surprise.

\textit{A/N: I have no excuses for not updating more regularly. Things got in my way. I’m so sorry, and I hope you still find some pleasure in reading this.}
A parade of Lannisters

She'd woken up early, her neck twisted into an idiotic position, and not in her own bed. Her uncomfortable pillow, she discovered, was her brother's leg. Soon, the sound of his soft whuffling proved soporific enough to send her back into dreamland.

A few hours later, she woke again. The pillow had left: gone to the kitchen, thankfully. Gasping, she opened her eyes, recoiling from the breath of the enormous white dog who was calmly watching her from the vantage point of her chest. Ghost was far less concerned with Arya's inability to breathe, and far more interested in her ability to get up and fetch him some breakfast.

She rose from the sofa, and wondered idly when she might be able to resume sleeping in a real bed. The night before, Sansa had made it clear that she required 'space'. To Arya's surprise, Jon had agreed, and had bade Arya kip on the sofa in the lounge. He had kept her company, feeling guilty about turning her out of the room. Neither were sleepy, however, and they had watched a film before nodding off.

It was just gone nine when the first Lannister had arrived. Much to Arya's dismay, she opened the door to Cersei rather than Tywin, whom she was actually looking forward to seeing.

Something of this must have shown on her face, for Cersei gave her a look of what Arya believed to be disapproval, though the recent botox she'd had done on her forehead ameliorated those wrinkles which were usually employed in communicating emotions.

Stepping in, her court shoes thunking on the tile of the hall floor, Cersei took Arya's hand in her own soft and aromatic one. Arya noted that she still wore her wedding ring.

'Arya, dear,' Cersei began. 'Where is Sansa?' Cersei was so insincerely grave that Arya could have laughed, were she not so irked by the way Cersei always pronounced her sister's name, drawing out the first syllable to an absurd length.

'Sahn-sa Sahn-sa SAHN-sa.'

She put away her annoyance. 'She's upstairs. Shall I get her?'

'Yes, dear. Please do,' Cersei responded, breathily. Arya found herself irritated even by the soft ringlets Cersei's hair made. *Ringlets on a fifty-year-old, indeed.*

Arya made as if to climb the stairs, but turned on the bottom step to face Cersei. 'What if she...won't see you?' she asked, but needlessly. Sansa had heard the conversation, emerged from their room, and was already walking down the stairs. Arya marveled at her sister's collectedness.

'It's all right, Arya,' Sansa said, in her little voice. 'We can go out into the garden to talk.'

As much as Arya wished to eavesdrop, her attention was focused on the soft vibrations of her iPhone. Text messages again. *I wonder who that could be,* she snorted.

*Many things underway this week. Need you to use every ounce of creativity and come up with some photos of the "new" London and the "old" London. *
I've no idea. : We have some people who don't know what they want, so we can go a bit more open. Try to get good stock photos if nothing else. You, Rorge, and the new bloke are working on this.

New bloke? There was a new bloke?

He was there last night...You'll meet him on Thursday at the mtg. A good surprise, I think.

She wondered if the new bloke would be the interesting man who had nudged her lens. He had been interesting, if mysterious. Perhaps a bit familiar.

As the last message came in, so did Sansa and Cersei from the garden. It looked as though Sansa had been crying. Arya revised her initial negative opinions on Sansa's acting ability, for her sister looked genuinely sad.

'She's been by, I see,' Tywin Lannister said drily, after sniffing the air in Jon's entrance hall. Jon, who had gotten up to answer the door, could not hide his smile.

'Yes, she has,' he said. 'Tea?'

'Please,' he assented in his usual regal manner, as if by allowing Jon to put the kettle on, he was doing Jon a favour.'

 Arya ushered Tywin to a seat on the sofa on which she had recently passed the night. Wordlessly, Sansa came down and sat down in one of the chairs in the lounge, and Arya patted Tywin's hand and scarpered, joining Jon in the kitchen.

She tried to find the biscuits Jon had asked her to, moving silently in order to better hear their conversation, but she found Jon looking at her, dark brows lowered. She burst out laughing, and he did the same, shushing her. The noise of the kettle spoilt any chance they had of hearing Sansa's and Tywin's conversation.

It was an awfully nice day: too pleasant to be trapped inside listening to Lord Tywin bowing his head and swallowing his pride to apologise to a sister who possibly deserved very little of it, so Arya went out to the garden with Ghost, who padded lazily around his territory. She heard the door opening, and soon Tywin joined her on the low bench. She was appalled at how old he looked. Grim and old. She felt a wave of pity for him and anger towards bloody little prince Joffrey, who had never once acted like a proper human being, being too busy narcissistically sneering his way through every situation in his life. A proper little toerag.

But Tywin clearly did not wish to speak about his grandson.

'Who was the man with you last night?' Tywin asked, without ceremony, without the usual playful honorifics. 'The one with strange hair,' he prompted at her quizzical look.

'Oh,' she said. 'Jaqen.'

'And he is...?'

'Oh,' Arya exclaimed. 'Well, he is JHWire...I mean the company is his. He runs it. Owns it, with a few of the others. I think.'
'You think.'

'Well, I know.' She felt suddenly wrong-footed.

Arya could hear Tywin's concern, lying heavily in his breath as he moved to ask his next question.

'And how old is he?'

'I don't know. Thirty.' His eyes bore a parental concern. 'Thirty-one,' she sighed.

But Tywin seemed not to care about this. She took that as a sort of consent, not that she needed any from him.

'Talented,' he said.

'Yes,' she agreed, restraining herself from gushing. Sounding like a silly schoolgirl wouldn't do.

It was entirely unlike any of their conversations. Usually she teased him, he recommended books to her which he knew she would not read, and their conversation meandered merrily to one thing or another. Banter. They bantered, ordinarily. This time, however, was different.

'I despise him, you know,' Tywin said, after a time. 'Joffrey.'

Arya restrained herself again, this time from agreeing with him. She noticed that Tywin's hand had begun to shake.

'I don't know what he's capable of. He's always been"off". Cersei never got him any help, though I begged her to put him in some sort of care years ago. That's why we always had Sandor Clegane minding him.'

Arya slipped her hand into Tywin's, reassured that his grip was as strong as ever.

'But now, he's of age, and last night…well, let's hope for the best, since he's said he won't be minded by Clegane anymore. Said he doesn't need a dog anymore. Can you believe that?'

Arya's mind raced. 'What will Mr Clegane do?' she asked, trying to sound casual.

'Oh, we've made it clear that he'll still have a place with us, but he's having none of it.'

'Where will he go?'

'He said he has a position to go to here in London, but I spoke with Tyrion earlier. Frankly, we're going to try to convince him to stay with us and see to Sansa. He's really more been Sansa's minder than Joffrey's, and Tyrion raised the concern that Joffrey will still try to bother her, despite his newfound affections for this woman...what was her name?'

'Margaery Tyrell. I work with her.'

'Margaery. Yes.'

Tywin Lannister left after spending a few more minutes with Arya, and Arya herself fled Jon's house a little while later. There were too many unanswered questions, and a roll of film on Needle that drew her to the JHWire darkroom.

She let herself in. The silence of the ordinarily busy space made her feel like loud noise would be out
of place, so she moved as quietly as if she had been in a library. She didn't expect to see anyone, since she knew that the takedown and clean-up of all the rental equipment and such was due to take place on Monday. No one had wanted to work this weekend.

The red light of the darkroom thrummed strangely. *Due for replacement,* Arya mused. She was comforted by the darkroom's odd vinegary tang: a familiar odour, if not a very pleasant one.

She developed the film: easy, since it was only a single roll. She decided against printing a contact sheet since there were so few pictures.

Print them all and see what you did wrong, she thought.

Mechanically, she put each negative into the enlarger, exposed the negative, moved the print from the developer to the stop bath, then from the stop bath to the fixer. She rinsed the print, methodically, then placed it in the drying agent, before rinsing it again. Then she hung it and repeated the process with the rest of the negatives save one, for Needle's shutter had misfired. She found herself hoping that was not a shot of Jaqen, and blushed.

Once she had finished, she pinned up and inspected her work, forgoing the darkroom's red glow for the harsh overhead lights. She opened the door, grateful for the fresh, clean air.

Crowd shots, a few. One was interesting, showing the scene nicely. She'd been on the stairs then. Since she was not tall, getting a few steps up helped her shots immensely.

Stannis and Melisandre. Stannis looked terrible. Not just the usual haggard middle-aged man caught on camera before he can suck certain things in and jut certain other things out. He just radiated guilt. Melisandre, on the other hand, looked cosmopolitan and elegant. A few weeks ago, she had looked like her world was ending. Now, even her eyebrows were perfect. Arya had taken the picture to disrupt and discompose them. She'd succeeded with Stannis, but failed miserably with Melisandre. Nevertheless, it was a bad photograph. She was Arya Stark shooting a picture, trying to make people look horrible in it. If 'no one' had taken the picture, it would have been much better. Arya sighed. Would she end up being the kind of photographer who has to like her subject in order to shoot it proficiently? She hoped not.

Tywin Lannister in profile. She resolved to ask him to let her take more photographs of him. After the furor died down, of course. She'd never really thought about it before, since she knew his face too well, but he was an interesting looking man: one well worth photographing.

A tall blonde woman, almost freakishly large. She was ugly and compelling in equal measures.

Sonja Yoren, looking very good. Not an exciting photograph. She couldn't remember what drew her to take the picture.

Her brother speaking to that white-haired woman, who was beautiful. His face was soft, Arya thought. She rarely saw him like that. Relaxed. The woman was exquisite. The contrast between her dark brother and the fair woman was unbelievable.


She saw that final shot of Jaqen and knew that it was the one where the mystery man had provided his simple aid. Her breath caught. Jaqen was perfectly framed. Her own photographs were jarringly wrong once she looked at this one, for Jaqen's face was turned slightly to the side while the background showed his own photographs in clear detail. It was if he had become a foreground to his own work, separate yet inseparable. The symmetry of the background contrasted magnificently with
the asymmetry of his face. Jaqen was an attractive man, but this photograph was beautiful.

'How did he do that?' she wondered aloud.

'How did he do what, lovely girl?' came a voice from the door.

A/N: I am so sorry for not updating sooner. I have been really busy at work and there has just been no time left to polish this and present it to you. Things are calming down now, thankfully. I realise that some of you might feel I've abandoned this and have subsequently, abandoned me, but I hope you can forgive me and read on.

On another note, I want to direct everyone's attention to Winterlyn Dow's The Assassin's Apprentice. It and she are brilliant.
Arya the Coward

She saw that final shot of Jaqen and knew that it was the one where the mystery man had provided his simple aid. Her breath caught. Jaqen was perfectly framed. Her own photographs were jarringly wrong once she looked at this one, for Jaqen’s face was turned slightly to the side while the background showed his own photographs in clear detail. It was if he had become a foreground to his own work, separate yet inseparable. The symmetry of the background contrasted magnificently with the asymmetry of his face. Jaqen was an attractive man, but this photograph was beautiful.

‘How did he do that?’ she wondered aloud.

“How did he do what, lovely girl?” came a voice from the door.

Arya felt betrayed by her own good sense, for in that moment she shifted her focus from the problem that lay before her to those fluttering, arrhythmic feelings of adolescent mortification and insecurity. I didn’t shower! I should have at least brushed my hair! Oh God! These shorts? I’m really wearing these?

But thankfully, Arya being Arya, such moments were short-lived, and in the space of a single indrawn breath, she managed a rather poised, if surprised, “Hi.” Mentally, she congratulated herself on not being quite the most awkward person possible in recorded history.

‘What is the photograph?’ Jaqen asked, but before Arya could question him as to the identity of the mysterious man who had helped her take the picture, the tell-tale sounds of ballerina flats scuffing along the smooth concrete floor suggested that they were not alone.

Of course, it had to be the woman from last night, the platinum blonde who had so mesmerised her brother, possibly every other straight man in the room, and probably most of the women. And, of course, she was not alone, but came with something of an entourage.

The woman did not wait for Jaqen to introduce her, but matter-of-factly extended a hand to Arya, and introduced herself as ‘Dany.’

Jaqen responded, ‘Danaerys Targaryen, this is Arya Stark, one of our staff photographers.’ The tall also-blond man behind Dany introduced himself as Viserys Targaryen with a mildly imperious nod.

‘Viserys is my brother,’ Dany smiled tightly, enunciating the sentence clearly, as if to indicate that the sibling whom she had named had some very major problems.

‘I’m Aegon,’ said another voice, belonging to a youth with shocking blue hair, whom Arya had seen the night before. He shook hands and gave Arya a broad smile which she could not help but return. ‘Arya Stark,’ she said.

‘My nephew,’ supplied Daenerys, with an air of great patience. Aegon winked at Arya. She barely listened to the reasons why they were there, for it was not lost on Arya how Jaqen had introduced her. ‘Staff photographer.’ Didn’t that just sound grand? Arya failed to hear much of Jaqen’s final introduction. Jane-something.

Jaqen waited, expectantly.
‘Pardon?’ Arya said, conscious of having missed something crucial.

‘Jane’s picture. For our staff directory. Do you have time now?’ he repeated.

‘Oh. Yes, right!’ she affirmed, embarrassed. Wait. *We have a staff directory?* Jaqen was moving to leave before she could ask him about it.

‘Cheers,’ he said, smiling his crinkly smile at her. He touched her shoulder gently: a thanking touch, but not a lingering one.

Arya looked Jane-something over, catching herself being somewhat critical after seeing the way that Jane-something looked at Jaqen’s receding figure. She was young and very pretty, wearing a cheap-looking floral dress and rather clunky-looking platform court shoes. Uncomfortable, mused Arya. And her skirt is far too short, she thought, rather uncharitably.

‘All right, let’s get your picture taken,’ Arya unclipped her pictures, now dry, and ushered Jane-something out of the darkroom.

She motioned to the door that led to the studios, and Jane-something followed, clapping along.

‘He is *so* fanciable,’ Jane-something said, rather loudly, as Arya unlocked the door of 3B.

‘What?’

‘Jaaqen, love. He is completely delectable. That arse! Those jeans!’ Jane-something groaned, not noticing Arya’s shock.

‘Is he single?’ Jane continued.

‘I don’t know,’ Arya said, truthfully, busily moving to set up a single light with a flash behind. That slave flash would light the background, while the flash on her Nikon would serve as fill-flash, illuminating Jane-something’s face and chasing the shadows away.

‘Look, Jane…,’ she paused. *Staff photographer.* ‘We are professionals here. We don’t go around fancying each other.’

In that moment, Arya was acutely aware that she had become the worst sort of hypocrite. It wasn’t as if she were courageous enough to make some sort of claim on Jaqen and tell this stranger that she herself fancied him. They were not in any sort of relationship. There was something to it, of course. A spark. Chemistry. Something that drew them to one another despite the unenviable distance in their ages and situations in life. And to deny that was cowardice born of jealousy. Something settled in Arya: a kind of discomfort at her own weakness, and a resolve to do something about it.

‘But he does have a remarkably fine arse,’ Arya said, smiling.

Jane-something laughed, and Arya settled into her role as *no one at all* as she began to photograph her.

By the end of the session, Arya had the unsettling realisation that she liked this Jane-something. She was shyer than she appeared, and though she was trying very hard to look grown-up and important, she had a bit of a wry sense of humour at how bad she was failing. They went for coffee later, and after seeing Jane’s eyes light up when Hot Pie placed a slab of sticky toffee pudding in front of them, Arya knew that she and Jane-something would be fast friends.
Mouth full of the pudding, Jane motioned with her fork to Hot Pie. ‘Is ‘e single?’

Arya promptly giggled.

‘No, seriously. Very cute in a chubby sort of way. Totally shaggable,’ Jane said. ‘You, Arya, appear to know an entire raft of entirely shaggable blokes. With him, I’d be fat, but I’d be happy.’

Arya laughed until she choked on her pudding, resolving never to invite Jane over to Jon’s house. That would be...carnage, she thought.

Arya knew her sister had brains. Indeed, for all her pretensions to being as vacuous as the next girl, Sansa was both shrewd and intelligent. What Arya did not know was how well Sansa had thought out her plans.

She had been hired on at a small security firm in Hackney, close by, and for all everyone knew, her plan was to work there for the year one, given sufficient means, normally traveled around Europe. Jon, confiding in Arya over a mug of tea in the late afternoon, thought her plans might have shifted, given her spectacular breakup with Joffrey.

‘Perhaps she’ll go to Nepal or summat,’ he mused. Arya snorted. Sansa was not the backpacking type.

‘Perhaps she’ll just bum around Shoreditch, turn into a hipster, and live here with you forever,’ Arya replied.

‘What a cheery thought!’ Jon laughed.

Their conversation was startlingly prescient, since the Saturday post came, and with it came an offer for Sansa. Silently, secretly, and no small time ago, Sansa had applied for university, foregoing her gap year entirely.

It was as if Joffrey had never happened. Sansa was focused and cool as she, Jon, and Arya were sat at the table eating their rather odd tea, for Sam’s cookery lessons had been somewhat hit or miss. Do lentils ever really belong in pudding?

‘I’m going to LSE in September,’ Sansa chirped. ‘I’ll continue to work at the security firm part-time.’ Somewhat smugly, she continued. ‘They can’t do without me now.’

‘They can’t?’ Jon questioned. ‘No, of course not,’ he said, rolling his eyes in Arya's direction.

Sansa had gotten a job in the office of the firm rather easily, which wasn’t much of a surprise, since it was owned by her aunt and uncle.

‘Not that I have to justify myself to you, Jon,’ she said crossly, ‘but I started as their receptionist and now that Uncle Petyr trained me, I’m doing all their bookkeeping.’

Although Jon was not particularly impressed, he nodded gravely, shooting ‘that look’ at a smirking Arya.

It wasn’t lost on Sansa. ‘Jon! Do not patronise me, you twat!’

Jon was somewhat shocked, since his sister’s vocabulary had never included the more vulgar insults that everyone else in their family resorted to fairly regularly.

Arya giggled. Sandor Clegane’s influence had certainly made itself known.
Jon retreated to the safer ground of congratulating Sansa on her uni admission, avoiding the topic of Uncle Petyr, whom no one liked much, nor how indispensable Sansa had made herself to him. Jon suggested that Sansa ring Catelyn, since her mum would not take kindly to Jon holding such plum information whilst she, Sansa’s mother, was kept in the dark.

They bickered good-naturedly throughout the rest of the evening. It reminded Arya of the time before her father died. They had been a close family. Now it felt so incomplete: as it would always feel, she thought, bitterly. And everyone had changed so much around her.

A buzz underneath her pillow jolted her into wakefulness.

‘So, lovely girl. Am I “fanciable”? ’

Arya had conveniently forgotten that Jaqen's office was above 3B. She groaned.

A/N: It's been a while, hasn't it? I've been struggling with this somewhat. Since I didn't plan it out very well from the beginning, this is now starting to come back and bite my bottom. Cheer me on, please, and don't hesitate to make suggestions. Also, as before, I've been far more interested in reading Winterlyn Dow's 'The Assassin's Apprentice' than doing any writing whatsoever. Another shout-out to her and her very well-written, imaginative, and richly detailed work.
Michaelmas Term

Michaelmas Term

Within a short time, it dawned on Arya that she was going to have it rough. For weeks, she had been attempting to keep an open mind about returning to school, or rather to pry her closed mind open. Yet, although her rather happy summer gave way to an autumn of bleak despair, it was something of a relief to think about problems other than her family, her friends, and her work life.

There was the problem of her completely fanciable boss.

He had texted her, one summer night:

‘So, lovely girl. Am I “fanciable”? ’

_Completely, _she had thought, stifling an audible groan.

‘Not really...’ she had sent.

And so he’d started responding ‘Not really’ to every single question she’d asked him at JHWire, until she’d relented and texted him one night (savagely, at 3 am):

‘Yes. Yes, you are. Satisfied?’

‘...Not quite ;-)' came his response, instantaneously. He couldn’t have been sleeping, then.

Their dance continued, much as before, though Arya thought that he was growing somewhat more distant with her. He was, certainly, being more careful with how and when and why he meted out physical affection. This was clearly not his natural state, for he touched everyone. Constantly. And then one day, not her. That was hard, for Arya found that she sometimes just wanted to chuck it all and dance a bit more. But she had other storms to weather.

Sansa wasn’t speaking to her much, since she was both busy as a uni student and angry at Arya. She had asked Arya whether or not Arya would teach the basics of film photography, on an informal level, to Sandor Clegane.

‘What? So I can be some kind of alibi for you? Not on, Sansa.’ Arya had retorted angrily. Sansa had made no effort to come clean with her family, and only Arya knew of her relationship with Sandor Clegane.

It turned out that Sandor Clegane was legitimately interested. So Arya had sheepishly made, or tried to make, amends with Sansa and had begun to spend ‘quality time’ with the massive weirdness (or was that the weird massiveness?) that was Sandor Clegane, attempting to teach him certain technical fundamentals.

Jon was sunk into some sort of large project and, since his firm had grown well beyond a simple start-up, was having the requisite trouble with a certain member of his staff. His black mood, coupled with Sansa’s wintry chill made it somewhat difficult to be at home, so Arya had spent more time at work and sitting idly in coffee shops, often with Jane-something.

School, Arya had thought, would be a respite from the other stuff. Not so, for within a mere two weeks into Michaelmas term at Hoxton, some of the girls had branded her with the single most
offensive (and untrue) epithet possible.

_Slag._

*It would be funny, Arya had thought, if it weren’t so awful…and boring.*

Hoxton was, for all its branding of alternativeness, something of a rather traditional experience, or so said her nominal head of house, Miss Mordane. Arya did not expect this, having thought she had left the halcyon days at public school behind her. At least, as a day pupil, Arya did not interact much with Miss Mordane, but she found herself more or less visiting her office on a weekly basis, called up for some infraction or other. Miss Mordane began every one of these visits in the same fashion: she would purse her rather lipless mouth in disapproval before beginning her calm, well-reasoned lecture. Miss Mordane taught maths (poorly, Aegon told Arya), and thankfully, Arya did not agree with maths, nor they with her. She wasn’t even going to try for an A-level there. Best leave that to Sansa.

There was no school uniform, but the rules governing attire, as Arya found, were so restrictive that everyone wore roughly the same kinds of things. There was no place for casual attire, as Miss Mordane sharply informed her. Her Converse were to be replaced with standard black leather brogues, or even court shoes with heel height 6.75 cm or lower. Her t-shirt soon became a standard white blouse, her jeans became black trousers (she drew the line at donning a dowdy wool skirt). Her rather ragged grey jersey gilet was replaced by a smart black cardie. She looked like a classic public school pupil, or, as Jon remarked, 'a very small waiter.'

Arya made sure to carry her regular clothing in her bag, since Jaqen looked positively haunted the one time he’d seen her in her non-uniform uniform.

‘What?’ she’d asked him crossly.

‘Sometimes,’ he had swallowed. ‘I forget just how young you are.’ He’d offered her a weak smile and then had been fairly distant for a week. She’d made up her mind to never, ever dress up like a schoolgirl in front of him. Not for years, anyway. Clearly, that was not part of her appeal.

She didn’t realise how much harder it would be to start at a new school than it was to start at JHWire. At the latter institution, she was treated as an investment. Everyone wanted her to succeed. People often brought her biscuits. At Hoxton, she was a newcomer: someone who was important enough to be excused from classes on certain days due to outside commitments, but not famous or from an important family, and therefore, she was someone who did not seem to warrant the special treatment which she received.

Within her own dear Harrenhal House, there were three models, eight or nine actors, a pianist, and an Aegon Targaryen. Aegon was a surprise to her, a godsend, and very slightly, the beginning of the misunderstanding. He’d been at Hoxton for years, both as a boarder and, as he got older, a day pupil. He was a popular boy, and a pale, plump, oddly-dressed girl named Varys fancied him like mad. Not being a particularly confrontational sort, he decided that paying attention to Arya, the new girl whom he sort of almost already knew, was probably a good way to dismiss Varys’ crush without causing her undue harm.

Alas, this plan of Aegon’s failed miserably. Faced with her dry wit, her complete lack of interest in shallow, girlish things, and her early devotion to her craft, he found himself _liking_ the new girl. Although he was far too polished to ever give any sign of it, he felt the telltale fluttering of heart and stomach when he ran into Arya Stark. However, Varys, instead of retiring demurely and setting her sights on another blue-haired boy (there were several copycats in the ranks), amassed her vitriol and flung it fairly regularly at Arya, first subtly, then with increasing rancour. For three weeks, almost to
half-term, Arya suffered the abuse of Varys and her mates.

Arya had put Aegon out of his misery rather quickly, informing him bluntly that she would never ever EVER be interested him in that way. Aegon took it well, and they settled into a close, symbiotic relationship, for she was absolute pants at the life sciences, and he was insupportably lazy at writing essays. Well, more specifically, he mostly refused to read the wonderful selections of 19th century literature thrust at him by his betters, which led to a sort of blankness of page when it came to regurgitating facts about these novels. Arya supplied him with synopses and occasional insights.

Varys, and the gang of little mice with whom she ran, watched Arya Stark, who both did not fit in and made no effort to do so. They watched her intently: her arrival at school, what she ate, how and with whom she studied.

And they watched her leave.

First, with Jon.

By the next morning, Varys had abandoned subtlety. ‘That slag left last night with a bloke. An older bloke. Must be in uni.’

‘Curly brown hair?’ Aegon asked, sans concern.

‘Yeh.’

‘Her brother.’

‘Oh.’

Soon after that, Arya walked off the grounds of Hoxton with Aegon and one Gendry Waters, and the rumour mill, not to mention the insults, began again.

The next morning, Aegon, who was at this point fairly wishing he’d never met Arya Stark, sighed after yet another round of Varys’ comments, ‘His name is Gendry. He is just a friend. You should be nice to him, because he is fucking FIT.’

‘So, was it a threesome?’ she smirked, fingering the hem of her purple velvet dress, something she tended to do when nervous. (While Miss Mordane could not stand Arya’s ‘tomboy casual’ approach to dress, she tended to overlook ostentation, possibly because she herself enjoyed the feeling of fine fabrics draped over her bony frame.)

He shrugged and walked away.

The next one he couldn’t explain. Arya Stark, shortly before half-term, had left on a motorcycle with a man in a red leather jacket.

‘I’ve no idea,’ he said, tiredly. ‘Ask her yourself.’

They didn’t, of course. They just whispered as she walked down the halls and called her a fucking slag. (Rather lacking innovation).

Aegon warned her later that they’d seen someone with her.

‘Oh,’ she said, brightening. ‘The new guy!’ (Aegon's unruly heart beat faster.)

While Aegon was worried about how Arya was coping, the truth of it was that she wasn’t at school all that often, and Varys’ silk-and-velvet girls weren’t that bothersome to her. Additionally, she had
one class that she enjoyed enough to make almost anything worthwhile.

And frankly, she and Rorge and the new guy had fucking work to do that didn’t include dealing with the organisms with unicellular amoebae for brains that passed themselves off as her female housemates. Thank god for Aegon, she mused. He was good to her. For instance, she actually knew what amoebae were, thanks to him.

For the past months, she and Rorge and the new guy had been working on Daenerys Targaryen’s London project. They’d drawn a bit of a blank. Aegon’s aunt, Dany, was some sort of filmmaker needing stills for a new film. She’d given them far too much time to find the right photographs, but not enough direction, so they had time to overthink, overprepare, and generally fuck it all up.

Every day, it seemed, Rorge would say, or write, or text, ‘What the fuck is the “Essential London”? ’ And Arya had no answers. She had taken pictures of the entire city. Empty pictures. Pretty photographs that would have been fine for the tourism council, but not so much for a film. But Daenerys was brilliant, Arya reflected. She was down to earth, fair, gobsmackingly gorgeous. So they kept trying.

And it was fun working with the new guy, even if they didn’t get that far with the whole project. First of all, he had a motorcycle. Second, he let Arya ride with him, though Jaqen disapproved mightily. Third, he was hilarious. The first day she’d met him, at a Thursday staff meeting to which she had been mortifyingly late, he’d turned a stern face to her, which caused her eyes to widen, and then he winked quickly.

They’d all seen his work on Tibet. They’d seen him, passionate about social justice, in TED talks, in print (his book on the Children of the Urals was near the top of the Guardian’s best of 2011 list). They’d seen his documentaries. In many ways, he was the perfect foil to Jaqen H’ghar himself. Just as talented, he took a fine art approach to everything, whereas Jaqen preferred the grittiness of photojournalism. Where Jaqen embedded himself to get stories, Oberyn lived alongside people to help preserve entire cultures.

She didn’t have a crush on him whatsoever (both his age and his rather complicated, free-wheeling, and slightly grotty personal life ruined the whole effect). She was, however, conscious of the deep honour of being his friend. She rode behind Oberyn Martell, her face mostly pressed into his red leather jacket, as he drove far too fucking fast to Croydon, of all places.

‘Cunt,’ she said grumpily, throwing the spare helmet at him.

‘Did you snot all over my jacket again?’ he asked her, craning his neck as if to look at his own back.

‘Yeah, I did a bit,’ Arya confessed sheepishly. They laughed and laughed.

Yet, in one respect, Hoxton did not disappoint Arya, for the school did offer a course in photography. Their accelerated programme meant that Arya would achieve her A-level in one term.

And she was utterly smitten with her teacher.

(Varys had tried to start a rumour about that, as well.)

Not many students pursued photography. The other fine arts, especially those related to acting and stagecraft, were far more popular, and the darkroom’s rigour and stench tended to put people off. For Arya, it was both a respite and a chance to do highly experimental things: for one assignment, she’d bodged together her own snoots, gobos, and grids, and had published an article in The Strobist as a result. She’d discovered the magic of double exposures. She’d tried high-speed
photography, tilt-shifting, macro photography, and even come to a grudging respect for HDR. At JHWire, everything done on spec had to be commercial and saleable. Here, she could do precisely whatever she wanted without any element of risk. It was pure creativity.

And her teacher was, well...he was the best. He was gruff and kind and recognised in Arya an uncanny talent. And he smelt wonderful.

Arya was grateful to be able to do photography both in school and outside of it, grateful to have such a teacher to guide her. While Jaqen and the others were good instructors, this man seemed to refine things that Jaqen had taught her. He’d told her to work on her balance, seeing that several photographs were not quite straight. She’d endured some odd looks as she was stood in the stairwell, balancing on the top step, ankles dropped. She’d had to chase cats, since he’d told her to work on her action shots. Like the best teachers, he inspired her to do better, something that Mr Polliver, whom she loathed, could not bring out in her continuing indifferent approach to biology.

Jaqen had picked her up early one day. He’d actually wandered onto the grounds of Hoxton since Arya was late, a bit pissed at having to find her.

‘We’re late,’ he texted. ‘Where are you?’

‘2nd blding from entrance. Changing out of my school uniform,’ she replied, sad to have missed the opportunity to see him blanch.

He found her shortly after, and hugged her: his way of apologising for being brusque. Putting her arms around him was her undoing in more ways than one, for naturally she was seen by one of Varys’ network of spies. But it had been so long since he'd touched her, and he was so wanted.

The sharp sound of a stick on quarry tile interrupted them, and Jaqen released Arya rather abruptly. ‘Oh cock,’ he said under his breath, seeing to whom the stick belonged, and Arya smiled at the idiom.

‘This...not today, I think,’ said Arya's teacher, looking sternly at the man who had had his arms about Arya Stark, of whom he had grown rather fond.

Later that night, Aegon Targaryen received a call from Roslin, a friend of Varys’ -- one of the less vapid Harrenhal models.

‘There’s another bloke that your slag is on to,’ she said. *Christ, I thought she was one of the nicer ones*, Aegon thought.

‘Oh?’ Aegon replied, as he proofread an essay he’d written (rather hastily) on Jane Eyre and the transcendent power of love. *Crap*, he thought. *Utter fucking rubbish.*

‘Weird hair. Red, and I guess he’s rilly fucking old, coz he was fit but it had like grey streaks in it.’ Roslin was not the sharpest knife in the drawer.

‘Her boss.’

‘He hugged her. Practically snogged her face right off.’

‘He’s an inappropriate toucher. Pinched my bottom, once. He hugs everyone. Maybe you, if you’re good.'
'Ew,' was Roslin's succinct response.

'You know, you shouldn't be nasty to Arya...' Aegon began.

'Whyever not? Why be nice to that slag?' Aegon rolled his eyes.

'She has four brothers, you realise,' Aegon continued.

'Oh, and what're they going to do, happy-slap uz?'

'No, no,' Aegon soothed. 'You see...they are completely gorgeous.'

Roslin paused. 'What? Really?'

'Yup,' Aegon continued. 'All of them.' He felt a trifle guilty, since he knew at least two of Arya's brothers were infants, practically. Roslin didn't need to know this.

A few hours later, when Aegon had given up on Jane Eyre, the daft cow, and had resolved to go and annoy his aunt instead, a text from Arya distracted him from this lofty goal.

'Why the *fuck* did Roslin, Varys, and co. just friend me on FB?'

'Erm...I told Roslin your bruv's were hot?'

'Oh Christ..Rickon is *eight*. I don't have to set Jon or Robb up with one of them, do I?''

'Hm. That might be an idea...'

'hmm...let me see if they're interested in schoolgirls...yeah, mebbe fuck right off?'

Aegon chuckled, shaking his head at his traitorous heart.

A/N: Last time, I treated you to a bit of a whinge. You know what? I think I just needed my bottom kicked. Many people wrote me and suggested things, most of which were in my non-plan already. I gave it a bit of a think and concluded that, instead of panicking about what I was doing, perhaps it would be a better approach to simply write it out and then shape it into something story-like. So, here you go, and thanks very much for supporting this, and me.
The Invited Guest

The shuffle-clack of the train was too much for Arya, and as the train rolled along on its ribbon of track, ever northward, her eyes drifted shut. She was unnoticed by the others, except perhaps Ghost, who softly whuffled with his muzzle in her palm. Arya's thoughts began to stray into that realm somewhere between sleep and waking. She still burned with the humiliation of being caught hugging Jaqen at school the week prior. It was the disappointment on Mr Forel's face that she kept recalling.

She'd gone to Hoxton, pleasantly surprised to find the mystery guest at the JHWire gala, who, with the merest touch on her camera, had effortlessly changed the composition of her photograph from good to brilliant. And she'd been more than chuffed to find that this mystery man, who taught photography at Hoxton, was none other than Syrio Forel, Italy's greatest living photographer.

Of course, had she even thought of glancing at the school prospectus, which both Jon and Jaqen had attempted to show her, she would have solved her mystery rather quickly instead of dragging it out until the start of term.

Syrio Forel, who had shown such patience with her, who had fired her creativity, and who had sparked her inspiration, had been disappointed in her. (Actually, he was simply furious, but he disguised his wrath rather well).

'In,' he had said.

'Sit,' he had pointed sharply with his walking stick to two of the chairs in the classroom. Arya and Jaqen sat, like errant children. Well, she had ruminated, she was an errant child.

'Well,' Syrio had begun, with a sigh.

What followed was an increasingly animated and angry diatribe, in quick, clipped Italian.

Arya caught very little of it, though she did hear Syrio Forel say, "No, no, no, no, NO!" That she understood well enough.

'Non ti ho detto? Who is in whose debt? 'Non per fare questa cosa…' Wait, 'cosa' is 'thing.'

'Il nome di Dio…', cosa stavi pensando? God's name? What?

Syrio had fallen silent, and Arya glanced at Jaqen, who appeared as downcast as ever she had seen him.

'Si, professore,' he said. She had never seen Jaqen, always confident, so meek.

'Il mio maestro, mi dispiace…' Maestro? Was Mr Forel an orchestra conductor?

'Tu? ti dispiace? mi dispiace…Jaqen…' Syrio covered his forehead with his hand.

'È una ragazza. Sei un uomo. Capisci?'

'Si, si, professore,' Jaqen replied. 'Ma-

No, Jaqen, Syrio had abruptly switched to English. 'This cannot be.' It was said with a deep kindness that made Arya feel more sorry than she would have had he yelled at them.
Jaqen looked at his watch and swore. 'We have to go, Syrio,' he said. 'We're going to be late for an assignment.'

'Go, then,' Syrio said, displeasure showing on his face.

Jaqen and Arya had barely spoken for a week. He had avoided her rather obviously, which was just as well, since she had been so thrown by the encounter with Mr Forel that she simply did not know how to process it.

She had attempted to broach the subject with Jaqen shortly before half-term began.

'I didn't know Mr Forel was so protective of me,' she had said. 'I mean, I barely know him.'

He smiled at her, a genuine and sad smile. 'Lovely girl, he is protecting me.' He had reached for her, as if to touch her, but pulled back, and left his office. The ginger cat stretched in its sleep, and Arya had been left speechless.

In light of the stern, paternal opposition of Syrio Forel as respected his two pupils, for Jaqen would ever be both student and found child to him, both Jaqen and Arya tried to, if not surrender those feelings that lead to Syrio's anger, suppress them.

And yet, fate conspires naturally against each of us in our turn, providing us with rich and ample opportunities to make poor decisions, to defy our betters, to seek out and adhere to forbidden things. After all, why would resisting temptation be a saintly act if the temptation itself were not so powerful a lure?

The train jolted Arya into wakefulness, and as her eyes opened, she saw that her Converse-clad foot was nestled between Jaqen's boots. He had his laptop on the table and was intent on something. She studied his face for a second, quickly looking outside the window when he felt her eyes on him and looked up. Peripherally, she could see his smile, and winced inwardly at her own cowardice in not returning it.

It was all Jon's fault. He had invited Jaqen up to Winterfell, not knowing any of the drama that played itself out behind the scenes. And Jaqen was complicit, since he had agreed willingly and even enthusiastically. After the encounter with Mr Forel, Arya thought Jaqen was likely to resume his peripatetic life, but he seemed rooted to JHWire.

But Jon had accurately surmised that Arya wanted to go home for half-term, and he had arranged everything with Catelyn. Sansa was reluctant, but she acquiesced as well, and since the LSE had no half-term break, had received permission from her tutors to miss a week. She was sat next to Arya, with her nose in an economics textbook. Jon, brow furrowed, was typing savagely onto his laptop. *Staff troubles*, Arya surmised.

Arya wiggled her foot slightly, still looking out the window, and Jaqen answered in kind. It escalated, and after he had imprisoned her foot with both of his, she turned to him and favoured him with a wide smile.

'I love York,' she said, for the train began to slow. 'Have you been?' she asked, while trying to disengage her foot.

'Once, many years ago,' he said, craftily holding on. 'For a job, so I didn't see much. What might a man see there?'
'York Minster is spectacularly beautiful. *Fuck!* she swore, having succeeded in winning her foot back, at the cost of her shoe.

Jon glanced up. She smiled. 'It's fucking beautiful,' she explained.

'Yeah, 'tis,' Jon confirmed, nodding to Jaqen beside him.

Jaqen released Arya's foot and she scrambled back into her shoe.

Another hour passed, and they arrived in Newcastle.

'Almost there,' Jon said, smiling. 'We'll gan take a day an' walk along the wall, nee?'

Arya nodded enthusiastically, laughing at his use of dialect and Jaqen's resulting puzzlement.

'Hadrian's wall,' she explained to Jaqen. 'It's not too far from Winterfell. Jon likes to patrol it,' she grinned.

'Jon's the earl, after all,' Sansa said, a trifle glumly.

'Haddaway, lass. Da was the earl, Sansa,' Jon chided her gently, shaking his head. 'I'm just Jon.'

'Why has Jon become a totally different person?' Jaqen asked, changing the subject.

'How's that?' Sansa asked, too innocently.

'His accent. I've no idea what he is saying,' Jaqen replied, obviously fascinated.

'Aye, the gadgie's proper worky ticket,' Sansa replied, laughing. Jaqen just shook his head.

They left the train, and soon a large, muddy Land Rover pulled up.

'Jory!' Arya squealed. He hugged both girls, lifting them off their feet.

'Jaqen, this is Jory Cassel. The Cassels farm with us at Winterfell. Jory, this is Jaqen H'ghar.'

'Wow,' Jory exclaimed. 'So you're the gadgie Arya is training under?' Arya winced, for both his exaggerated manner of speaking and his turn of phrase.

'Pleased to meet you,' Jaqen replied, shaking Jory's hand.

City gave way to farms, and farms gave way to forest, with the fell rising gently in the distance, as Jory drove on to Winterfell.

They broke out of the forest and wound their way through more farmland - "All part of Winterfell," Jory explained to Jaqen, who was sat in front.

Jory turned, heading through a narrow, tall gate, with a stone-built cottage set to one side. 'The lodge,' he said. The gravel crunched under the tyres of the Rover as they headed up the long, flat drive to Winterfell.

The house was built of some ancient stone, and gave an impression of having borne witness to much history.

'How old is this place?' asked Jaqen.
'The first part was built in 900 or so,' said Jory. 'And one of the towers is sort of rubble, but that one dates to around 1100. The tower that Arya lives in is later. 1200s, I think.'

'The rest of the house is newer,' Jon took up the narrative. '1600s. But all mod cons,' he added reassuringly.

'I wasn't worried,' Jaqen laughed.

They clambered out of the Rover and began walking up the front path, laid to flagstones. The massive wood door opened and Catelyn Stark stood in the entranceway, smiling and hugging her daughters.

'Welcome,' she smiled. 'Jaqen, we are honoured to have you here.' He thanked her, noting immediately a faint Irishness in her voice and the resemblance Sansa bore to her. But while Sansa was in the first flush of her beauty, Catelyn Stark was hollowed-out, ethereal: sorrow revealing itself in the shadows lining her eyes, the over-taut muscles of her neck, the fine lines framing her mouth.

'Bruvvvvah!' came a happy yell, and Jon, overpowered by Robb's sneak attack, sank to the stone floor.

'Boys!' Catelyn Stark cautioned. 'We have a guest!'

Jaqen H'ghar shook hands politely with Robb Stark, who rose off the floor with easy grace, and whose good looks and sheer wholesomeness were both very charming.

'Arya,' Catelyn began. 'Show Jaqen to his room. We'll have tea in about half an hour, but come to the kitchen earlier if you're hungry.'

'Where's Bran?' Arya asked.

'He's in with Osha right now,' Catelyn told her. 'But he'll be done his therapy and ready for tea when we are.'

Jon and Sansa ascended a massive staircase, and Arya, playing tour guide, led Jaqen to the tower.

'How big is this place?' Jaqen mock-complained, after Arya had led him into a corridor, flanked by beautiful old mullioned windows, after having gone through a large hall, a drawing room, and a library.

'I assure you, I'm not leading you astray,' she said. 'This really is the quickest route.'

A smaller staircase wound its way up, and she took it.

'I feel like a princess imprisoned in the tower,' he joked.

'Funny you should say that,' she said. 'My room hosted a king at one time...against his will, of course.'

'Is it haunted?' he asked.

'Not that I know of!' Arya replied, snorting.

She opened a door and walked into a large room, with a bank of windows at one end and a stone fireplace in the middle. 'Here you go,' she said. 'Shower room off that door. It should have everything you need.'
'Palatial,' he smiled. 'Fit for a king.'

She beckoned him out, pointing to the staircase, which continued up. 'That's mine, up there. Got a darkroom there, y'know,' she smiled at him.

'I look forward to seeing it,' he said, reaching out and touching her shoulder. Arya scampered, blushing, up the stairs, and he called after her. 'You'll have to show me how to get to the kitchen!'

Tea at Winterfell was always a largeish affair. The family, of course, were always there, but workers, tenants, and neighbours who felt like dropping in simply showed up. The solid, oaken refectory table, probably as ancient as the house, was ever so long, and there was always an extra chair somewhere.

Dogs and people alike filled the space as Arya and Jaqen walked in. Arya dropped to her knees, and a very large, wolf-like dog bounded up to her, licking her face.

'Nymeria!' she cried. 'Wolf-girl, I missed you.'

'Horseface!' Bran called out to her. Jaqen chuckled quietly behind her. Sigh. Her head high, despite the mortification she was feeling, she went over to her little brother's wheelchair and hugged him long and hard, which, of course, embarrassed him thoroughly in his turn.

Her father's chair was still left empty, a place set for him like Elijah, the prophet expected at the Passover feast. It was as though he would come through the French doors of the utility room at any moment, his boots tracking mud as they so often had done. The Starks had begun the process common to the grief-stricken: honouring the places favoured by the deceased, setting his things apart, and preparing to let go of him as the person he was in order to enshrine him in the pantheon of ancestor-gods who bridge the gap between the world of the living and that of the dead.

Catelyn steered Jaqen to a place by Jon. Arya heaved a great sigh and looked at the empty place at the table, feeling the dull thud of her heart.

Throughout the meal, Nymeria rested her great muzzle on Arya's lap, and watched the stranger carefully.

Since Jaqen was Jon's guest, it fell to Jon to entertain him. He performed this task so admirably that Arya barely saw Jaqen or Jon for three days, and then, when she ran into him, it was accidental.

She had risen earlier than the household, and slipped on a pair of wellies that she assumed belonged to her mother: hers were nowhere to be found, a sign, she concluded ruefully, that she had indeed left home. Her mother's boots were over-large, but worked well enough. She slung Needle over her shoulder, grabbed the tripod, and left via the kitchen door. Strangely, it was unlocked, and she resolved to remember to tell her mother.

Ghost and Nymeria had found their way to the kitchen as well, warming themselves on the flagstones by the hearth, and she let them out as they begged and whined. As if they've never been outside, she snorted.

It was cold outside, for it had cleared the day before. Frost crunched underneath her feet and her breath caught in her throat. The predawn light hung close to the horizon, the merest lightening of the night's black.

She walked up the hill for twenty minutes or so, the dogs tearing off then returning to her, happy to
be out so early. That sliver betwixt sky and earth began to become discernibly blue, then peach as the rest of the firmament took on more colour.

A man's shadow at the top of the hill pricked Nymeria's interest, and she stood by Arya, watchful, while Ghost trotted up to him.

Jaqen, thought Arya. That's why the door was unlatched.

'S ok, girl,' she said to the beast beside her, but Nymeria was not mollified.

'Have you come to greet the sun, lovely girl?' Jaqen asked, looking through the viewfinder of a camera she'd not seen him use before. Medium format, she thought. And old.

'A twin-lens reflex?' She asked. 'I've not seen that.'

'Maintaining the mystery,' he replied, grinning.

She quickly set up. It wouldn't do to moon over a man and miss the sunrise, though she snuck glances at him.

They shot the sunrise in a companionable silence, broken only by his exclamation.

'The sky in this Winterfell is very beautiful,' he said. She smiled and agreed.

'The welkin,' she said.

'What? I don't know this word,' he said.

'It's an old word. Never used anymore, except by a few people around here. The welkin. It means sky.'

The sun, weak as it was, soon rose too high, and they packed up their equipment, intending to head back down the hill.

Arya's ill-fitting boot slipped off, making a rather grand arc away from her, and she managed to fall right on her bottom as she walked down the slope, her teeth chattering together as her head hit the ground.

'Oww!' she cried, rubbing the base of her skull.

Jaqen was there beside her in an instant.

'Lovely girl,' he breathed. 'Are you all right? How hard did you hit your head?'

She began to laugh. 'I'm fine. I'm fine, really. Just my luck for wearing someone else's boots is all,' she explained.

(He couldn't resist, and leaned his face down to hers. He meant nothing by it. Just a simple guerdon for one who'd suffered, or so he told himself.)

His lips touched hers, and she was very aware of his nearness, of how he smelled. His hand cradled her neck, rubbing gently, gently, and she dimly realised that she should close her eyes, for that's how it was done, wasn't it?

...and she felt his tongue, softly softly on her bottom lip and knew that she had to open her mouth for him and once she did and his tongue was in her mouth she felt that burning flutterache balled up in
her belly whilst her face became stubblegrazed and she pulled, pulled a very little bit at his lip with her teeth because that felt like the right thing right then and he made a low noise that just made it all more urgent...

(In truth, she surprised him with the ferocity of her response.)

He pulled away from her, carefully, as if he didn’t trust either of them at that moment.

(He didn’t).

'So that's kissing,' she mused. She blushed, suddenly shy. Why did I say that out loud?

'Your first kiss,' he said. Arya thought she detected a note of something notgood, something like resignation in his tone.

'Was it bad?' she asked, worry creeping into her face, her grey eyes widening.

(He was appalled at how young she looked).

'Come here, lovely girl,' he said, pulling her up to her feet.

'It was not at all bad, as I think you know.' His left hand still caressed the back of her neck, while his right slid down her side until it reached her hip. 'A man clearly finds a girl to be lovely.' He pulled her towards him, and this time her eyes closed naturally as he kissed her again, more insistently this time, and she put her arms around him and kissed him back, open to him.

And it was her turn to groan when she, pressed against him as she was, figured out why he thought she knew.

'But,' he pulled away from her, 'we must not.'

He picked up his camera bag and slung it over his shoulder, grinning at her as if this, her first kiss and all those rushing feelings, had not even happened.

Arya let that sink in for a moment, and then she was off like a shot, borrowed boots and all.

A/N: I'm pants at Italian. I apologise to any native speakers.
Advance and retreat

Sufferers of Capgras Syndrome report that suddenly, their entire world has shifted, having been replaced by a nearly identical, yet subtly different one. Exact duplicates have substituted for the sufferer’s family, placed there by an unknown, unseen force. Even the dog has been swapped for another. Over time, the sufferer notes the personality differences in these impostors, comparing their behaviour to that of his missing loved ones. In most cases, the sufferer learns to live with the replacements, since no-one will listen or believes his story.

Less powerful, and thankfully far less dangerously delusional, is the recognition, usually occurring in late adolescence, that one is out of phase with one’s home and family. It is as if, somehow, the world has shifted on its axis and something irrevocable has happened.

In a certain class of young women, who have been taught that Such Things Matter, this typically happens when they lose their virginity: as if the breaking of the hymen, itself a physiological and evolutionary accident, carries with it such particular meaning so as to catapult the body to which it belongs into some different space of being.

In Arya’s case, this hadn’t happened, nor was it likely to be An Event, given that her family was most nonchalant about these things. But by the time she had reached the door which she had exited scant hours before, pausing to allow her breath to catch her up, she too was out of phase with her life. As she opened the door, facing the blast of heat from both the cooker and the bodies now moving within the room, everything seemed somewhat different, displaced from the reality she had left a scant two hours since. Feigning nonchalance, she went to the table, grabbing toast from the silver toast rack, a banana from the ugly brown bowl that had been in the house probably for a hundred years. Catelyn, with that special economy of movement known only to mothers, neatly landed two eggs, yolks like unblinking orange eyes, onto her youngest daughter’s plate. And by the time Jaqen walked through the same door, bringing the frost with him, Arya felt more normalised, felt as if she was a figure, painted like the others, into the kitchen canvas. It was as though she had always been there. Her early morning on the hill, her first kiss, and her subsequent run from the shift in her reality had been subsumed into the quotidian routine of breakfast at Winterfell.

She spent the rest of the morning with her youngest siblings, thinking that time spent watching Bran’s struggle to do the most basic of physical tasks would cure her of the emotions that she knew she barely held at bay. And it worked, for a time. They played draughts for a while, with Rickon reading beside her. However, all too soon, Osha called for Bran to do his daily physical therapy, and Arya saw the mute appeal in his eyes. Don’t see me like this. So she, gracefully for her, withdrew to her part of the house, taking her thoughts with her.

It was as if her mother was clairvoyant, or perhaps just supernaturally perceptive. Arya wasn’t to know that Catelyn, who found her widow’s bed unrelentingly empty, often rose earlier than the dawn since her husband had died, finding solace with domestic tasks that she had never enjoyed before, let alone given any thought to doing. Catelyn had watched two tiny figures high on the hill, embracing once, then again, unnoticed by the rest of the family who gradually filtered into the kitchen. And she saw one of those figures running, and didn’t need to guess who it was.

So Arya, when she withdrew to her room, found a smallish blue box on her bedside table. She blushed profusely on discovering its contents: a leaflet on contraceptive options, lubricant, a box of condoms, and a puzzling pink object. Turning it over in her hands, she clicked the button and it began to buzz. She dropped it hastily, yelping as if she had been stung, only to have the entire box
begin to vibrate. She quickly dug through everything and clicked the button off again.

_My mother. Oh God._ Arya wasn’t given to pleading to any deity or other, but she lay back on her bed feeling the livid flush of mortification on her cheeks, praying, in a not particularly original way, that the earth would simply open up and swallow her. Two years ago, Sansa had experienced something rather similar: in fact, Arya had discovered The Box with her, though Sansa had quickly shut the lid before Arya saw more than simply a box of condoms. Arya had teased her sister mercilessly about Joffrey before Sansa tossed her out of the room and locked the door behind her. Arya now closed her eyes, vowing to apologise to Sansa. Hug her even. Faintly, she could hear her own braying and triumphant laugh coming to her from time’s great void as she had sung, if you could call it that, ‘Joffrey, Joffrey, sex with Joffrey!’ over and over outside her sister’s room. She winced anew. It must have been awful for Sansa, for it seemed that she had led something of a double life for months, if not years.

‘Why did Mum do this?’ Arya wondered, vaguely, before her mind, shocked with the embarrassment of this peculiar Stark family rite of passage into adulthood, wandered further and further, and she sunk into that greatest of spontaneous occurrences, the unplanned afternoon nap. She woke, hungry and cold, and quickly scrambled to close the blue box and put it in with the junk in the drawer of her bedside table before anyone should find it. Her embarrassment mingled with defiance. Her own mother had, it seemed, given her tacit consent for Arya to pursue something with Jaqen. Why then would Jaqen not do so? She smoothed her hair in the mirror behind her door, looking at herself appraisingly. Perhaps it’s because you’re a child, Arya thought. Grow up.

The regret he’d shown her that morning. What did that mean? As she descended the stairs to join everyone for tea, this thought of hers echoed as loudly as if it had been spoken aloud.

She slipped into her chair, ruffling Rickon’s hair beside her, and was too late to avoid Jaqen’s gaze on her. Grey eyes met blue ones that bore a look of deep concern. She smiled at him, though she did not feel like smiling. She looked up to find her mother wearing a similar expression; so, were they colluding somehow?

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The soft knock on the inner door of her darkroom startled her from her thoughts, which were occupied with Jaqen. She dropped the tongs she was using to move the print she’d just developed. No matter. The phosphorescent paint of the switch beckoned to her, and she flipped on the safelight, flooding the room with red. She didn’t often use it, having grown accustomed to working in the utter blackness of the little room. She opened the inner door, hearing its customary pop, for the weather-stripping she and her father had installed made a solid seal between the darkroom and the light that always threatened.

Jaqen, of course.

‘May I come in?’ he asked. Arya felt the absence of his customary term of endearment. She nodded, flushing at his nearness.

He looked around, and smiled at her. ‘This is a very good darkroom,’ he said. She shrugged, feeling very awkward. He was undeterred, and went to the water-bath in which she had placed the print she had made.

‘Black and white sunrise’, he mused. She snorted. ‘And yet, it works. More or less.’ He grinned. Arya snorted again.
She took the print out and hung it up to dry on the line that criss-crossed above them. A large, fat droplet of water fell on her nose, and Jaqen brushed it off, catching her and holding her close, feeling her heart through her ribs, tremulous and fast.

‘We can’t do anything about bad timing, lovely girl,’ he said, wrapping his arms tightly around her. ‘All we can do is make the best of it,’ he continued.

‘I don’t want to make the best of it,’ Arya replied sullenly. ‘And what does that even mean? “Bad timing?”’

‘Try to understand,’ he began. ‘Please. You are just beginning. What kind of person would stand in the way of that? Don’t let yourself be tied to anyone, not just yet.’

‘That’s not the whole of it,’ Arya replied. ‘What about Mr Forel? It seems as though you obey him, or something.’

‘I do,’ he smiled at her.

‘Did he save your life or something?’

His smile vanished. ‘In a manner of speaking, yes, he did. Though this is a story for another day.’ He opened the door and took her hand, leading her out and into her bedroom. Arya sat down on her bed. Nymeria sprawled, asleep, on Arya’s small sofa. Jaqen took a seat beside her, as if he had meant to do so all along. He kept her hand in his.

A mutinous heart pounded.

‘Nevertheless,’ Jaqen continued. ‘He has chastised me severely and he was right to do so.’ He swallowed. His thumb drew small circles on the back of her hand.

‘This isn't fair,' Arya complained.

‘To you, I apologise,’ he said, contritely. ‘It’s not fair. But you and I are in very different places right now. Six months ago, we were going to get married, Melisandre and I, or at least I thought we were.’ He smiled ruefully.

Arya heard the emotion in his voice, but instead of engendering sympathy, his words invoked that great disquietier, Phthonos, whose whispers fuel all insecurities and jealousies; he who is anathema to the human heart. She looked down, numb to his warm hand in her own.

‘Is this you letting me down gently?’ she asked. 'because this is shit.'

‘I don't think so, lovely girl,’ he replied, grasping her hand more firmly as she tried to wriggle away. ‘Letting you down, as you say, would imply that your feelings were one-sided.’

He had, however obliquely, acknowledged his own regard for her. She felt the telltale blush suffuse her cheeks for what seemed like the seventh time in the day.

‘But making the news, for instance with a scandal with my seventeen year-old intern, is perhaps not the best idea. This is what Syrio is concerned about. My career, and probably yours.’

He kissed the top of her head. Nymeria stirred in her sleep.

‘Jaqen,’ Arya began, mollified a bit, yet she found herself upset. Is it all about him?

‘This would be nothing,’ he said, squeezing her hand to apologise for his interruption. ‘But for one
thing.'

'What?' Arya asked, her tone verging on rudeness.

'What were you thinking about in the darkroom?' he asked abruptly.

Arya paused. 'You,' she said boldly.

'And earlier, on the hill?'

'It's a fell, not a hill,' she responded.

'Winterfell.'

'Fine,' he said, impatiently. 'What were you thinking about on the fell?'

'You,' she responded, less certain.

'And on the train?' Arya was silent for a long time. 'You,' she sighed.

'How can we do what we do,' he began, 'if we can't focus? Our work takes us to dangerous places. Distraction could mean our deaths. But more importantly, being distracted from our art means we become mediocre. I will not be that, and I will not let you be that either,' he exclaimed.

Arya began to protest.

'Think about what you shot today,' he urged, interrupting the words on her lips. She had looked at the twelve negatives in the roll, carefully examining them through her loupe on the light-table. Only the black and white sunrise was passable. And it wasn’t brilliant.

'Eleven shots were complete rubbish,' she said. She felt nauseous.

'For me as well,' he replied gently, though Arya suspected he might be lying. He must be lying: how could he, a great photographer, be so distracted by her?

But it didn't matter. It was true for her. She didn’t have the focus. Not yet, anyway.

'I understand,' she said, feeling utterly defeated.

He brought his right hand to her cheek, and leaned in to kiss her gently and briefly: the kind of kiss a man gives to a maiden aunt. Still, she relished his closeness. He pulled away from her. Only a faint smell remained of him: a whiff of ginger and cloves lingering in the air, likely from her mum's maddeningly addictive ginger biscuits. *He is spot on, Arya thought. I have to stop focusing entirely on him. This will drive me barmy.*

‘I wonder...’ he began.

‘Wonder what?’ she asked.

‘I wonder which part of a man your dog prefers to savage first...Leg or arm?’ He grinned at her.

Arya looked at Nymeria, who had awakened and appeared unamused. Arya laughed, a bit shakily. ‘She won’t hurt you...much.’
A/N: I wish to apologise, sincerely, for my long and unscheduled absence; a number of reasons, including a re-occurring illness and a death in the family, kept me from this. I'll try to be more regular in updating from this point forward, though who can predict what life has in store.

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