

THE WORLDWIDE BESTSELLER

A CLASH OF
KINGS
GEORGE R.R. MARTIN



'Characters so venomous they could
eat the Borgias' *Guardian*

George Raymond Richard Martin

A Clash of Kings

Серия «A Song of Ice and Fire», книга 2

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=42327315

HarperCollinsPublishers; 2012

ISBN 9780007378388

Аннотация

HBO's hit series A GAME OF THRONES is based on George R. R. Martin's internationally bestselling series A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE, the greatest fantasy epic of the modern age. A CLASH OF KINGS is the second volume in the series.

Throughout Westeros, the cold winds are rising.

From the ancient citadel of Dragonstone to the forbidding lands of Winterfell, chaos reigns as pretenders to the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms stake their claims through tempest, turmoil and war.

As a prophecy of doom cuts across the sky – a comet the colour of blood and flame – five factions struggle for control of a divided land. Brother plots against brother and the dead rise to walk in the night.

Against a backdrop of incest, fratricide, alchemy and murder, the price of glory is measured in blood.

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George R.R. Martin
A CLASH OF KINGS
BOOK TWO OF
A Song of Ice and Fire



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An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpervoyagerbooks.com

Previously published in paperback by Voyager in 1999, 2003, 2008, 2011

First published in Great Britain by Voyager in 1998

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Source ISBN: 9780002256681

Ebook Edition © April 2012 ISBN: 9780007378388

Version: 2017-11-14

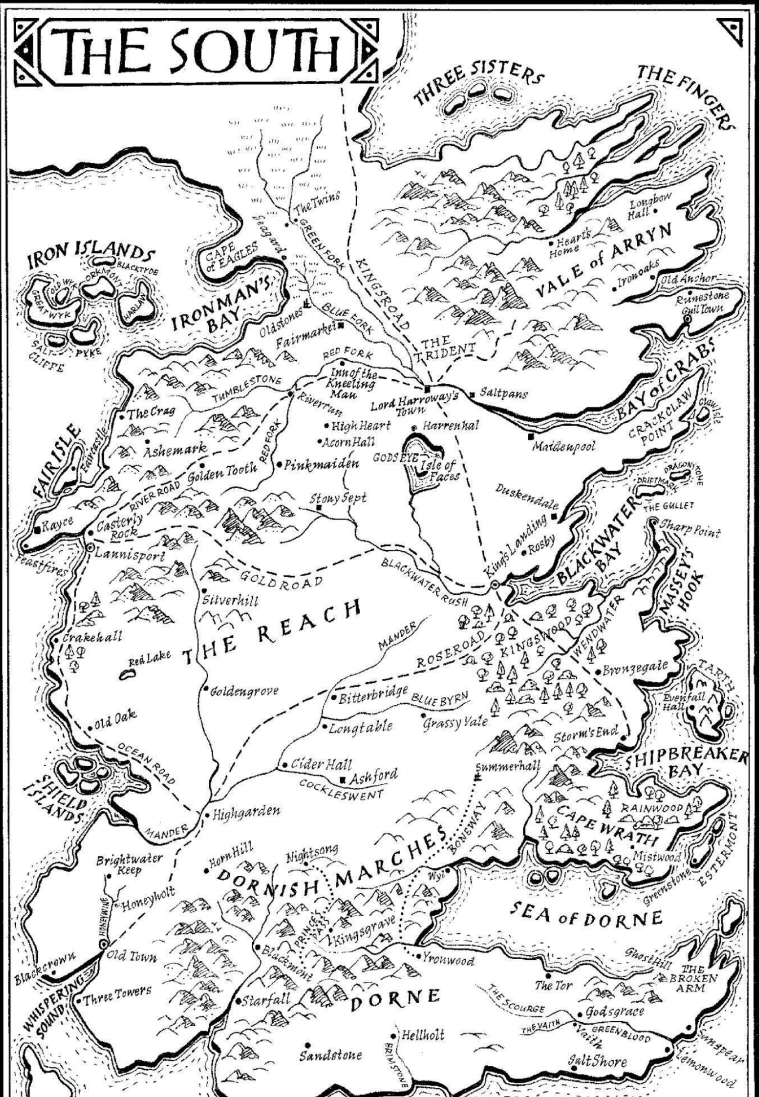
Dedication

*to John and Gail for all the meat and mead we've
shared*

Maps



THE SOUTH

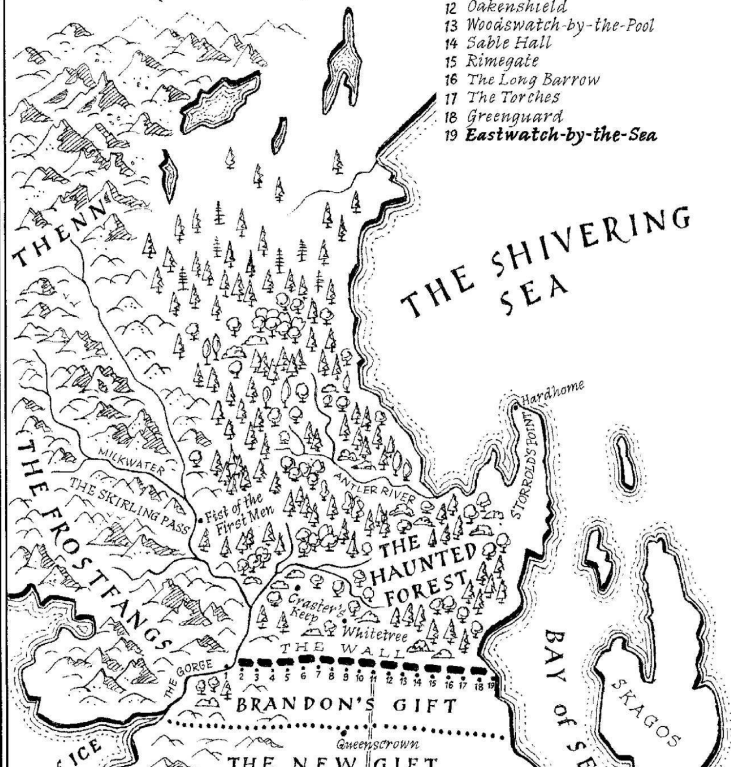


THE LAND BEYOND THE WALL

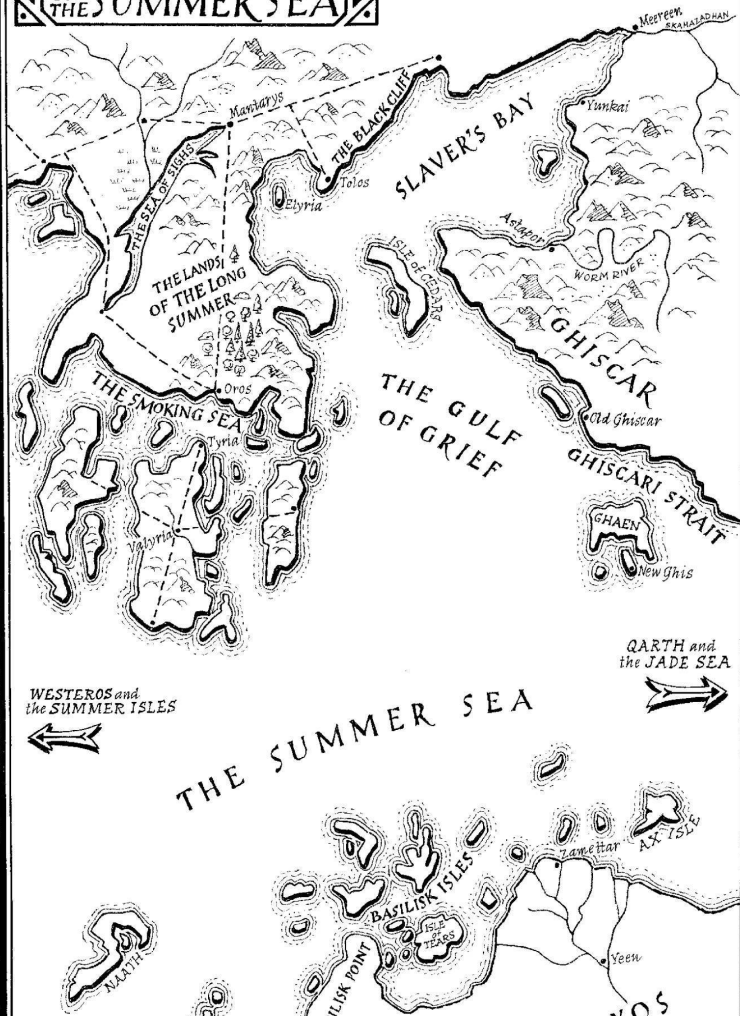
THE LAND OF
ALWAYS WINTER
(UNMAPPED)

STRONGHOLDS of the NORTH

- 1 *Westwatch-by-the-Bridge*
- 2 **The Shadow Tower**
- 3 *Sentinel Stand*
- 4 *Greyguard*
- 5 *Stonedoor*
- 6 *Hoarfrost Hill*
- 7 *Ice-mark*
- 8 *The Nightfort*
- 9 *Deep Lake*
- 10 *Queensgate*
- 11 **Castle Black**
- 12 *Oakenshield*
- 13 *Woodswatch-by-the-Pool*
- 14 *Sable Hall*
- 15 *Rimegate*
- 16 *The Long Barrow*
- 17 *The Torches*
- 18 *Greenguard*
- 19 *Eastwatch-by-the-Sea*



THE LANDS OF THE SUMMER SEA

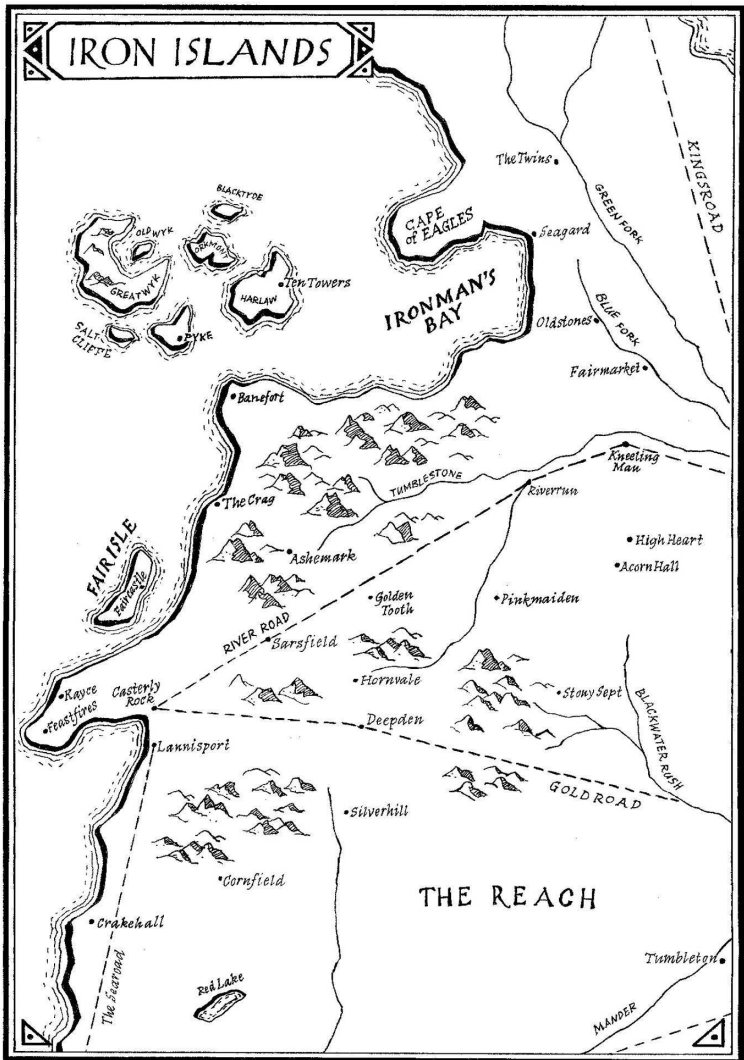


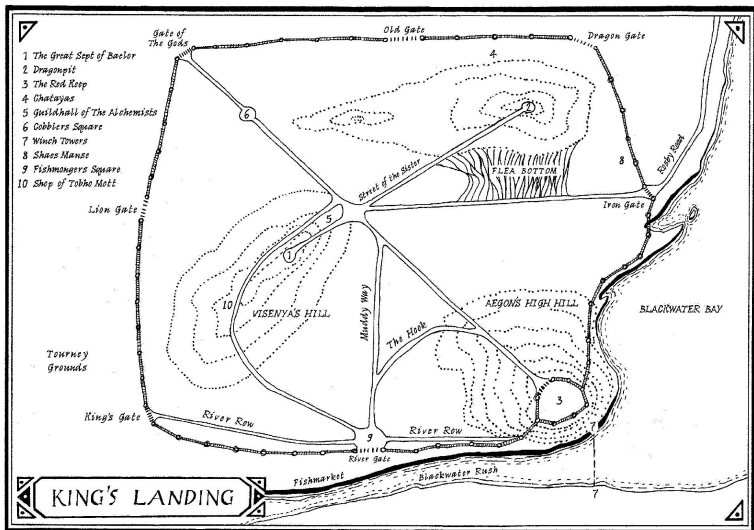
WESTEROS and
the SUMMER ISLES

QARTH and
the JADE SEA

THE SUMMER SEA

IRON ISLANDS





PROLOGUE

The comet's tail spread across the dawn, a red slash that bled above the crags of Dragonstone like a wound in the pink and purple sky.

The maester stood on the windswept balcony outside his chambers. It was here the ravens came, after long flight. Their droppings speckled the gargoyles that rose twelve feet tall on either side of him, a hellhound and a wyvern, two of the thousand that brooded over the walls of the ancient fortress. When first he came to Dragonstone, the army of stone grotesques had made him uneasy, but as the years passed he had grown used to them. Now he thought of them as old friends. The three of them watched the sky together with foreboding.

The maester did not believe in omens. And yet ... old as he was, Cressen had never seen a comet half so bright, nor yet that color, that terrible color, the color of blood and flame and sunsets. He wondered if his gargoyles had ever seen its like. They had been here so much longer than he had, and would still be here long after he was gone. If stone tongues could speak ...

Such folly. He leaned against the battlement, the sea crashing beneath him, the black stone rough beneath his fingers. *Talking gargoyles and prophecies in the sky. I am an old done man, grown giddy as a child again.* Had a lifetime's hard-won wisdom fled him along with his health and strength? He was a maester, trained

and chained in the great Citadel of Oldtown. What had he come to, when superstition filled his head as if he were an ignorant fieldhand?

And yet ... and yet ... the comet burned even by day now, while pale grey steam rose from the hot vents of Dragonmont behind the castle, and yestermorn a white raven had brought word from the Citadel itself, word long-expected but no less fearful for all that, word of summer's end. Omens, all. Too many to deny. *What does it all mean?* he wanted to cry.

“Maester Cressen, we have visitors.” Pylos spoke softly, as if loath to disturb Cressen's solemn meditations. Had he known what drivel filled the maester's head, he would have shouted. “The princess would see the white raven.” Ever correct, Pylos called her *princess* now, as her lord father was a king. King of a smoking rock in the great salt sea, yet a king nonetheless. “She would see the white raven. Her fool is with her.”

The old man turned away from the dawn, keeping a hand on his wyvern to steady himself. “Help me to my chair and show them in.”

Taking his arm, Pylos led him inside. In his youth, Cressen had walked briskly, but he was not far from his eightieth name day now, and his legs were frail and unsteady. Two years past, he had fallen and shattered a hip, and it had never mended properly. Last year when he took ill, the Citadel had sent Pylos out from Oldtown, mere days before Lord Stannis had closed the isle ... to help him in his labors, it was said, but Cressen knew the truth.

Pylos had come to replace him when he died. He did not mind. Someone must take his place, and sooner than he would like . . .

He let the younger man settle him behind his books and papers. “Go bring her. It is ill to keep a lady waiting.” He waved a hand, a feeble gesture of haste from a man no longer capable of hastening. His flesh was wrinkled and spotted, the skin so papery thin that he could see the web of veins and the shape of bones beneath. And how they trembled, these hands of his that had once been so sure and deft . . .

When Pylos returned the girl came with him, shy as ever. Behind her, shuffling and hopping in that queer sideways walk of his, came her fool. On his head was a mock helm fashioned from an old tin bucket, with a rack of deer antlers strapped to the crown and hung with cowbells. With his every lurching step, the bells rang, each with a different voice, *clang-a-dang bong-dong ring-a-ling clong clong clong*.

“Who comes to see us so early, Pylos?” Cressen said.

“It’s me and Patches, maester.” Guileless blue eyes blinked at him. Hers was not a pretty face, alas. The child had her lord father’s square jut of jaw and her mother’s unfortunate ears, along with a disfigurement all her own, the legacy of the bout of greyscale that had almost claimed her in the crib. Across half one cheek and well down her neck, her flesh was stiff and dead, the skin cracked and flaking, mottled black and grey and stony to the touch. “Pylos said we might see the white raven.”

“Indeed you may,” Cressen answered. As if he would ever

deny her. She had been denied too often in her time. Her name was Shireen. She would be ten on her next name day, and she was the saddest child that Maester Cressen had ever known. *Her sadness is my shame*, the old man thought, *another mark of my failure*. “Maester Pylos, do me a kindness and bring the bird down from the rookery for the Lady Shireen.”

“It would be my pleasure.” Pylos was a polite youth, no more than five-and-twenty, yet solemn as a man of sixty. If only he had more humor, more *life* in him; that was what was needed here. Grim places needed lightening, not solemnity, and Dragonstone was grim beyond a doubt, a lonely citadel in the wet waste surrounded by storm and salt, with the smoking shadow of the mountain at its back. A maester must go where he is sent, so Cressen had come here with his lord some twelve years past, and he had served, and served well. Yet he had never loved Dragonstone, nor ever felt truly at home here. Of late, when he woke from restless dreams in which the red woman figured disturbingly, he often did not know where he was.

The fool turned his patched and piebald head to watch Pylos climb the steep iron steps to the rookery. His bells rang with the motion. “Under the sea, the birds have scales for feathers,” he said, *clang-a-langing*. “I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.”

Even for a fool, Patchface was a sorry thing. Perhaps once he could evoke gales of laughter with a quip, but the sea had taken that power from him, along with half his wits and all his memory. He was soft and obese, subject to twitches and trembles,

incoherent as often as not. The girl was the only one who laughed at him now, the only one who cared if he lived or died.

An ugly little girl and a sad fool, and maester makes three ... now there is a tale to make men weep. “Sit with me, child.” Cressen beckoned her closer. “This is early to come calling, scarce past dawn. You should be snug in your bed.”

“I had bad dreams,” Shireen told him. “About the dragons. They were coming to eat me.”

The child had been plagued by nightmares as far back as Maester Cressen could recall. “We have talked of this before,” he said gently. “The dragons cannot come to life. They are carved of stone, child. In olden days, our island was the westernmost outpost of the great Freehold of Valyria. It was the Valyrians who raised this citadel, and they had ways of shaping stone since lost to us. A castle must have towers wherever two walls meet at an angle, for defense. The Valyrians fashioned these towers in the shape of dragons to make their fortress seem more fearsome, just as they crowned their walls with a thousand gargoyles instead of simple crenelations.” He took her small pink hand in his own frail spotted one and gave it a gentle squeeze. “So you see, there is nothing to fear.”

Shireen was unconvinced. “What about the thing in the sky? Dalla and Matrice were talking by the well, and Dalla said she heard the red woman tell mother that it was dragonsbreath. If the dragons are breathing, doesn’t that mean they are coming to life?”

The red woman, Maester Cressen thought sourly. *Ill enough that she's filled the head of the mother with her madness, must she poison the daughter's dreams as well?* He would have a stern word with Dalla, warn her not to spread such tales. "The thing in the sky is a comet, sweet child. A star with a tail, lost in the heavens. It will be gone soon enough, never to be seen again in our lifetimes. Watch and see."

Shireen gave a brave little nod. "Mother said the white raven means it's not summer any more."

"That is so, my lady. The white ravens fly only from the Citadel." Cressen's fingers went to the chain about his neck, each link forged from a different metal, each symbolizing his mastery of another branch of learning; the maester's collar, mark of his order. In the pride of his youth, he had worn it easily, but now it oft seemed heavy to him, the metal cold against his skin. "They are larger than other ravens, and more clever, bred to carry only the most important messages. This one came to tell us that the Conclave has met, considered the reports and measurements made by maesters all over the realm, and declared this great summer done at last. Ten years, two turns, and sixteen days it lasted, the longest summer in living memory."

"Will it get cold now?" Shireen was a summer child, and had never known true cold.

"In time," Cressen replied. "If the gods are good, they will grant us a warm autumn and bountiful harvests, so we might prepare for the winter to come." The smallfolk said that a long

summer meant an even longer winter, but the maester saw no reason to frighten the child with such tales.

Patchface rang his bells. "It is *always* summer under the sea," he intoned. "The merwives wear nennymoans in their hair and weave gowns of silver seaweed. I know, I know, oh, oh, oh."

Shireen giggled. "I should like a gown of silver seaweed."

"Under the sea, it snows up," said the fool, "and the rain is dry as bone. I know, I know, oh, oh, oh."

"Will it truly snow?" the child asked.

"It will," Cressen said. *But not for years yet, I pray, and then not for long.* "Ah, here is Pylos with the bird."

Shireen gave a cry of delight. Even Cressen had to admit the bird made an impressive sight, white as snow and larger than any hawk, with the bright black eyes that meant it was no mere albino, but a truebred white raven of the Citadel. "Here," he called. The raven spread its wings, leapt into the air, and flapped noisily across the room to land on the table beside him.

"I'll see to your breakfast now," Pylos announced. Cressen nodded. "This is the Lady Shireen," he told the raven. The bird bobbed its pale head up and down, as if it were bowing. "*Lady,*" it croaked. "*Lady.*"

The child's mouth gaped open. "It *talks!*"

"A few words. As I said, they are clever, these birds."

"Clever bird, clever man, clever clever fool," said Patchface, jangling. "Oh, clever clever clever fool." He began to sing. "*The shadows come to dance, my lord, dance my lord, dance my lord,*"

he sang, hopping from one foot to the other and back again. “*The shadows come to stay, my lord, stay my lord, stay my lord.*” He jerked his head with each word, the bells in his antlers sending up a clangor.

The white raven screamed and went flapping away to perch on the iron railing of the rookery stairs. Shireen seemed to grow smaller. “He sings that all the time. I told him to stop but he won’t. It makes me scared. Make him stop.”

And how do I do that? the old man wondered. *Once I might have silenced him forever, but now ...*

Patchface had come to them as a boy. Lord Steffon of cherished memory had found him in Volantis, across the narrow sea. The king—the old king, Aerys II Targaryen, who had not been quite so mad in those days—had sent his lordship to seek a bride for Prince Rhaegar, who had no sisters to wed. “We have found the most splendid fool,” he wrote Cressen, a fortnight before he was to return home from his fruitless mission. “Only a boy, yet nimble as a monkey and witty as a dozen courtiers. He juggles and riddles and does magic, and he can sing prettily in four tongues. We have bought his freedom and hope to bring him home with us. Robert will be delighted with him, and perhaps in time he will even teach Stannis how to laugh.”

It saddened Cressen to remember that letter. No one had ever taught Stannis how to laugh, least of all the boy Patchface. The storm came up suddenly, howling, and Shipbreaker Bay proved the truth of its name. The lord’s two-masted galley *Windproud*

broke up within sight of his castle. From its parapets his two eldest sons had watched as their father's ship was smashed against the rocks and swallowed by the waters. A hundred oarsmen and sailors went down with Lord Steffon Baratheon and his lady wife, and for days thereafter every tide left a fresh crop of swollen corpses on the strand below Storm's End.

The boy washed up on the third day. Maester Cressen had come down with the rest, to help put names to the dead. When they found the fool he was naked, his skin white and wrinkled and powdered with wet sand. Cressen had thought him another corpse, but when Jommy grabbed his ankles to drag him off to the burial wagon, the boy coughed water and sat up. To his dying day, Jommy had sworn that Patchface's flesh was clammy cold.

No one ever explained those two days the fool had been lost in the sea. The fisherfolk liked to say a mermaid had taught him to breathe water in return for his seed. Patchface himself had said nothing. The witty, clever lad that Lord Steffon had written of never reached Storm's End; the boy they found was someone else, broken in body and mind, hardly capable of speech, much less of wit. Yet his fool's face left no doubt of who he was. It was the fashion in the Free City of Volantis to tattoo the faces of slaves and servants; from neck to scalp the boy's skin had been patterned in squares of red and green motley.

"The wretch is mad, and in pain, and no use to anyone, least of all himself," declared old Ser Harbert, the castellan of Storm's End in those years. "The kindest thing you could do for that

one is fill his cup with the milk of the poppy. A painless sleep, and there's an end to it. He'd bless you if he had the wit for it." But Cressen had refused, and in the end he had won. Whether Patchface had gotten any joy of that victory he could not say, not even today, so many years later.

"The shadows come to dance, my lord, dance my lord, dance my lord," the fool sang on, swinging his head and making his bells clang and clatter. *Bong dong, ring-a-ling, bong dong.*

"Lord," the white raven shrieked. *"Lord, lord, lord."*

"A fool sings what he will," the maester told his anxious princess. "You must not take his words to heart. On the morrow he may remember another song, and this one will never be heard again." *He can sing prettily in four tongues,* Lord Steffon had written ...

Pylos strode through the door. "Maester, pardons."

"You have forgotten the porridge," Cressen said, amused. That was most unlike Pylos.

"Maester, Ser Davos returned last night. They were talking of it in the kitchen. I thought you would want to know at once."

"Davos ... last night, you say? Where is he?"

"With the king. They have been together most of the night."

There was a time when Lord Stannis would have woken him, no matter the hour, to have him there to give his counsel. "I should have been told," Cressen complained. "I should have been woken." He disentangled his fingers from Shireen's. "Pardons, my lady, but I must speak with your lord father. Pylos, give me

your arm. There are too many steps in this castle, and it seems to me they add a few every night, just to vex me.”

Shireen and Patchface followed them out, but the child soon grew restless with the old man’s creeping pace and dashed ahead, the fool lurching after her with his cowbells clanging madly.

Castles are not friendly places for the frail, Cressen was reminded as he descended the turnpike stair of Sea Dragon Tower. Lord Stannis would be found in the Chamber of the Painted Table, atop the Stone Drum, Dragonstone’s central keep, so named for the way its ancient walls boomed and rumbled during storms. To reach him they must cross the gallery, pass through the middle and inner walls with their guardian gargoyles and black iron gates, and ascend more steps than Cressen cared to contemplate. Young men climbed steps two at a time; for old men with bad hips, every one was a torment. But Lord Stannis would not think to come to him, so the maester resigned himself to the ordeal. He had Pylos to help him, at the least, and for that he was grateful.

Shuffling along the gallery, they passed before a row of tall arched windows with commanding views of the outer bailey, the curtain wall, and the fishing village beyond. In the yard, archers were firing at practice butts to the call of, “Notch, draw, loose.” Their arrows made a sound like a flock of birds taking wing. Guardsmen strode the wallwalks, peering between the gargoyles on the host camped without. The morning air was hazy with the smoke of cookfires, as three thousand men sat down to break

their fasts beneath the banners of their lords. Past the sprawl of the camp, the anchorage was crowded with ships. No craft that had come within sight of Dragonstone this past half year had been allowed to leave again. Lord Stannis's *Fury*, a triple-decked war galley of three hundred oars, looked almost small beside some of the big-bellied carracks and cogs that surrounded her.

The guardsmen outside the Stone Drum knew the maesters by sight, and passed them through. "Wait here," Cressen told Pylos, within. "It's best I see him alone."

"It is a long climb, maester."

Cressen smiled. "You think I have forgotten? I have climbed these steps so often I know each once by name."

Halfway up, he regretted his decision. He had stopped to catch his breath and ease the pain in his hip when he heard the scuff of boots on stone, and came face to face with Ser Davos Seaworth, descending.

Davos was a slight man, his low birth written plain upon a common face. A well-worn green cloak, stained by salt and spray and faded from the sun, draped his thin shoulders, over brown doublet and breeches that matched brown eyes and hair. About his neck a pouch of worn leather hung from a thong. His small beard was well peppered with grey, and he wore a leather glove on his maimed left hand. When he saw Cressen, he checked his descent.

"Ser Davos," the maester said. "When did you return?"

"In the black of morning. My favorite time." It was said

that no one had ever handled a ship by night half so well as Davos Shorthand. Before Lord Stannis had knighted him, he had been the most notorious and elusive smuggler in all the Seven Kingdoms.

“And?”

The man shook his head. “It is as you warned him. They will not rise, maester. Not for him. They do not love him.”

No, Cressen thought. Nor will they ever. He is strong, able, just ... aye, just past the point of wisdom ... yet it is not enough. It has never been enough. “You spoke to them all?”

“All? No. Only those that would see me. They do not love me either, these highborns. To them I’ll always be the onion knight.” His left hand closed, stubby fingers locking into a fist; Stannis had hacked the ends off at the last joint, all but the thumb. “I broke bread with Gulian Swann and old Penrose, and the Tarths consented to a midnight meeting in a grove. The others—well, Beric Dondarrion is gone missing, some say dead, and Lord Caron is with Renly. He is now Bryce the Orange, of the Rainbow Guard.”

“The Rainbow Guard?”

“Renly’s made his own Kingsguard,” the one-time smuggler explained, “but these seven don’t wear white. Each one has his own color. Loras Tyrell’s their Lord Commander.”

It was just the sort of notion that would appeal to Renly Baratheon; a splendid new order of knighthood, with gorgeous new raiment to proclaim it. Even as a boy, Renly had loved bright

colors and rich fabrics, and he had loved his games as well. “Look at me!” he would shout as he ran through the halls of Storm’s End laughing. “Look at me, I’m a dragon,” or “Look at me, I’m a wizard,” or “Look at me, look at me, I’m the rain god.”

The bold little boy with wild black hair and laughing eyes was a man grown now, one-and-twenty, and still he played his games. *Look at me, I’m a king*, Cressen thought sadly. *Oh, Renly, Renly, dear sweet child, do you know what you are doing? And would you care if you did? Is there anyone who cares for him but me?* “What reasons did the lords give for their refusals?” he asked Ser Davos.

“Well, as to that, some gave me soft words and some blunt, some made excuses, some promises, some only lied.” He shrugged. “In the end words are just wind.”

“You could bring him no hope?”

“Only the false sort, and I’d not do that,” Davos said. “He had the truth from me.”

Maester Cressen remembered the day Davos had been knighted, after the siege of Storm’s End. Lord Stannis and a small garrison had held the castle for close to a year, against the great host of the Lords Tyrell and Redwyne. Even the sea was closed against them, watched day and night by Redwyne galleys flying the burgundy banners of the Arbor. Within Storm’s End, the horses had long since been eaten, the dogs and cats were gone, and the garrison was down to roots and rats. Then came a night when the moon was new and black clouds hid the stars. Cloaked

in that darkness, Davos the smuggler had dared the Redwyne cordon and the rocks of Shipbreaker Bay alike. His little ship had a black hull, black sails, black oars, and a hold crammed with onions and salt fish. Little enough, yet it had kept the garrison alive long enough for Eddard Stark to reach Storm's End and break the siege.

Lord Stannis had rewarded Davos with choice lands on Cape Wrath, a small keep, and a knight's honors ... but he had also decreed that he lose a joint of each finger on his left hand, to pay for all his years of smuggling. Davos had submitted, on the condition that Stannis wield the knife himself; he would accept no punishment from lesser hands. The lord had used a butcher's cleaver, the better to cut clean and true. Afterwards, Davos had chosen the name Seaworth for his new-made house, and he took for his banner a black ship on a pale grey field—with an onion on its sails. The one-time smuggler was fond of saying that Lord Stannis had done him a boon, by giving him four less fingernails to clean and trim.

No, Cressen thought, a man like that would give no false hope, nor soften a hard truth. “Ser Davos, truth can be a bitter draught, even for a man like Lord Stannis. He thinks only of returning to King's Landing in the fullness of his power, to tear down his enemies and claim what is rightfully his. Yet now ...”

“If he takes this meagre host to King's Landing, it will be only to die. He does not have the numbers. I told him as much, but you know his pride.” Davos held up his gloved hand. “My fingers

will grow back before that man bends to sense.”

The old man sighed. “You have done all you could. Now I must add my voice to yours.” Wearily, he resumed his climb.

Lord Stannis Baratheon’s refuge was a great round room with walls of bare black stone and four tall narrow windows that looked out to the four points of the compass. In the center of the chamber was the great table from which it took its name, a massive slab of carved wood fashioned at the command of Aegon Targaryen in the days before the Conquest. The Painted Table was more than fifty feet long, perhaps half that wide at its widest point, but less than four feet across at its narrowest. Aegon’s carpenters had shaped it after the land of Westeros, sawing out each bay and peninsula until the table nowhere ran straight. On its surface, darkened by near three hundred years of varnish, were painted the Seven Kingdoms as they had been in Aegon’s day; rivers and mountains, castles and cities, lakes and forests.

There was a single chair in the room, carefully positioned in the precise place that Dragonstone occupied off the coast of Westeros, and raised up to give a good view of the tabletop. Seated in the chair was a man in a tight-laced leather jerkin and breeches of roughspun brown wool. When Maester Cressen entered, he glanced up. “I knew *you* would come, old man, whether I summoned you or no.” There was no hint of warmth in his voice; there seldom was.

Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone and by the grace of the gods rightful heir to the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms

of Westeros, was broad of shoulder and sinewy of limb, with a tightness to his face and flesh that spoke of leather cured in the sun until it was as tough as steel. *Hard* was the word men used when they spoke of Stannis, and hard he was. Though he was not yet five-and-thirty, only a fringe of thin black hair remained on his head, circling behind his ears like the shadow of a crown. His brother, the late King Robert, had grown a beard in his final years. Maester Cressen had never seen it, but they said it was a wild thing, thick and fierce. As if in answer, Stannis kept his own whiskers cropped tight and short. They lay like a blue-black shadow across his square jaw and the bony hollows of his cheeks. His eyes were open wounds beneath his heavy brows, a blue as dark as the sea by night. His mouth would have given despair to even the drollest of fools; it was a mouth made for frowns and scowls and sharply worded commands, all thin pale lips and clenched muscles, a mouth that had forgotten how to smile and had never known how to laugh. Sometimes when the world grew very still and silent of a night, Maester Cressen fancied he could hear Lord Stannis grinding his teeth half a castle away.

“Once you would have woken me,” the old man said.

“Once you were young. Now you are old and sick, and need your sleep.” Stannis had never learned to soften his speech, to dissemble or flatter; he said what he thought, and those that did not like it could be damned. “I knew you’d learn what Davos had to say soon enough. You always do, don’t you?”

“I would be of no help to you if I did not,” Cressen said. “I

met Davos on the stair.”

“And he told all, I suppose? I should have had the man’s tongue shortened along with his fingers.”

“He would have made you a poor envoy then.”

“He made me a poor envoy in any case. The storm lords will not rise for me. It seems they do not like me, and the justice of my cause means nothing to them. The cravenly ones will sit behind their walls waiting to see how the wind rises and who is likely to triumph. The bold ones have already declared for Renly. For *Renly!*” He spat out the name like poison on his tongue.

“Your brother has been the Lord of Storm’s End these past thirteen years. These lords are his sworn bannermen—”

“*His,*” Stannis broke in, “when by rights they should be mine. I never asked for Dragonstone. I never wanted it. I took it because Robert’s enemies were here and he commanded me to root them out. I built his fleet and did his work, dutiful as a younger brother should be to an elder, as Renly should be to me. And what was Robert’s thanks? He names me Lord of Dragonstone, and gives Storm’s End and its incomes to *Renly*. Storm’s End belonged to House Baratheon for three hundred years. By rights it should have passed to me when Robert took the Iron Throne.”

It was an old grievance, deeply felt, and never more so than now. Here was the heart of his lord’s weakness; for Dragonstone, old and strong though it was, commanded the allegiance of only a handful of lesser lords, whose stony island holdings were too thinly peopled to yield up the men that Stannis needed. Even

with the sellswords he had brought across the narrow sea from the Free Cities of Myr and Lys, the host camped outside his walls was far too small to bring down the power of House Lannister.

“Robert did you an injustice,” Maester Cressen replied carefully, “yet he had sound reasons. Dragonstone had long been the seat of House Targaryen. He needed a man’s strength to rule here, and Renly was but a child.”

“He is a child still,” Stannis declared, his anger ringing loud in the empty hall, “a thieving child who thinks to snatch the crown off my brow. What has Renly ever done to earn a throne? He sits in council and jests with Littlefinger, and at tourneys he dons his splendid suit of armor and allows himself to be knocked off his horse by a better man. That is the sum of my brother Renly, who thinks he ought to be a king. I ask you, why did the gods inflict me with *brothers*?”

“I cannot answer for the gods.”

“You seldom answer at all these days, it seems to me. Who maesters for Renly? Perchance I should send for him, I might like his counsel better. What do you think this maester said when my brother decided to steal my crown? What counsel did your colleague offer to this traitor blood of mine?”

“It would surprise me if Lord Renly sought counsel, Your Grace.” The youngest of Lord Steffon’s three sons had grown into a man bold but heedless, who acted from impulse rather than calculation. In that, as in so much else, Renly was like his brother Robert, and utterly unlike Stannis.

“Your Grace,” Stannis repeated bitterly. “You mock me with a king’s style, yet what am I king of? Dragonstone and a few rocks in the narrow sea, there is my kingdom.” He descended the steps of his chair to stand before the table, his shadow falling across the mouth of the Blackwater Rush and the painted forest where King’s Landing now stood. There he stood, brooding over the realm he sought to claim, so near at hand and yet so far away. “Tonight I am to dine with my lords bannermen, such as they are. Celtigar, Velaryon, Bar Emmon, the whole paltry lot of them. A poor crop, if truth be told, but they are what my brothers have left me. That Lysene pirate Salladhor Saan will be there with the latest tally of what I owe him, and Morosh the Myrman will caution me with talk of tides and autumn gales, while Lord Sunglass mutters piously of the will of the Seven. Celtigar will want to know which storm lords are joining us. Velaryon will threaten to take his levies home unless we strike at once. What am I to tell them? What must I do now?”

“Your true enemies are the Lannisters, my lord,” Maester Cressen answered. “If you and your brother were to make common cause against them—”

“I will not treat with Renly,” Stannis answered, in a tone that brooked no argument. “Not while he calls himself a king.”

“Not Renly, then,” the maester yielded. His lord was stubborn and proud; when he had set his mind, there was no changing it. “Others might serve your needs as well. Eddard Stark’s son has been proclaimed King in the North, with all the power of

Winterfell and Riverrun behind him.”

“A green boy,” said Stannis, “and another false king. Am I to accept a broken realm?”

“Surely half a kingdom is better than none,” Cressen said, “and if you help the boy avenge his father’s murder—”

“Why should I avenge Eddard Stark? The man was nothing to me. Oh, *Robert* loved him, to be sure. Loved him as a brother, how often did I hear that? *I* was his brother, not Ned Stark, but you would never have known it by the way he treated me. I held Storm’s End for him, watching good men starve while Mace Tyrell and Paxter Redwyne feasted within sight of my walls. Did Robert thank me? No. He thanked *Stark*, for lifting the siege when we were down to rats and radishes. I built a fleet at Robert’s command, took Dragonstone in his name. Did he take my hand and say, *Well done, brother, whatever should I do without you?* No, he blamed me for letting Willem Darry steal away Viserys and the babe, as if I could have stopped it. I sat on his council for fifteen years, helping Jon Arryn rule his realm while Robert drank and whored, but when Jon died, did my brother name me his Hand? No, he went galloping off to his dear friend Ned Stark, and offered him the honor. And small good it did either of them.”

“Be that as it may, my lord,” Maester Cressen said gently. “Great wrongs have been done you, but the past is dust. The future may yet be won if you join with the Starks. There are others you might sound out as well. What of Lady Arryn? If the queen murdered her husband, surely she will want justice for

him. She has a young son, Jon Arryn's heir. If you were to betroth Shireen to him—”

“The boy is weak and sickly,” Lord Stannis objected. “Even his father saw how it was, when he asked me to foster him on Dragonstone. Service as a page might have done him good, but that damnable Lannister woman had Lord Arryn poisoned before it could be done, and now Lysa hides him in the Eyrie. She'll never part with the boy, I promise you that.”

“Then you must send Shireen to the Eyrie,” the maester urged. “Dragonstone is a grim home for a child. Let her fool go with her, so she will have a familiar face about her.”

“Familiar and hideous.” Stannis furrowed his brow in thought. “Still ... perhaps it is worth the trying ...”

“Must the rightful Lord of the Seven Kingdoms beg for help from widow women and usurpers?” a woman's voice asked sharply.

Maester Cressen turned, and bowed his head. “My lady,” he said, chagrined that he had not heard her enter.

Lord Stannis scowled. “I do not beg. Of anyone. Mind you remember that, woman.”

“I am pleased to hear it, my lord.” Lady Selyse was as tall as her husband, thin of body and thin of face, with prominent ears, a sharp nose, and the faintest hint of a moustache on her upper lip. She plucked it daily and cursed it regularly, yet it never failed to return. Her eyes were pale, her mouth stern, her voice a whip. She cracked it now. “Lady Arryn owes you her allegiance, as do

the Starks, your brother Renly, and all the rest. You are their one true king. It would not be fitting to plead and bargain with them for what is rightfully yours by the grace of god.”

God, she said, not *gods*. The red woman had won her, heart and soul, turning her from the gods of the Seven Kingdoms, both old and new, to worship the one they called the Lord of Light.

“Your god can keep his grace,” said Lord Stannis, who did not share his wife’s fervent new faith. “It’s swords I need, not blessings. Do you have an army hidden somewhere that you’ve not told me of?” There was no affection in his tone. Stannis had always been uncomfortable around women, even his own wife. When he had gone to King’s Landing to sit on Robert’s council, he had left Selyse on Dragonstone with their daughter. His letters had been few, his visits fewer; he did his duty in the marriage bed once or twice a year, but took no joy in it, and the sons he had once hoped for had never come.

“My brothers and uncles and cousins have armies,” she told him. “House Florent will rally to your banner.”

“House Florent can field two thousand swords at best.” It was said that Stannis knew the strength of every house in the Seven Kingdoms. “And you have a deal more faith in your brothers and uncles than I do, my lady. The Florent lands lie too close to Highgarden for your lord uncle to risk Mace Tyrell’s wrath.”

“There is another way.” Lady Selyse moved closer. “Look out your windows, my lord. There is the sign you have waited for, blazoned on the sky. Red, it is, the red of flame, red for the fiery

heart of the true god. It is *his* banner—and yours! See how it unfurls across the heavens like a dragon’s hot breath, and you the Lord of Dragonstone. It means your time has come, Your Grace. Nothing is more certain. You are meant to sail from this desolate rock as Aegon the Conqueror once sailed, to sweep all before you as he did. Only say the word, and embrace the power of the Lord of Light.”

“How many swords will the Lord of Light put into my hand?” Stannis demanded again.

“All you need,” his wife promised. “The swords of Storm’s End and Highgarden for a start, and all their lords bannermen.”

“Davos would tell you different,” Stannis said. “Those swords are sworn to Renly. They love my charming young brother, as they once loved Robert ... and as they have never loved me.”

“Yes,” she answered, “but if Renly should die ...”

Stannis looked at his lady with narrowed eyes, until Cressen could not hold his tongue. “It is not to be thought. Your Grace, whatever follies Renly has committed—”

“*Follies?* I call them treasons.” Stannis turned back to his wife. “My brother is young and strong, and he has a vast host around him, and these rainbow knights of his.”

“Melisandre has gazed into the flames, and seen him dead.”

Cressen was horrorstruck. “Fratricide ... my lord, this is *evil*, unthinkable ... please, listen to me.”

Lady Selyse gave him a measured look. “And what will you tell him, maester? How he might win half a kingdom if he goes

to the Starks on his knees and sells our daughter to Lysa Arryn?"

"I have heard your counsel, Cressen," Lord Stannis said. "Now I will hear hers. You are dismissed."

Maester Cressen bent a stiff knee. He could feel Lady Selyse's eyes on his back as he shuffled slowly across the room. By the time he reached the bottom of the steps it was all he could do to stand erect. "Help me," he said to Pylos.

When safe back in his own rooms, Cressen sent the younger man away and limped to his balcony once more, to stand between his gargoyles and stare out to sea. One of Salladhor Saan's warships was sweeping past the castle, her gaily striped hull slicing through the grey-green waters as her oars rose and fell. He watched until she vanished behind a headland. *Would that my fears could vanish so easily.* Had he lived so long for this?

When a maester donned his collar, he put aside the hope of children, yet Cressen had oft felt a father nonetheless. Robert, Stannis, Renly ... three sons he had raised after the angry sea claimed Lord Steffon. Had he done so ill that now he must watch one kill the other? He could not allow it, *would* not allow it.

The woman was the heart of it. Not the Lady Selyse, the *other* one. The red woman, the servants had named her, afraid to speak her name. "I will speak her name," Cressen told his stone hellhound. "Melisandre. *Her.*" Melisandre of Asshai, sorceress, shadowbinder, and priestess to R'hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow. Melisandre, whose madness must not be allowed to spread beyond Dragonstone.

His chambers seemed dim and gloomy after the brightness of the morning. With fumbling hands, the old man lit a candle and carried it to the workroom beneath the rookery stair, where his ointments, potions, and medicines stood neatly on their shelves. On the bottom shelf behind a row of salves in squat clay jars he found a vial of indigo glass, no larger than his little finger. It rattled when he shook it. Cressen blew away a layer of dust and carried it back to his table. Collapsing into his chair, he pulled the stopper and spilled out the vial's contents. A dozen crystals, no larger than seeds, rattled across the parchment he'd been reading. They shone like jewels in the candlelight, so purple that the maester found himself thinking that he had never truly seen the color before.

The chain around his throat felt very heavy. He touched one of the crystals lightly with the tip of his little finger. *Such a small thing to hold the power of life and death.* It was made from a certain plant that grew only on the islands of the Jade Sea, half a world away. The leaves had to be aged, and soaked in a wash of limes and sugar water and certain rare spices from the Summer Isles. Afterwards they could be discarded, but the potion must be thickened with ash and allowed to crystalize. The process was slow and difficult, the necessities costly and hard to acquire. The alchemists of Lys knew the way of it, though, and the Faceless Men of Braavos ... and the maesters of his order as well, though it was not something talked about beyond the walls of the Citadel. All the world knew that a maester forged his silver link when he

learned the art of healing—but the world preferred to forget that men who knew how to heal also knew how to kill.

Cressen no longer recalled the name the Asshai'i gave the leaf, or the Lysene poisoners the crystal. In the Citadel, it was simply called the strangler. Dissolved in wine, it would make the muscles of a man's throat clench tighter than any fist, shutting off his windpipe. They said a victim's face turned as purple as the little crystal seed from which his death was grown, but so too did a man choking on a morsel of food.

And this very night Lord Stannis would feast his bannermen, his lady wife ... and the red woman, Melisandre of Asshai.

I must rest, Maester Cressen told himself. I must have all my strength come dark. My hands must not shake, nor my courage flag. It is a dreadful thing I do, yet it must be done. If there are gods, surely they will forgive me. He had slept so poorly of late. A nap would refresh him for the ordeal ahead. Wearily, he tottered off to his bed. Yet when he closed his eyes, he could still see the light of the comet, red and fiery and vividly alive amidst the darkness of his dreams. *Perhaps it is my comet,* he thought drowsily at the last, just before sleep took him. *An omen of blood, foretelling murder ... yes ...*

When he woke it was full dark, his bedchamber was black, and every joint in his body ached. Cressen pushed himself up, his head throbbing. Clutching for his cane, he rose unsteady to his feet. *So late,* he thought. *They did not summon me.* He was always summoned for feasts, seated near the salt, close to Lord

Stannis. His lord's face swam up before him, not the man he was but the boy he had been, standing cold in the shadows while the sun shone on his elder brother. Whatever he did, Robert had done first, and better. Poor boy ... he must hurry, for *his* sake.

The maester found the crystals where he had left them, and scooped them off the parchment. Cressen owned no hollow rings, such as the poisoners of Lys were said to favor, but a myriad of pockets great and small were sewn inside the loose sleeves of his robe. He secreted the strangler seeds in one of them, threw open his door, and called, "Pylos? Where are you?" When he heard no reply, he called again, louder. "Pylos, I need help." Still there came no answer. That was queer; the young maester had his cell only a half-turn down the stair, within easy earshot.

In the end, Cressen had to shout for the servants. "Make haste," he told them. "I have slept too long. They will be feasting by now ... drinking ... I should have been woken." What had happened to Maester Pylos? Truly, he did not understand.

Again he had to cross the long gallery. A night wind whispered through the great windows, sharp with the smell of the sea. Torches flickered along the walls of Dragonstone, and in the camp beyond, he could see hundreds of cookfires burning, as if a field of stars had fallen to the earth. Above, the comet blazed red and malevolent. *I am too old and wise to fear such things*, the maester told himself.

The doors to the Great Hall were set in the mouth of a stone

dragon. He told the servants to leave him outside. It would be better to enter alone; he must not appear feeble. Leaning heavily on his cane, Cressen climbed the last few steps and hobbled beneath the gateway teeth. A pair of guardsmen opened the heavy red doors before him, unleashing a sudden blast of noise and light. Cressen stepped down into the dragon's maw.

Over the clatter of knife and plate and the low mutter of table talk, he heard Patchface singing, "... *dance, my lord, dance my lord,*" to the accompaniment of jangling cowbells. The same dreadful song he'd sung this morning. "*The shadows come to stay, my lord, stay my lord, stay my lord.*" The lower tables were crowded with knights, archers, and sellsword captains, tearing apart loaves of black bread to soak in their fish stew. Here there was no loud laughter, no raucous shouting such as marred the dignity of other men's feasts; Lord Stannis did not permit such.

Cressen made his way toward the raised platform where the lords sat with the king. He had to step wide around Patchface. Dancing, his bells ringing, the fool neither saw nor heard his approach. As he hopped from one leg to the other, Patchface lurched into Cressen, knocking his cane out from under him. They went crashing down together amidst the rushes in a tangle of arms and legs, while a sudden gale of laughter went up around them. No doubt it was a comical sight.

Patchface sprawled half on top of him, motley fool's face pressed close to his own. He had lost his tin helm with its antlers and bells. "Under the sea, you fall *up*," he declared. "I know, I

know, oh, oh, oh.” Giggling, the fool rolled off, bounded to his feet, and did a little dance.

Trying to make the best of it, the maester smiled feebly and struggled to rise, but his hip was in such pain that for a moment he was half afraid that he had broken it all over again. He felt strong hands grasp him under the arms and lift him back to his feet. “Thank you, ser,” he murmured, turning to see which knight had come to his aid . . .

“Maester,” said Lady Melisandre, her deep voice flavored with the music of the Jade Sea. “You ought take more care.” As ever, she wore red head to heel, a long loose gown of flowing silk as bright as fire, with dagged sleeves and deep slashes in the bodice that showed glimpses of a darker blood red fabric beneath. Around her throat was a red gold choker tighter than any maester’s chain, ornamented with a single great ruby. Her hair was not the orange or strawberry color of common red-haired men, but a deep burnished copper that shone in the light of the torches. Even her eyes were red . . . but her skin was smooth and white, unblemished, pale as cream. Slender she was, graceful, taller than most knights, with full breasts and narrow waist and a heart-shaped face. Men’s eyes that once found her did not quickly look away, not even a maester’s eyes. Many called her beautiful. She was not beautiful. She was red, and terrible and red.

“I . . . thank you, my lady.” Cressen’s fear whispered to him. *She knows what the comet portends. She is wiser than you, old man.*

“A man your age must look to where he steps,” Melisandre said courteously. “The night is dark and full of terrors.”

He knew the phrase, some prayer of her faith. *It makes no matter, I have a faith of my own.* “Only children fear the dark,” he told her. Yet even as he said the words, he heard Patchface take up his song again. “*The shadows come to dance, my lord, dance my lord, dance my lord.*”

“Now here is a riddle,” Melisandre said. “A clever fool and a foolish wise man.” Bending, she picked up Patchface’s helm from where it had fallen and set it on Cressen’s head. The cowbells rang softly as the tin bucket slid down over his ears. “A crown to match your chain, lord maester,” she announced. All around them, men were laughing.

Cressen pressed his lips together and fought to still his rage. She thought he was feeble and helpless, but she would learn otherwise before the night was done. Old he might be, yet he was still a maester of the Citadel. “I need no crown but truth,” he told her, removing the fool’s helm from his head.

“There are truths in this world that are not taught at Oldtown.” Melisandre turned from him in a swirl of red silk and made her way back to the high table, where King Stannis and his queen were seated. Cressen handed the antlered tin bucket back to Patchface, and made to follow.

Maester Pylos sat in his place.

The old man could only stop and stare. “Maester Pylos,” he said at last. “You ... you did not wake me.”

“His Grace commanded me to let you rest.” Pylos had at least the grace to blush. “He told me you were not needed here.”

Cressen looked over the knights and captains and lords sitting silent. Lord Celtigar, aged and sour, wore a mantle patterned with red crabs picked out in garnets. Handsome Lord Velaryon chose sea green silk, the white gold seahorse at his throat matching his long fair hair. Lord Bar Emmon, that plump boy of fourteen, was swathed in purple velvet trimmed with white seal, Ser Axell Florent remained homely even in russet and fox fur, pious Lord Sunglass wore moonstones at throat and wrist and finger, and the Lysene captain Salladhör Saan was a sunburst of scarlet satin, gold, and jewels. Only Ser Davos dressed simply, in brown doublet and green wool mantle, and only Ser Davos met his gaze, with pity in his eyes.

“You are too ill and too confused to be of use to me, old man.” It sounded so like Lord Stannis’s voice, but it could not be, it could not. “Pylos will counsel me henceforth. Already he works with the ravens, since you can no longer climb to the rookery. I will not have you kill yourself in my service.”

Maester Cressen blinked. *Stannis, my lord, my sad sullen boy, son I never had, you must not do this, don't you know how I have cared for you, lived for you, loved you despite all? Yes, loved you, better than Robert even, or Renly, for you were the one unloved, the one who needed me most.* Yet all he said was, “As you command, my lord, but ... but I am hungry. Might not I have a place at your table?” *At your side, I belong at your side ...*

Ser Davos rose from the bench. “I should be honored if the maester would sit here beside me, Your Grace.”

“As you will.” Lord Stannis turned away to say something to Melisandre, who had seated herself at his right hand, in the place of high honor. Lady Selyse was on his left, flashing a smile as bright and brittle as her jewels.

Too far, Cressen thought dully, looking at where Ser Davos was seated. Half of the lords bannermen were between the smuggler and the high table. I must be closer to her if I am to get the strangler into her cup, yet how?

Patchface was capering about as the maester made his slow way around the table to Davos Seaworth. “Here we eat fish,” the fool declared happily, waving a cod about like a sceptre. “Under the sea, the fish eat us. I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.”

Ser Davos moved aside to make room on the bench. “We all should be in motley tonight,” he said gloomily as Cressen seated himself, “for this is fool’s business we’re about. The red woman has seen victory in her flames, so Stannis means to press his claim, no matter what the numbers. Before she’s done we’re all like to see what Patchface saw, I fear—the bottom of the sea.”

Cressen slid his hands up into his sleeves as if for warmth. His fingers found the hard lumps the crystals made in the wool. “Lord Stannis.”

Stannis turned from the red woman, but it was Lady Selyse who replied. “*King* Stannis. You forget yourself, maester.”

“He is old, his mind wanders,” the king told her gruffly. “What

is it, Cressen? Speak your mind.”

“As you intend to sail, it is vital that you make common cause with Lord Stark and Lady Arryn ...”

“I make common cause with no one,” Stannis Baratheon said.

“No more than light makes common cause with darkness.”

Lady Selyse took his hand.

Stannis nodded. “The Starks seek to steal half my kingdom, even as the Lannisters have stolen my throne and my own sweet brother the swords and service and strongholds that are mine by rights. They are all usurpers, and they are all my enemies.”

I have lost him, Cressen thought, despairing. If only he could somehow approach Melisandre unseen ... he needed but an instant’s access to her cup. “You are the rightful heir to your brother Robert, the true Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men,” he said desperately, “but even so, you cannot hope to triumph without allies.”

“He has an ally,” Lady Selyse said. “R’hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow.”

“Gods make uncertain allies at best,” the old man insisted, “and *that* one has no power here.”

“You think not?” The ruby at Melisandre’s throat caught the light as she turned her head, and for an instant it seemed to glow bright as the comet. “If you will speak such folly, maester, you ought to wear your crown again.”

“Yes,” Lady Selyse agreed. “Patch’s helm. It suits you well,

old man. Put it on again, I command you.”

“Under the sea, no one wears hats,” Patchface said. “I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.”

Lord Stannis’s eyes were shadowed beneath his heavy brow, his mouth tight as his jaw worked silently. He always ground his teeth when he was angry. “Fool,” he growled at last, “my lady wife commands. Give Cressen your helm.”

No, the old maester thought, this is not you, not your way, you were always just, always hard yet never cruel, never, you did not understand mockery, no more than you understood laughter.

Patchface danced closer, his cowbells ringing. The maester sat silent while the fool set the antlered bucket on his brow. Cressen bowed his head beneath the weight. His bells clanged. “Perhaps he ought sing his counsel henceforth,” Lady Selyse said.

“You go too far, woman,” Lord Stannis said. “He is an old man, and he’s served me well.”

And I will serve you to the last, my sweet lord, my poor lonely son, Cressen thought, for suddenly he saw the way. Ser Davos’s cup was before him, still half-full of sour red. He found a hard flake of crystal in his sleeve, held it tight between thumb and forefinger as he reached for the cup. *Smooth motions, deft, I must not fumble now,* he prayed, and the gods were kind. In the blink of an eye, his fingers were empty. His hands had not been so steady for years, nor half so fluid. Davos saw, but no one else, he was certain. Cup in hand, he rose to his feet. “Mayhaps I have been a fool. Lady Melisandre, will you share a cup of wine with

me? A cup in honor of your god, your Lord of Light? A cup to toast his power?"

The red woman studied him. "If you wish."

He could feel them all watching him. Davos clutched at him as he left the bench, catching his sleeve with the fingers that Lord Stannis had shortened. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

"A thing that must be done," Maester Cressen answered, "for the sake of the realm, and the soul of my lord." He shook off Davos's hand, spilling a drop of wine on the rushes.

She met him beneath the high table with every man's eyes upon them. But Cressen saw only her. Red silk, red eyes, the ruby red at her throat, red lips curled in a faint smile as she put her hand atop his own, around the cup. Her skin felt hot, feverish. "It is not too late to spill the wine, maester."

"No," he whispered hoarsely. "No."

"As you will." Melisandre of Asshai took the cup from his hands, and drank long and deep. There was only half a swallow of wine remaining when she offered it back to him. "And now you."

His hands were shaking, but he made himself be strong. A maester of the Citadel must not be afraid. The wine was sour on his tongue. He let the empty cup drop from his fingers to shatter on the floor. "He *does* have power here, my lord," the woman said. "And fire cleanses." At her throat, the ruby shimmered redly.

Cressen tried to reply, but his words caught in his throat. His cough became a terrible thin whistle as he strained to suck in

air. Iron fingers tightened round his neck. As he sank to his knees, still he shook his head, denying her, denying her power, denying her magic, denying her god. And the cowbells pealed in his antlers, singing *fool, fool, fool* while the red woman looked down on him in pity, the candle flames dancing in her red red eyes.

ARYA

At Winterfell they had called her “Arya Horseface” and she’d thought nothing could be worse, but that was before the orphan boy Lommy Greenhands had named her “Lumpyhead.” Her head *felt* lumpy when she touched it. When Yoren had dragged her into that alley she’d thought he meant to kill her, but the sour old man had only held her tight, sawing through her mats and tangles with his dagger. She remembered how the breeze sent the fistfuls of dirty brown hair skittering across the paving stones, toward the sept where her father had died. “I’m taking men and boys from the city,” Yoren growled as the sharp steel scraped at her head. “Now you hold still, *boy*.” By the time he had finished, her scalp was nothing but tufts and stubble.

Afterward, he told her that from there to Winterfell she’d be Arry the orphan boy. “Gate shouldn’t be hard, but the road’s another matter. You got a long way to go in bad company. I got thirty this time, men and boys all bound for the Wall, and don’t be thinking they’re like that bastard brother o’ yours.” He shook her. “Lord Eddard gave me pick o’ the dungeons, and I didn’t find no little lordlings down there. This lot, half o’ them would turn you over to the queen quick as spit for a pardon and maybe a few silvers. The other half’d do the same, only they’d rape you first. So you keep to yourself and make your water in the woods, alone. That’ll be the hardest part, the pissing, so don’t drink no

more'n you need."

Leaving King's Landing was easy, just like he'd said. The Lannister guardsmen on the gate were stopping everyone, but Yoren called one by name and their wagons were waved through. No one spared Arya a glance. They were looking for a highborn girl, daughter of the King's Hand, not for a skinny boy with his hair chopped off. Arya never looked back. She wished the Rush would rise and wash the whole city away, Flea Bottom and the Red Keep and the Great Sept and *everything*, and *everyone* too, especially Prince Joffrey and his mother. But she knew it wouldn't, and anyhow Sansa was still in the city and would wash away too. When she remembered that, Arya decided to wish for Winterfell instead.

Yoren was wrong about the pissing, though. That wasn't the hardest part at all; Lommy Greenhands and Hot Pie were the hardest part. Orphan boys. Yoren had plucked some from the streets with promises of food for their bellies and shoes for their feet. The rest he'd found in chains. "The Watch needs good men," he told them as they set out, "but you lot will have to do."

Yoren had taken grown men from the dungeons as well, thieves and poachers and rapers and the like. The worst were the three he'd found in the black cells who must have scared even him, because he kept them fettered hand and foot in the back of a wagon, and vowed they'd stay in irons all the way to the Wall. One had no nose, only the hole in his face where it had been cut off, and the gross fat bald one with the pointed teeth and the

weeping sores on his cheeks had eyes like nothing human.

They took five wagons out of King's Landing, laden with supplies for the Wall; hides and bolts of cloth, bars of pig iron, a cage of ravens, books and paper and ink, a bale of sourleaf, jars of oil, and chests of medicine and spices. Teams of plow horses pulled the wagons, and Yoren had bought two coursers and a half-dozen donkeys for the boys. Arya would have preferred a real horse, but the donkey was better than riding on a wagon.

The men paid her no mind, but she was not so lucky with the boys. She was two years younger than the youngest orphan, not to mention smaller and skinnier, and Lommy and Hot Pie took her silence to mean she was scared, or stupid, or deaf. "Look at that sword Lumpyhead's got there," Lommy said one morning, as they made their plodding way past orchards and wheat fields. He'd been a dyer's apprentice before he was caught stealing, and his arms were mottled green to the elbow. When he laughed he brayed like the donkeys they were riding. "Where's a gutter rat like Lumpyhead get him a sword?"

Arya chewed her lip sullenly. She could see the back of Yoren's faded black cloak up ahead of the wagons, but she was determined not to go crying to him for help.

"Maybe he's a little squire," Hot Pie put in. His mother had been a baker before she died, and he'd pushed her cart through the streets all day, shouting *Hot pies! Hot pies!* "Some lordy lord's little squire boy, that's it."

"He ain't no squire, look at him. I bet that's not even a real

sword. I bet it's just some plain sword made of tin."

Arya hated them making fun of Needle. "It's castle-forged steel, you stupid," she snapped, turning in the saddle to glare at them, "and you better shut your mouth."

The orphan boys hooted. "Where you get a blade like that, Lumpyface?" Hot Pie wanted to know.

"Lumpyhead," corrected Lommy. "He prob'ly stole it."

"I did *not*!" she shouted. Jon Snow had given her Needle. Maybe she had to let them call her Lumpyhead, but she wasn't going to let them call Jon a thief.

"If he stole it, we could take it off him," said Hot Pie. "It's not his anyhow. I could use me a sword like that."

Lommy egged him on. "Go on, take it off him, I dare you."

Hot Pie kicked his donkey, riding closer. "Hey, Lumpyface, you gimme that sword." His hair was the color of straw, his fat face all sunburnt and peeling. "You don't know how to use it."

Yes, I do, Arya could have said. *I killed a boy, a fat boy like you, I stabbed him in the belly and he died, and I'll kill you too if you don't let me alone.* Only she did not dare. Yoren didn't know about the stableboy, but she was afraid of what he might do if he found out. Arya was pretty sure that some of the other men were killers too, the three in the manacles for sure, but the queen wasn't looking for *them*, so it wasn't the same.

"Look at him," brayed Lommy Greenhands. "I bet he's going to cry now. You want to cry, Lumpyhead?" She had cried in her sleep the night before, dreaming of her father. Come morning,

she'd woken red-eyed and dry, and could not have shed another tear if her life had hung on it.

"He's going to wet his pants," Hot Pie suggested.

"Leave him be," said the boy with the shaggy black hair who rode behind them. Lommy had named *him* the Bull, on account of this horned helm he had that he polished all the time but never wore. Lommy didn't dare mock the Bull. He was older, and big for his age, with a broad chest and strong-looking arms.

"You better give Hot Pie the sword, Arry," Lommy said. "Hot Pie wants it bad. He kicked a boy to death. He'll do the same to you, I bet."

"I knocked him down and I kicked him in the balls, and I kept kicking him there until he was dead," Hot Pie boasted. "I kicked him all to pieces. His balls were broke open and bloody and his cock turned black. You better gimme the sword."

Arya slid her practice sword from her belt. "You can have this one," she told Hot Pie, not wanting to fight.

"That's just some stick." He rode nearer and tried to reach over for Needle's hilt.

Arya made the stick whistle as she laid the wood across his donkey's hindquarters. The animal *hawed* and bucked, dumping Hot Pie on the ground. She vaulted off her own donkey and poked him in the gut as he tried to get up and he sat back down with a grunt. Then she whacked him across the face and his nose made a *crack* like a branch breaking. Blood dribbled from his nostrils. When Hot Pie began to wail, Arya whirled

toward Lommy Greenhands, who was sitting on his donkey open-mouthed. “You want some sword too?” she yelled, but he didn’t. He raised dyed green hands in front of his face and squealed at her to get away.

The Bull shouted, “Behind you,” and Arya spun. Hot Pie was on his knees, his fist closing around a big jagged rock. She let him throw it, ducking her head as it sailed past. Then she flew at him. He raised a hand and she hit it, and then his cheek, and then his knee. He grabbed for her, and she danced aside and bounced the wood off the back of his head. He fell down and got up and stumbled after her, his red face all smeared with dirt and blood. Arya slid into a water dancer’s stance and waited. When he came close enough, she lunged, right between his legs, so hard that if her wooden sword had had a point it would have come out between his butt cheeks.

By the time Yoren pulled her off him, Hot Pie was sprawled out on the ground with his breeches brown and smelly, crying as Arya whapped him over and over and over. “*Enough*,” the black brother roared, prying the stick sword from her fingers, “you want to kill the fool?” When Lommy and some others started to squeal, the old man turned on them too. “Shut your mouths, or I’ll be shutting them for you. Any more o’ this, I’ll tie you lot behind the wagons and *drag* you to the Wall.” He spat. “And that goes twice for you, Arry. You come with me, boy. *Now*.”

They were all looking at her, even the three chained and manacled in the back of the wagon. The fat one snapped his

pointy teeth together and *hissed*, but Arya ignored him.

The old man dragged her well off the road into a tangle of trees, cursing and muttering all the while. “If I had a thimble o’ sense, I would’ve left you in King’s Landing. You hear me, *boy*?” He always snarled that word, putting a bite in it so she would be certain to hear. “Unlace your breeches and pull ’em down. Go on, there’s no one here to see. Do it.” Sullenly, Arya did as he said. “Over there, against the oak. Yes, like that.” She wrapped her arms around the trunk and pressed her face to the rough wood. “You scream now. You scream loud.”

I won’t, Arya thought stubbornly, but when Yoren laid the wood against the back of her bare thighs, the shriek burst out of her anyway. “Think that hurt?” he said. “Try this one.” The stick came whistling. Arya shrieked again, clutching the tree to keep from falling. “One more.” She held on tight, chewing her lip, flinching when she heard it coming. The stroke made her jump and howl. *I won’t cry*, she thought, *I won’t do that. I’m a Stark of Winterfell, our sigil is the direwolf, direwolves don’t cry.* She could feel a thin trickle of blood running down her left leg. Her thighs and cheeks were ablaze with pain. “Might be I got your attention now,” Yoren said. “Next time you take that stick to one o’ your brothers, you’ll get twice what you give, you hear me? Now cover yourself.”

They’re not my brothers, Arya thought as she bent to yank up her breeches, but she knew better than to say so. Her hands fumbled with her belt and laces.

Yoren was looking at her. “You hurt?”

Calm as still water, she told herself, the way Syrio Forel had taught her. “Some.”

He spat. “That pie boy’s hurting worse. It wasn’t him as killed your father, girl, nor that thieving Lommy neither. Hitting them won’t bring him back.”

“I know,” Arya muttered sullenly.

“Here’s something you don’t know. It wasn’t supposed to happen like it did. I was set to leave, wagons bought and loaded, and a man comes with a boy for me, and a purse of coin, and a message, never mind who it’s from. Lord Eddard’s to take the black, he says to me, wait, he’ll be going with you. Why d’you think I was there? Only something went queer.”

“*Joffrey*,” Arya breathed. “Someone should kill *him*!”

“Someone will, but it won’t be me, nor you neither.” Yoren tossed her back her stick sword. “Got sourleaf back at the wagons,” he said as they made their way back to the road. “You’ll chew some, it’ll help with the sting.”

It did help, some, though the taste of it was foul and it made her spit look like blood. Even so, she walked for the rest of that day, and the day after, and the day after *that*, too raw to sit a donkey. Hot Pie was worse off; Yoren had to shift some barrels around so he could lie in the back of a wagon on some sacks of barley, and he whimpered every time the wheels hit a rock. Lommy Greenhands wasn’t even hurt, yet he stayed as far away from Arya as he could get. “Every time you look at him, he

twitches,” the Bull told her, as she walked beside his donkey.

She did not answer. It seemed safer not to talk to anyone.

That night she lay upon her thin blanket on the hard ground, staring up at the great red comet. The comet was splendid and scary all at once. “The Red Sword,” the Bull named it; he claimed it looked like a sword, the blade still red-hot from the forge. When Arya squinted the right way she could see the sword too, only it wasn’t a new sword, it was Ice, her father’s greatsword, all ripply Valyrian steel, and the red was Lord Eddard’s blood on the blade after Ser Ilyn the King’s Justice had cut off his head. Yoren had made her look away when it happened, yet it seemed to her that the comet looked like Ice must have, after.

When at last she slept, she dreamt of home. The kingsroad wound past Winterfell on its way to the Wall, and Yoren had promised he’d leave her there with no one any wiser about who she’d been. She yearned to see her mother again, and Robb and Bran and Rickon . . . but it was Jon Snow she thought of most. She wished somehow they could come to the Wall *before* Winterfell, so Jon might muss up her hair and call her “little sister.” She’d tell him, “I missed you,” and he’d say it too at the very same moment, the way they always used to say things together. She would have liked that. She would have liked that better than anything.

SANSA

The morning of King Joffrey's name day dawned bright and windy, with the long tail of the great comet visible through the high scuttling clouds. Sansa was watching it from her tower window when Ser Arys Oakheart arrived to escort her down to the tourney grounds. "What do you think it means?" she asked him.

"Glory to your betrothed," Ser Arys answered at once. "See how it flames across the sky today on His Grace's name day, as if the gods themselves had raised a banner in his honor? The smallfolk have named it King Joffrey's Comet."

Doubtless that was what they told Joffrey; Sansa was not so sure. "I've heard servants calling it the Dragon's Tail."

"King Joffrey sits where Aegon the Dragon once sat, in the castle built by his son," Ser Arys said. "He is the dragon's heir—and crimson is the color of House Lannister, another sign. This comet is sent to herald Joffrey's ascent to the throne, I have no doubt. It means that he will triumph over his enemies."

Is it true? she wondered. *Would the gods be so cruel?* Her mother was one of Joffrey's enemies now, her brother Robb another. Her father had died by the king's command. Must Robb and her lady mother die next? The comet *was* red, but Joffrey was Baratheon as much as Lannister, and their sigil was a black stag on a golden field. Shouldn't the gods have sent Joff a golden

comet?

Sansa closed the shutters and turned sharply away from the window. "You look very lovely today, my lady," Ser Arys said.

"Thank you, ser." Knowing that Joffrey would require her to attend the tourney in his honor, Sansa had taken special care with her face and clothes. She wore a gown of pale purple silk and a moonstone hair net that had been a gift from Joffrey. The gown had long sleeves to hide the bruises on her arms. Those were Joffrey's gifts as well. When they told him that Robb had been proclaimed King in the North, his rage had been a fearsome thing, and he had sent Ser Boros to beat her.

"Shall we go?" Ser Arys offered his arm and she let him lead her from her chamber. If she must have one of the Kingsguard dogging her steps, Sansa preferred that it be him. Ser Boros was short-tempered, Ser Meryn cold, and Ser Mandon's strange dead eyes made her uneasy, while Ser Preston treated her like a lackwit child. Arys Oakheart was courteous, and would talk to her cordially. Once he even objected when Joffrey commanded him to hit her. He *did* hit her in the end, but not hard as Ser Meryn or Ser Boros might have, and at least he had argued. The others obeyed without question ... except for the Hound, but Joff never asked the Hound to punish her. He used the other five for that.

Ser Arys had light brown hair and a face that was not unpleasant to look upon. Today he made quite the dashing figure, with his white silk cloak fastened at the shoulder by a golden leaf, and a spreading oak tree worked upon the breast of his tunic

in shining gold thread. “Who do you think will win the day’s honors?” Sansa asked as they descended the steps arm in arm.

“I will,” Ser Arys answered, smiling. “Yet I fear the triumph will have no savor. This will be a small field, and poor. No more than two score will enter the lists, including squires and freeriders. There is small honor in unhorsing green boys.”

The last tourney had been different, Sansa reflected. King Robert had staged it in her father’s honor. High lords and fabled champions had come from all over the realm to compete, and the whole city had turned out to watch. She remembered the splendor of it: the field of pavilions along the river with a knight’s shield hung before each door, the long rows of silken pennants waving in the wind, the gleam of sunlight on bright steel and gilded spurs. The days had rung to the sounds of trumpets and pounding hooves, and the nights had been full of feasts and song. Those had been the most magical days of her life, but they seemed a memory from another age now. Robert Baratheon was dead, and her father as well, beheaded for a traitor on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor. Now there were three kings in the land, and war raged beyond the Trident while the city filled with desperate men. Small wonder that they must hold Joff’s tournament behind the thick stone walls of the Red Keep.

“Will the queen attend, do you think?” Sansa always felt safer when Cersei was there to restrain her son.

“I fear not, my lady. The council is meeting, some urgent business.” Ser Arys dropped his voice. “Lord Tywin has gone to

ground at Harrenhal instead of bringing his army to the city as the queen commanded. Her Grace is furious.” He fell silent as a column of Lannister guardsmen marched past, in crimson cloaks and lion-crested helms. Ser Arys was fond of gossip, but only when he was certain that no one was listening.

The carpenters had erected a gallery and lists in the outer bailey. It was a poor thing indeed, and the meagre throng that had gathered to watch filled but half the seats. Most of the spectators were guardsmen in the gold cloaks of the City Watch or the crimson of House Lannister; of lords and ladies there were but a paltry few, the handful that remained at court. Grey-faced Lord Gyles Rosby was coughing into a square of pink silk. Lady Tanda was bracketed by her daughters, placid dull Lollys and acid-tongued Falyse. Ebon-skinned Jalabhar Xho was an exile who had no other refuge, Lady Ermesande a babe seated on her wet nurse’s lap. The talk was she would soon be wed to one of the queen’s cousins, so the Lannisters might claim her lands.

The king was shaded beneath a crimson canopy, one leg thrown negligently over the carved wooden arm of his chair. Princess Myrcella and Prince Tommen sat behind him. In the back of the royal box, Sandor Clegane stood at guard, his hands resting on his swordbelt. The white cloak of the Kingsguard was draped over his broad shoulders and fastened with a jeweled brooch, the snowy cloth looking somehow unnatural against his brown roughspun tunic and studded leather jerkin. “Lady Sansa,” the Hound announced curtly when he saw her. His voice was as

rough as the sound of a saw on wood. The burn scars on his face and throat made one side of his mouth twitch when he spoke.

Princess Myrcella nodded a shy greeting at the sound of Sansa's name, but plump little Prince Tommen jumped up eagerly. "Sansa, did you hear? I'm to ride in the tourney today. Mother said I could." Tommen was all of eight. He reminded her of her own little brother, Bran. They were of an age. Bran was back at Winterfell, a cripple, yet safe.

Sansa would have given anything to be with him. "I fear for the life of your foeman," she told Tommen solemnly.

"His foeman will be stuffed with straw," Joff said as he rose. The king was clad in a gilded breastplate with a roaring lion engraved upon its chest, as if he expected the war to engulf them at any moment. He was thirteen today, and tall for his age, with the green eyes and golden hair of the Lannisters.

"Your Grace," she said, dipping in a curtsy.

Ser Arys bowed. "Pray pardon me, Your Grace. I must equip myself for the lists."

Joffrey waved a curt dismissal while he studied Sansa from head to heels. "I'm pleased you wore my stones."

So the king had decided to play the gallant today. Sansa was relieved. "I thank you for them ... and for your tender words. I pray you a lucky name day, Your Grace."

"Sit," Joff commanded, gesturing her to the empty seat beside his own. "Have you heard? The Beggar King is dead."

"Who?" For a moment Sansa was afraid he meant Robb.

“Viserys. The last son of Mad King Aerys. He’s been going about the Free Cities since before I was born, calling himself a king. Well, mother says the Dothraki finally crowned him. With molten gold.” He laughed. “That’s funny, don’t you think? The dragon was their sigil. It’s almost as good as if some wolf killed your traitor brother. Maybe I’ll feed him to wolves after I’ve caught him. Did I tell you, I intend to challenge him to single combat?”

“I should like to see that, Your Grace.” *More than you know.* Sansa kept her tone cool and polite, yet even so Joffrey’s eyes narrowed as he tried to decide whether she was mocking him. “Will you enter the lists today?” she asked quickly.

The king frowned. “My lady mother said it was not fitting, since the tourney is in my honor. Otherwise I would have been champion. Isn’t that so, dog?”

The Hound’s mouth twitched. “Against this lot? Why not?”

He had been the champion in her father’s tourney, Sansa remembered. “Will you joust today, my lord?” she asked him.

Clegane’s voice was thick with contempt. “Wouldn’t be worth the bother of arming myself. This is a tournament of gnats.”

The king laughed. “My dog has a fierce bark. Perhaps I should command him to fight the day’s champion. To the death.” Joffrey was fond of making men fight to the death.

“You’d be one knight the poorer.” The Hound had never taken a knight’s vows. His brother was a knight, and he hated his brother.

A blare of trumpets sounded. The king settled back in his seat and took Sansa's hand. Once that would have set her heart to pounding, but that was before he had answered her plea for mercy by presenting her with her father's head. His touch filled her with revulsion now, but she knew better than to show it. She made herself sit very still.

"Ser Meryn Trant of the Kingsguard," a herald called.

Ser Meryn entered from west side of the yard, clad in gleaming white plate chased with gold and mounted on a milk white charger with a flowing grey mane. His cloak streamed behind him like a field of snow. He carried a twelve-foot lance.

"Ser Hobber of House Redwyne, of the Arbor," the herald sang. Ser Hobber trotted in from the east, riding a black stallion caparisoned in burgundy and blue. His lance was striped in the same colors, and his shield bore the grape cluster sigil of his house. The Redwyne twins were the queen's unwilling guests, even as Sansa was. She wondered whose notion it had been for them to ride in Joffrey's tourney. Not their own, she thought.

At a signal from the master of revels, the combatants couched their lances and put their spurs to their mounts. There were shouts from the watching guardsmen and the lords and ladies in the gallery. The knights came together in the center of the yard with a great shock of wood and steel. The white lance and the striped one exploded in splinters within a second of each other. Hobber Redwyne reeled at the impact, yet somehow managed to keep his seat. Wheeling their horses about at the far end

of the lists, the knights tossed down their broken lances and accepted replacements from the squires. Ser Horas Redwyne, Ser Hobber's twin, shouted encouragement to his brother.

But on their second pass Ser Meryn swung the point of his lance to strike Ser Hobber in the chest, driving him from the saddle to crash resoundingly to the earth. Ser Horas cursed and ran out to help his battered brother from the field.

"Poorly ridden," declared King Joffrey.

"*Ser Balon Swann, of Stonehelm in the Red Watch,*" came the herald's cry. Wide white wings ornamented Ser Balon's greathelm, and black and white swans fought on his shield. "*Morros of House Slynt, heir to Lord Janos of Harrenhal.*"

"Look at that upjumped oaf," Joff hooted, loud enough for half the yard to hear. Morros, a mere squire and a new-made squire at that, was having difficulty managing lance and shield. The lance was a knight's weapon, Sansa knew, the Slynts lowborn. Lord Janos had been no more than commander of the City Watch before Joffrey had raised him to Harrenhal and the council.

I hope he falls and shames himself, she thought bitterly. *I hope Ser Balon kills him.* When Joffrey proclaimed her father's death, it had been Janos Slynt who seized Lord Eddard's severed head by the hair and raised it on high for king and crowd to behold, while Sansa wept and screamed.

Morros wore a checkered black-and-gold cloak over black armor inlaid with golden scrollwork. On his shield was the bloody

spear his father had chosen as the sigil of their new-made house. But he did not seem to know what to do with the shield as he urged his horse forward, and Ser Balon's point struck the blazon square. Morros dropped his lance, fought for balance, and lost. One foot caught in a stirrup as he fell, and the runaway charger dragged the youth to the end of the lists, head bouncing against the ground. Joffrey hooted derision. Sansa was appalled, wondering if the gods had heard her vengeful prayer. But when they disentangled Morros Slynt from his horse, they found him bloodied but alive. "Tommen, we picked the wrong foe for you," the king told his brother. "The straw knight jousts better than that one."

Next came Ser Horas Redwyne's turn. He fared better than his twin, vanquishing an elderly knight whose mount was bedecked with silver griffins against a striped blue-and-white field. Splendid as he looked, the old man made a poor contest of it. Joffrey curled his lip. "This is a feeble show."

"I warned you," said the Hound. "Gnats."

The king was growing bored. It made Sansa anxious. She lowered her eyes and resolved to keep quiet, no matter what. When Joffrey Baratheon's mood darkened, any chance word might set off one of his rages.

"*Lothor Brune, freerider in the service of Lord Baelish,*" cried the herald. "*Ser Dontos the Red, of House Hollard.*"

The freerider, a small man in dented plate without device, duly appeared at the west end of the yard, but of his opponent

there was no sign. Finally a chestnut stallion trotted into view in a swirl of crimson and scarlet silks, but Ser Dontos was not on it. The knight appeared a moment later, cursing and staggering, clad in breastplate and plumed helm and nothing else. His legs were pale and skinny, and his manhood flopped about obscenely as he chased after his horse. The watchers roared and shouted insults. Catching his horse by the bridle, Ser Dontos tried to mount, but the animal would not stand still and the knight was so drunk that his bare foot kept missing the stirrup.

By then the crowd was howling with laughter ... all but the king. Joffrey had a look in his eyes that Sansa remembered well, the same look he'd had at the Great Sept of Baelor the day he pronounced death on Lord Eddard Stark. Finally, Ser Dontos the Red gave it up for a bad job, sat down in the dirt, and removed his plumed helm. "I lose," he shouted. "Fetch me some wine."

The king stood. "A cask from the cellars! I'll see him drowned in it."

Sansa heard herself gasp. "*No*, you can't."

Joffrey turned his head. "What did you say?"

Sansa could not believe she had spoken. Was she mad? To tell him *no* in front of half the court? She hadn't meant to say anything, only ... Ser Dontos was drunk and silly and useless, but he meant no harm.

"Did you say I *can't*? Did you?"

"Please," Sansa said, "I only meant ... it would be ill luck, Your Grace ... to, to kill a man on your name day."

“You’re lying,” Joffrey said. “I ought to drown you with him, if you care for him so much.”

“I don’t care for him, Your Grace.” The words tumbled out desperately. “Drown him or have his head off, only ... kill him on the morrow, if you like, but please ... not today, not on your name day. I couldn’t bear for you to have ill luck ... terrible luck, even for kings, the singers all say so ...”

Joffrey scowled. He knew she was lying, she could see it. He would make her bleed for this.

“The girl speaks truly,” the Hound rasped. “What a man sows on his name day, he reaps throughout the year.” His voice was flat, as if he did not care a whit whether the king believed him or no. Could it be *true*? Sansa had not known. It was just something she’d said, desperate to avoid punishment.

Unhappy, Joffrey shifted in his seat and flicked his fingers at Ser Dontos. “Take him away. I’ll have him killed on the morrow, the fool.”

“He is,” Sansa said. “A fool. You’re so clever, to see it. He’s better fitted to be a fool than a knight, isn’t he? You ought to dress him in motley and make him clown for you. He doesn’t deserve the mercy of a quick death.”

The king studied her a moment. “Perhaps you’re not so stupid as mother says.” He raised his voice. “Did you hear my lady, Dontos? From this day on, you’re my new fool. You can sleep with Moon Boy and dress in motley.”

Ser Dontos, sobered by his near brush with death, crawled to

his knees. “Thank you, Your Grace. And you, my lady. Thank you.”

As a brace of Lannister guardsmen led him off, the master of revels approached the box. “Your Grace,” he said, “shall I summon a new challenger for Brune, or proceed with the next tilt?”

“Neither. These are gnats, not knights. I’d have them all put to death, only it’s my name day. The tourney is done. Get them all out of my sight.”

The master of revels bowed, but Prince Tommen was not so obedient. “I’m supposed to ride against the straw man.”

“Not today.”

“But I want to ride!”

“I don’t care what you want.”

“Mother *said* I could ride.”

“She said,” Princess Myrcella agreed.

“Mother *said*,” mocked the king. “Don’t be childish.”

“We’re children,” Myrcella declared haughtily. “We’re *supposed* to be childish.”

The Hound laughed. “She has you there.”

Joffrey was beaten. “Very well. Even my brother couldn’t tilt any worse than these others. Master, bring out the quintain, Tommen wants to be a gnat.”

Tommen gave a shout of joy and ran off to be readied, his chubby little legs pumping hard. “Luck,” Sansa called to him.

They set up the quintain at the far end of the lists while

the prince's pony was being saddled. Tommen's opponent was a child-sized leather warrior stuffed with straw and mounted on a pivot, with a shield in one hand and a padded mace in the other. Someone had fastened a pair of antlers to the knight's head. Joffrey's father King Robert had worn antlers on his helm, Sansa remembered ... but so did his uncle Lord Renly, Robert's brother, who had turned traitor and crowned himself king.

A pair of squires buckled the prince into his ornate silver-and-crimson armor. A tall plume of red feathers sprouted from the crest of his helm, and the lion of Lannister and crowned stag of Baratheon frolicked together on his shield. The squires helped him mount, and Ser Aron Santagar, the Red Keep's master-at-arms, stepped forward and handed Tommen a blunted silver longsword with a leaf-shaped blade, crafted to fit an eight-year-old hand.

Tommen raised the blade high. "Casterly Rock!" he shouted in a high boyish voice as he put his heels into his pony and started across the hard-packed dirt at the quintain. Lady Tanda and Lord Gyles started a ragged cheer, and Sansa added her voice to theirs. The king brooded in silence.

Tommen got his pony up to a brisk trot, waved his sword vigorously, and struck the knight's shield a solid blow as he went by. The quintain spun, the padded mace flying around to give the prince a mighty whack in the back of his head. Tommen spilled from the saddle, his new armor rattling like a bag of old pots as he hit the ground. His sword went flying, his pony cantered

away across the bailey, and a great gale of derision went up. King Joffrey laughed longest and loudest of all.

“Oh,” Princess Myrcella cried. She scrambled out of the box and ran to her little brother.

Sansa found herself possessed of a queer giddy courage. “You should go with her,” she told the king. “Your brother might be hurt.”

Joffrey shrugged. “What if he is?”

“You should help him up and tell him how well he rode.” Sansa could not seem to stop herself.

“He got knocked off his horse and fell in the dirt,” the king pointed out. “That’s not riding well.”

“Look,” the Hound interrupted. “The boy has courage. He’s going to try again.”

They were helping Prince Tommen mount his pony. *If only Tommen were the elder instead of Joffrey, Sansa thought. I wouldn’t mind marrying Tommen.*

The sounds from the gatehouse took them by surprise. Chains rattled as the portcullis was drawn upward, and the great gates opened to the creak of iron hinges. “Who told them to open the gate?” Joffrey demanded. With the troubles in the city, the gates of the Red Keep had been closed for days.

A column of riders emerged from beneath the portcullis with a clink of steel and a clatter of hooves. Clegane stepped close to the king, one hand on the hilt of his longsword. The visitors were dented and haggard and dusty, yet the standard they carried

was the lion of Lannister, golden on its crimson field. A few wore the red cloaks and mail of Lannister men-at-arms, but more were freeriders and sellswords, armored in oddments and bristling with sharp steel ... and there were others, monstrous savages out of one of Old Nan's tales, the scary ones Bran used to love. They were clad in shabby skins and boiled leather, with long hair and fierce beards. Some wore blood-stained bandages over their brows or wrapped around their hands, and others were missing eyes, ears, and fingers.

In their midst, riding on a tall red horse in a strange high saddle that cradled him back and front, was the queen's dwarf brother Tyrion Lannister, the one they called the Imp. He had let his beard grow to cover his pushed-in face, until it was a bristly tangle of yellow and black hair, coarse as wire. Down his back flowed a shadowskin cloak, black fur striped with white. He held the reins in his left hand and carried his right arm in a white silk sling, but otherwise looked as grotesque as Sansa remembered from when he had visited Winterfell. With his bulging brow and mismatched eyes, he was still the ugliest man she had ever chanced to look upon.

Yet Tommen put his spurs into his pony and galloped headlong across the yard, shouting with glee. One of the savages, a huge shambling man so hairy that his face was all but lost beneath his whiskers, scooped the boy out of his saddle armor and all and deposited him on the ground beside his uncle. Tommen's breathless laughter echoed off the walls as Tyrion

clapped him on the backplate, and Sansa was startled to see that the two were of a height. Myrcella came running after her brother, and the dwarf picked her up by the waist and spun her in a circle, squealing.

When he lowered her back to the ground, the little man kissed her lightly on the brow and came waddling across the yard toward Joffrey. Two of his men followed close behind him; a black-haired, black-eyed sellsword who moved like a stalking cat, and a gaunt youth with an empty socket where one eye should have been. Tommen and Myrcella trailed after them.

The dwarf went to one knee before the king. “Your Grace.”

“You,” Joffrey said.

“Me,” the Imp agreed, “although a more courteous greeting might be in order, for an uncle and an elder.”

“They said you were dead,” the Hound said.

The little man gave the big one a look. One of his eyes was green, one was black, and both were cool. “I was speaking to the king, not to his cur.”

“*I’m glad you’re not dead,*” said Princess Myrcella.

“We share that view, sweet child.” Tyrion turned to Sansa. “My lady, I am sorry for your losses. Truly, the gods are cruel.”

Sansa could not think of a word to say to him. How could he be sorry for her losses? Was he mocking her? It wasn’t the gods who’d been cruel, it was Joffrey.

“I am sorry for your loss as well, Joffrey,” the dwarf said.

“What loss?”

“Your royal father? A large fierce man with a black beard. You’ll recall him if you try. He was king before you.”

“Oh, *him*. Yes, it was very sad, a boar killed him.”

“Is that what ‘they’ say, Your Grace?”

Joffrey frowned. Sansa felt that she ought to say something. What was it that Septa Mordane used to tell her? *A lady’s armor is courtesy*, that was it. She donned her armor and said, “I’m sorry my lady mother took you captive, my lord.”

“A great many people are sorry for that,” Tyrion replied, “and before I am done, some may be a deal sorrier ... yet I thank you for the sentiment. Joffrey, where might I find your mother?”

“She’s with my council,” the king answered. “Your brother Jaime keeps losing battles.” He gave Sansa an angry look, as if it were *her* fault. “He’s been taken by the Starks and we’ve lost Riverrun and now her stupid brother is calling himself a king.”

The dwarf smiled crookedly. “All sorts of people are calling themselves kings these days.”

Joffrey did not know what to make of that, though he looked suspicious and out of sorts. “Yes. Well. I am pleased you’re not dead, uncle. Did you bring me a gift for my name day?”

“I did. My wits.”

“I’d sooner have Robb Stark’s head,” Joff said, with a sly glance at Sansa. “Tommen, Myrcella, come.”

Sandor Clegane lingered behind a moment. “I’d guard that tongue of yours, little man,” he warned, before he strode off after his liege.

Sansa was left with the dwarf and his monsters. She tried to think of what else she might say. “You hurt your arm,” she managed at last.

“One of your northmen hit me with a morningstar during the battle on the Green Fork. I escaped him by falling off my horse.” His grin turned into something softer as he studied her face. “Is it grief for your lord father that makes you so sad?”

“My father was a traitor,” Sansa said at once. “And my brother and lady mother are traitors as well.” That reflex she had learned quickly. “I am loyal to my beloved Joffrey.”

“No doubt. As loyal as a deer surrounded by wolves.”

“Lions,” she whispered, without thinking. She glanced about nervously, but there was no one close enough to hear.

Lannister reached out and took her hand, and gave it a squeeze. “I am only a little lion, child, and I vow, I shall not savage you.” Bowing, he said, “But now you must excuse me. I have urgent business with queen and council.”

Sansa watched him walk off, his body swaying heavily from side to side with every step, like something from a grotesquerie. *He speaks more gently than Joffrey, she thought, but the queen spoke to me gently too. He’s still a Lannister, her brother and Joff’s uncle, and no friend.* Once she had loved Prince Joffrey with all her heart, and admired and trusted his mother, the queen. They had repaid that love and trust with her father’s head. Sansa would never make that mistake again.

TYRION

In the chilly white raiment of the Kingsguard, Ser Mandon Moore looked like a corpse in a shroud. “Her Grace left orders, the council in session is not to be disturbed.”

“I would be only a small disturbance, ser.” Tyrion slid the parchment from his sleeve. “I bear a letter from my father, Lord Tywin Lannister, the Hand of the King. There is his seal.”

“Her Grace does not wish to be disturbed,” Ser Mandon repeated slowly, as if Tyrion was a dullard who had not heard him the first time.

Jaime had told him once that Moore was the most dangerous of the Kingsguard—excepting himself, always—because his face gave no hint as to what he might do next. Tyrion would have welcomed a hint. Bronn and Timett could likely kill the knight if it came to swords, but it would scarcely bode well if he began by slaying one of Joffrey’s protectors. Yet if he let the man turn him away, where was his authority? He made himself smile. “Ser Mandon, you have not met my companions. This is Timett son of Timett, a red hand of the Burned Men. And this is Bronn. Perchance you recall Ser Vardis Egen, who was captain of Lord Arryn’s household guard?”

“I know the man.” Ser Mandon’s eyes were pale grey, oddly flat and lifeless.

“Knew,” Bronn corrected, with a thin smile.

Ser Mandon did not deign to show that he had heard that. “Be that as it may,” Tyrion said lightly, “I truly must see my sister and present my letter, ser. If you would be so kind as to open the door for us?”

The white knight did not respond. Tyrion was almost at the point of trying to force his way past when Ser Mandon abruptly stood aside. “You may enter. They may not.”

A small victory, he thought, *but sweet*. He had passed his first test. Tyrion Lannister shouldered through the door, feeling almost tall. Five members of the king’s small council broke off their discussion suddenly. “You,” his sister Cersei said, in a tone that was equal parts disbelief and distaste.

“I can see where Joffrey learned his courtesies.” Tyrion paused to admire the pair of Valyrian sphinxes that guarded the door, affecting an air of casual confidence. Cersei could smell weakness the way a dog smelled fear.

“What are you doing here?” His sister’s lovely green eyes studied him without the least hint of affection.

“Delivering a letter from our lord father.” He sauntered to the table and placed the tightly rolled parchment between them.

The eunuch Varys took the letter and turned it in his delicate powdered hands. “How kind of Lord Tywin. And his sealing wax is such a lovely shade of gold.” Varys gave the seal a close inspection. “It gives every appearance of being genuine.”

“Of course it’s genuine.” Cersei snatched it out of his hands. She broke the wax and unrolled the parchment.

Tyrion watched her read. His sister had taken the king's seat for herself—he gathered Joffrey did not often trouble to attend council meetings, no more than Robert had—so Tyrion climbed up into the Hand's chair. It seemed only appropriate.

“This is absurd,” the queen said at last. “My lord father has sent my brother to sit in his place in this council. He bids us accept Tyrion as the Hand of the King, until such time as he himself can join us.”

Grand Maester Pycelle stroked his flowing white beard and nodded ponderously. “It would seem that a welcome is in order.”

“Indeed.” Jowly, balding Janos Slynt looked rather like a frog, a smug frog who had gotten rather above himself. “We have sore need of you, my lord. Rebellion everywhere, this grim omen in the sky, rioting in the city streets . . .”

“And whose fault is that, Lord Janos?” Cersei lashed out. “Your gold cloaks are charged with keeping order. As to you, Tyrion, you could better serve us on the field of battle.”

He laughed. “No, I'm done with fields of battle, thank you. I sit a chair better than a horse, and I'd sooner hold a wine goblet than a battleaxe. All that about the thunder of the drums, sunlight flashing on armor, magnificent destriers snorting and prancing? Well, the drums gave me headaches, the sunlight flashing on my armor cooked me up like a harvest day goose, and those magnificent destriers shit *everywhere*. Not that I am complaining. Compared to the hospitality I enjoyed in the Vale of Arryn, drums, horseshit, and fly bites are my favorite things.”

Littlefinger laughed. “Well said, Lannister. A man after my own heart.”

Tyion smiled at him, remembering a certain dagger with a dragonbone hilt and a Valyrian steel blade. *We must have a talk about that, and soon.* He wondered if Lord Petyr would find that subject amusing as well. “Please,” he told them, “do let me be of service, in whatever *small* way I can.”

Cersei read the letter again. “How many men have you brought with you?”

“A few hundred. My own men, chiefly. Father was loath to part with any of his. He *is* fighting a war, after all.”

“What use will your few hundred men be if Renly marches on the city, or Stannis sails from Dragonstone? I ask for an army and my father sends me a dwarf. The *king* names the Hand, with the consent of council. Joffrey named our lord father.”

“And our lord father named me.”

“He cannot do that. Not without Joff’s consent.”

“Lord Tywin is at Harrenhal with his host, if you’d care to take it up with him,” Tyion said politely. “My lords, perchance you would permit me a private word with my sister?”

Varys slithered to his feet, smiling in that unctuous way he had. “How you must have yearned for the sound of your sweet sister’s voice. My lords, please, let us give them a few moments together. The woes of our troubled realm shall keep.”

Janos Slynt rose hesitantly and Grand Maester Pycelle ponderously, yet they rose. Littlefinger was the last. “Shall I tell

the steward to prepare chambers in Maegor's Holdfast?"

"My thanks, Lord Petyr, but I will be taking Lord Stark's former quarters in the Tower of the Hand."

Littlefinger laughed. "You're a braver man than me, Lannister. You *do* know the fate of our last two Hands?"

"Two? If you mean to frighten me, why not say four?"

"Four?" Littlefinger raised an eyebrow. "Did the Hands before Lord Arryn meet some dire end in the Tower? I'm afraid I was too young to pay them much mind."

"Aerys Targaryen's last Hand was killed during the Sack of King's Landing, though I doubt he'd had time to settle into the Tower. He was only Hand for a fortnight. The one before him was burned to death. And before them came two others who died landless and penniless in exile, and counted themselves lucky. I believe my lord father was the last Hand to depart King's Landing with his name, properties, and parts all intact."

"Fascinating," said Littlefinger. "And all the more reason I'd sooner bed down in the dungeon."

Perhaps you'll get that wish, Tyrion thought, but he said, "Courage and folly are cousins, or so I've heard. Whatever curse may linger over the Tower of the Hand, I pray I'm small enough to escape its notice."

Janos Slynt laughed, Littlefinger smiled, and Grand Maester Pycelle followed them both out, bowing gravely.

"I hope father did not send you all this way to plague us with history lessons," his sister said when they were alone.

“How I have yearned for the sound of your sweet voice,” Tyrion sighed to her.

“How I have yearned to have that eunuch’s tongue pulled out with hot pincers,” Cersei replied. “Has father lost his senses? Or did you forge this letter?” She read it once more, with mounting annoyance. “Why would he inflict *you* on me? I wanted him to come himself.” She crushed Lord Tywin’s letter in her fingers. “I am Joffrey’s regent, and I sent him a royal *command!*”

“And he ignored you,” Tyrion pointed out. “He has quite a large army, he can do that. Nor is he the first. Is he?”

Cersei’s mouth tightened. He could see her color rising. “If I name this letter a forgery and tell them to throw you in a dungeon, no one will ignore *that*, I promise you.”

He was walking on rotten ice now, Tyrion knew. One false step and he would plunge through. “No one,” he agreed amiably, “least of all our father. The one with the army. But why should you want to throw me into a dungeon, sweet sister, when I’ve come all this long way to help you?”

“I do not require *your* help. It was our father’s presence that I commanded.”

“Yes,” he said quietly, “but it’s Jaime you want.”

His sister fancied herself subtle, but he had grown up with her. He could read her face like one of his favorite books, and what he read now was rage, and fear, and despair. “Jaime—”

“—is my brother no less than yours,” Tyrion interrupted. “Give me your support and I promise you, we will have Jaime

freed and returned to us unharmed.”

“How?” Cersei demanded. “The Stark boy and his mother are not likely to forget that we beheaded Lord Eddard.”

“True,” Tyrion agreed, “yet you still hold his daughters, don’t you? I saw the older girl out in the yard with Joffrey.”

“Sansa,” the queen said. “I’ve given it out that I have the younger brat as well, but it’s a lie. I sent Meryn Trant to take her in hand when Robert died, but her wretched dancing master interfered and the girl fled. No one has seen her since. Likely she’s dead. A great many people died that day.”

Tyrion had hoped for both Stark girls, but he supposed one would have to do. “Tell me about our friends on the council.”

His sister glanced at the door. “What of them?”

“Father seems to have taken a dislike to them. When I left him, he was wondering how their heads might look on the wall beside Lord Stark’s.” He leaned forward across the table. “Are you certain of their loyalty? Do you trust them?”

“I trust no one,” Cersei snapped. “I need them. Does father believe they are playing us false?”

“Suspects, rather.”

“Why? What does he know?”

Tyrion shrugged. “He knows that your son’s short reign has been a long parade of follies and disasters. That suggests that someone is giving Joffrey some very bad counsel.”

Cersei gave him a searching look. “Joff has had no lack of good counsel. He’s always been strong-willed. Now that he’s

king, he believes he should do as he pleases, not as he's bid."

"Crowns do queer things to the heads beneath them," Tyrion agreed. "This business with Eddard Stark ... Joffrey's work?"

The queen grimaced. "He was instructed to pardon Stark, to allow him to take the black. The man would have been out of our way forever, and we might have made peace with that son of his, but Joff took it upon himself to give the mob a better show. What was I to do? He called for Lord Eddard's head in front of half the city. And Janos Slynt and Ser Ilyn went ahead blithely and shortened the man without a word from me!" Her hand tightened into a fist. "The High Septon claims we profaned Baelor's Sept with blood, after lying to him about our intent."

"It would seem he has a point," said Tyrion. "So this *Lord* Slynt, he was part of it, was he? Tell me, whose fine notion was it to grant him Harrenhal and name him to the council?"

"Littlefinger made the arrangements. We needed Slynt's gold cloaks. Eddard Stark was plotting with Renly and he'd written to Lord Stannis, offering him the throne. We might have lost all. Even so, it was a close thing. If Sansa hadn't come to me and told me all her father's plans ..."

Tyrion was surprised. "Truly? His own daughter?" Sansa had always seemed such a sweet child, tender and courteous.

"The girl was wet with love. She would have done *anything* for Joffrey, until he cut off her father's head and called it mercy. That put an end to that."

"His Grace has a unique way of winning the hearts of his

subjects,” Tyrion said with a crooked smile. “Was it Joffrey’s wish to dismiss Ser Barristan Selmy from his Kingsguard too?”

Cersei sighed. “Joff wanted someone to blame for Robert’s death. Varys suggested Ser Barristan. Why not? It gave Jaime command of the Kingsguard and a seat on the small council, and allowed Joff to throw a bone to his dog. He is very fond of Sandor Clegane. We were prepared to offer Selmy some land and a towerhouse, more than the useless old fool deserved.”

“I hear that useless old fool slew two of Slynt’s gold cloaks when they tried to seize him at the Mud Gate.”

His sister looked very unhappy. “Janos should have sent more men. He is not as competent as might be wished.”

“Ser Barristan was the Lord Commander of Robert Baratheon’s Kingsguard,” Tyrion reminded her pointedly. “He and Jaime are the only survivors of Aerys Targaryen’s seven. The smallfolk talk of him in the same way they talk of Serwyn of the Mirror Shield and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight. What do you imagine they’ll think when they see Barristan the Bold riding beside Robb Stark or Stannis Baratheon?”

Cersei glanced away. “I had not considered that.”

“Father did,” said Tyrion. “*That* is why he sent me. To put an end to these follies and bring your son to heel.”

“Joff will be no more tractable for you than for me.”

“He might.”

“Why should he?”

“He knows *you* would never hurt him.”

Cersei's eyes narrowed. "If you believe I'd ever allow you to harm my son, you're sick with fever."

Tyrion sighed. She'd missed the point, as she did so often. "Joffrey is as safe with me as he is with you," he assured her, "but so long as the boy *feels* threatened, he'll be more inclined to listen." He took her hand. "I *am* your brother, you know. You need me, whether you care to admit it or no. Your son needs me, if he's to have a hope of retaining that ugly iron chair."

His sister seemed shocked that he would touch her. "You have always been cunning."

"In my own small way." He grinned.

"It may be worth the trying ... but make no mistake, Tyrion. If I accept you, you shall be the King's Hand in name, but *my* Hand in truth. You will share all your plans and intentions with me before you act, and you will do *nothing* without my consent. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes."

"Do you agree?"

"Certainly," he lied. "I am yours, sister." *For as long as I need to be.* "So, now that we are of one purpose, we ought have no more secrets between us. You say Joffrey had Lord Eddard killed, Varys dismissed Ser Barristan, and Littlefinger gifted us with Lord Slynt. Who murdered Jon Arryn?"

Cersei yanked her hand back. "How should I know?"

"The grieving widow in the Eyrie seems to think it was me. Where did she come by that notion, I wonder?"

“I’m sure I don’t know. That fool Eddard Stark accused me of the same thing. He hinted that Lord Arryn suspected or ... well, believed ...”

“That you were fucking our sweet Jaime?”

She slapped him.

“Did you think I was blind as father?” Tyrion rubbed his cheek. “Who you lay with is no matter to me ... although it doesn’t seem quite just that you should open your legs for one brother and not the other.”

She slapped him.

“Be gentle, Cersei, I’m only jesting with you. If truth be told, I’d sooner have a nice whore. I never understood what Jaime saw in you, apart from his own reflection.”

She slapped him.

His cheeks were red and burning, yet he smiled. “If you keep doing that, I may get angry.”

That stayed her hand. “Why should I care if you do?”

“I have some new friends,” Tyrion confessed. “You won’t like them at all. How did you kill Robert?”

“He did that himself. All we did was help. When Lancel saw that Robert was going after boar, he gave him strongwine. His favorite sour red, but fortified, three times as potent as he was used to. The great stinking fool loved it. He could have stopped swilling it down any time he cared to, but no, he drained one skin and told Lancel to fetch another. The boar did the rest. You should have been at the feast, Tyrion. There has never been a

boar so delicious. They cooked it with mushrooms and apples, and it tasted like triumph.”

“Truly, sister, you were born to be a widow.” Tyrion had rather liked Robert Baratheon, great blustering oaf that he was ... doubtless in part because his sister loathed him so. “Now, if you are done slapping me, I will be off.” He twisted his legs around and clambered down awkwardly from the chair.

Cersei frowned. “I haven’t given you leave to depart. I want to know how you intend to free Jaime.”

“I’ll tell you when I know. Schemes are like fruit, they require a certain ripening. Right now, I have a mind to ride through the streets and take the measure of this city.” Tyrion rested his hand on the head of the sphinx beside the door. “One parting request. Kindly make certain no harm comes to Sansa Stark. It would not do to lose *both* the daughters.”

Outside the council chamber, Tyrion nodded to Ser Mandon and made his way down the long vaulted hall. Bronn fell in beside him. Of Timett son of Timett there was no sign. “Where’s our red hand?” Tyrion asked.

“He felt an urge to explore. His kind was not made for waiting about in halls.”

“I hope he doesn’t kill anyone important.” The clansmen Tyrion had brought down from their fastnesses in the Mountains of the Moon were loyal in their own fierce way, but they were proud and quarrelsome as well, prone to answer insults real or imagined with steel. “Try to find him. And while you are at it,

see that the rest have been quartered and fed. I want them in the barracks beneath the Tower of the Hand, but don't let the steward put the Stone Crows near the Moon Brothers, and tell him the Burned Men must have a hall all to themselves.”

“Where will you be?”

“I'm riding back to the Broken Anvil.”

Bronn grinned insolently. “Need an escort? The talk is, the streets are dangerous.”

“I'll call upon the captain of my sister's household guard, and remind him that I am no less a Lannister than she is. He needs to recall that his oath is to Casterly Rock, not to Cersei or Joffrey.”

An hour later, Tyrion rode from the Red Keep accompanied by a dozen Lannister guardsmen in crimson cloaks and lion-crested halfhelms. As they passed beneath the portcullis, he noted the heads mounted atop the walls. Black with rot and old tar, they had long since become unrecognizable. “Captain Vylarr,” he called, “I want those taken down on the morrow. Give them to the silent sisters for cleaning.” It would be hell to match them with the bodies, he supposed, yet it must be done. Even in the midst of war, certain decencies needed to be observed.

Vylarr grew hesitant. “His Grace has told us he wishes the traitors' heads to remain on the walls until he fills those last three empty spikes there on the end.”

“Let me hazard a wild stab. One is for Robb Stark, the others for Lords Stannis and Renly. Would that be right?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“My nephew is thirteen years old today, Vylarr. Try and recall that. I’ll have the heads down on the morrow, or one of those empty spikes may have a different lodger. Do you take my meaning, captain?”

“I’ll see that they’re taken down myself, my lord.”

“Good.” Tyrion put his heels into his horse and trotted away, leaving the red cloaks to follow as best they could.

He had told Cersei he intended to take the measure of the city. That was not entirely a lie. Tyrion Lannister was not pleased by much of what he saw. The streets of King’s Landing had always been teeming and raucous and noisy, but now they reeked of danger in a way that he did not recall from past visits. A naked corpse sprawled in the gutter near the Street of Looms, being torn at by a pack of feral dogs, yet no one seemed to care. Watchmen were much in evidence, moving in pairs through the alleys in their gold cloaks and shirts of black ringmail, iron cudgels never far from their hands. The markets were crowded with ragged men selling their household goods for any price they could get ... and conspicuously empty of farmers selling food. What little produce he did see was three times as costly as it had been a year ago. One peddler was hawking rats roasted on a skewer. “*Fresh rats*,” he cried loudly, “*fresh rats*.” Doubtless fresh rats were to be preferred to old stale rotten rats. The frightening thing was, the rats looked more appetizing than most of what the butchers were selling. On the Street of Flour, Tyrion saw guards at every other shop door. When times grew lean, even bakers found sellswords

cheaper than bread, he reflected.

“There is no food coming in, is there?” he said to Vylarr.

“Little enough,” the captain admitted. “With the war in the riverlands and Lord Renly raising rebels in Highgarden, the roads are closed to south and west.”

“And what has my good sister done about this?”

“She is taking steps to restore the king’s peace,” Vylarr assured him. “Lord Slynt has tripled the size of the City Watch, and the queen has put a thousand craftsman to work on our defenses. The stonemasons are strengthening the walls, carpenters are building scorpions and catapults by the hundred, fletchers are making arrows, the smiths are forging blades, and the Alchemists’ Guild has pledged ten thousand jars of wildfire.”

Tyrion shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. He was pleased that Cersei had not been idle, but wildfire was treacherous stuff, and ten thousand jars were enough to turn all of King’s Landing into cinders. “Where has my sister found the coin to pay for all of this?” It was no secret that King Robert had left the crown vastly in debt, and alchemists were seldom mistaken for altruists.

“Lord Littlefinger always finds a way, my lord. He has imposed a tax on those wishing to enter the city.”

“Yes, that would work,” Tyrion said, thinking, *Clever. Clever and cruel.* Tens of thousands had fled the fighting for the supposed safety of King’s Landing. He had seen them on the kingsroad, troupes of mothers and children and anxious fathers who had gazed on his horses and wagons with covetous eyes.

Once they reached the city they would doubtless pay over all they had to put those high comforting walls between them and the war ... though they might think twice if they knew about the wildfire.

The inn beneath the sign of the broken anvil stood within sight of those walls, near the Gate of the Gods where they had entered that morning. As they rode into its courtyard, a boy ran out to help Tyrion down from his horse. "Take your men back to the castle," he told Vylarr. "I'll be spending the night here."

The captain looked dubious. "Will you be safe, my lord?"

"Well, as to that, captain, when I left the inn this morning it was full of Black Ears. One is never quite safe when Chella daughter of Cheyk is about." Tyrion waddled toward the door, leaving Vylarr to puzzle at his meaning.

A gust of merriment greeted him as he shoved into the inn's common room. He recognized Chella's throaty chuckle and the lighter music of Shae's laughter. The girl was seated by the hearth, sipping wine at a round wooden table with three of the Black Ears he'd left to guard her and a plump man whose back was to him. The innkeep, he assumed ... until Shae called Tyrion by name and the intruder rose. "My good lord, I am *so* pleased to see you," he gushed, a soft eunuch's smile on his powdered face.

Tyrion stumbled. "Lord Varys. I had not thought to see you here." *The Others take him, how did he find them so quickly?*

"Forgive me if I intrude," Varys said. "I was taken by a sudden urge to meet your young lady."

"Young lady," Shae repeated, savoring the words. "You're half

right, m'lord. I'm young."

Eighteen, Tyrion thought. *Eighteen, and a whore, but quick of wit, nimble as a cat between the sheets, with large dark eyes and fine black hair and a sweet, soft, hungry little mouth ... and mine! Damn you, eunuch.* "I fear I'm the intruder, Lord Varys," he said with forced courtesy. "When I came in, you were in the midst of some merriment."

"M'lord Varys complimented Chella on her ears and said she must have killed many men to have such a fine necklace," Shae explained. It grated on him to hear her call Varys *m'lord* in that tone; that was what she called him in their pillow play. "And Chella told him only cowards kill the vanquished."

"Braver to leave the man alive, with a chance to cleanse his shame by winning back his ear," explained Chella, a small dark woman whose grisly neckware was hung with no less than forty-six dried wrinkled ears. Tyrion had counted them once. "Only so can you prove you do not fear your enemies."

Shae hooted. "And then m'lord says if he was a Black Ear he'd never sleep, for dreams of one-eared men."

"A problem I will never need face," Tyrion said. "I'm terrified of my enemies, so I kill them all."

Varys giggled. "Will you take some wine with us, my lord?"

"I'll take some wine." Tyrion seated himself beside Shae. He understood what was happening here, if Chella and the girl did not. Varys was delivering a message. When he said, *I was taken by a sudden urge to meet your young lady*, what he meant was,

You tried to hide her, but I knew where she was, and who she was, and here I am. He wondered who had betrayed him. The innkeep, that boy in the stable, a guard on the gate ... or one of his own?

“I always like to return to the city through the Gate of the Gods,” Varys told Shae as he filled the wine cups. “The carvings on the gatehouse are exquisite, they make me weep each time I see them. The eyes ... so expressive, don’t you think? They almost seem to follow you as you ride beneath the portcullis.”

“I never noticed, m’lord,” Shae replied. “I’ll look again on the morrow, if it please you.”

Don’t bother, sweetling, Tyrion thought, swirling the wine in the cup. *He cares not a whit about carvings. The eyes he boasts of are his own. What he means is that he was watching, that he knew we were here the moment we passed through the gates.*

“Do be careful, child,” Varys urged. “King’s Landing is not wholly safe these days. I know these streets well, and yet I almost feared to come today, alone and unarmed as I was. Lawless men are everywhere in this dark time, oh yes. Men with cold steel and colder hearts.” *Where I can come alone and unarmed, others can come with swords in their fists,* he was saying.

Shae only laughed. “If they try and bother me, they’ll be one ear short when Chella runs them off.”

Varys hooted as if that was the funniest thing he had ever heard, but there was no laughter in his eyes when he turned them on Tyrion. “Your young lady has an amiable way to her. I should

take very good care of her if I were you.”

“I intend to. Any man who tries to harm her—well, I’m too small to be a Black Ear, and I make no claims to courage.” *See? I speak the same tongue you do, eunuch. Hurt her, and I’ll have your head.*

“I will leave you.” Varys rose. “I know how weary you must be. I only wished to welcome you, my lord, and tell you how very pleased I am by your arrival. We have dire need of you on the council. Have you seen the comet?”

“I’m short, not blind,” Tyrion said. Out on the kingsroad, it had seemed to cover half the sky, outshining the crescent moon.

“In the streets, they call it the Red Messenger,” Varys said. “They say it comes as a herald before a king, to warn of fire and blood to follow.” The eunuch rubbed his powdered hands together. “May I leave you with a bit of a riddle, Lord Tyrion?” He did not wait for an answer. “In a room sit three great men, a king, a priest, and a rich man with his gold. Between them stands a sellsword, a little man of common birth and no great mind. Each of the great ones bids him slay the other two. ‘Do it,’ says the king, ‘for I am your lawful ruler.’ ‘Do it,’ says the priest, ‘for I command you in the names of the gods.’ ‘Do it,’ says the rich man, ‘and all this gold shall be yours.’ So tell me—who lives and who dies?” Bowing deeply, the eunuch hurried from the common room on soft slippers feet.

When he was gone, Chella gave a snort and Shae wrinkled up her pretty face. “The rich man lives. Doesn’t he?”

Tyrion sipped at his wine, thoughtful. “Perhaps. Or not. That would depend on the sellsword, it seems.” He set down his cup. “Come, let’s go upstairs.”

She had to wait for him at the top of the steps, for her legs were slim and supple while his were short and stunted and full of aches. But she was smiling when he reached her. “Did you miss me?” she teased as she took his hand.

“Desperately,” Tyrion admitted. Shae only stood a shade over five feet, yet still he must look up to her ... but in her case he found he did not mind. She was sweet to look up at.

“You’ll miss me all the time in your Red Keep,” she said as she led him to her room. “All alone in your cold bed in your Tower of the Hand.”

“Too true.” Tyrion would gladly have kept her with him, but his lord father had forbidden it. *You will not take the whore to court*, Lord Tywin had commanded. Bringing her to the city was as much defiance as he dared. All his authority derived from his father, the girl had to understand that. “You won’t be far,” he promised. “You’ll have a house, with guards and servants, and I’ll visit as often as I’m able.”

Shae kicked shut the door. Through the cloudy panes of the narrow window, he could make out the Great Sept of Baelor crowning Visenya’s Hill, but Tyrion was distracted by a different sight. Bending, Shae took her gown by the hem, drew it over her head, and tossed it aside. She did not believe in smallclothes. “You’ll never be able to rest,” she said as she stood before him,

pink and nude and lovely, one hand braced on her hip. “You’ll think of me every time you go to bed. Then you’ll get hard and you’ll have no one to help you and you’ll never be able to sleep unless you—” She grinned that wicked grin Tyrion liked so well. “—is *that* why they call it the Tower of the Hand, m’lord?”

“Be quiet and kiss me,” he commanded.

He could taste the wine on her lips, and feel her small firm breasts pressed against him as her fingers moved to the lacings of his breeches. “My lion,” she whispered when he broke off the kiss to undress. “My sweet lord, my giant of Lannister.” Tyrion pushed her toward the bed. When he entered her, she screamed loud enough to wake Baelor the Blessed in his tomb, and her nails left gouges in his back. He’d never had a pain he liked half so well.

Fool, he thought to himself afterwards, as they lay in the center of the sagging mattress amidst the rumpled sheets. *Will you never learn, dwarf? She’s a whore, damn you, it’s your coin she loves, not your cock. Remember Tysha?* Yet when his fingers trailed lightly over one nipple, it stiffened at the touch, and he could see the mark on her breast where he’d bitten her in his passion.

“So what will you do, m’lord, now that you’re the Hand of the King?” Shae asked him as he cupped that warm sweet flesh.

“Something Cersei will never expect,” Tyrion murmured softly against her slender neck. “I’ll do ... justice.”

BRAN

Bran preferred the hard stone of the window seat to the comforts of his featherbed and blankets. A bed, the walls pressed close and the ceiling hung heavy above him; a bed, the room was his cell, and Winterfell his prison. Yet outside his window, the wide world still called.

He could not walk, nor climb nor hunt nor fight with a wooden sword as once he had, but he could still *look*. He liked to watch the windows begin to glow all over Winterfell as candles and hearth fires were lit behind the diamond-shaped panes of tower and hall, and he loved to listen to the direwolves sing to the stars.

Of late, he often dreamed of wolves. *They are talking to me, brother to brother*, he told himself when the direwolves howled. He could almost understand them ... not quite, not truly, but *almost* ... as if they were singing in a language he had once known and somehow forgotten. The Walders might be scared of them, but the Starks had wolf blood. Old Nan told him so. "Though it is stronger in some than in others," she warned.

Summer's howls were long and sad, full of grief and longing. Shaggydog's were more savage. Their voices echoed through the yards and halls until the castle rang and it seemed as though some great pack of direwolves haunted Winterfell, instead of only two ... two where there had once been six. *Do they miss their brothers and sisters too*, Bran wondered? *Are they calling to Grey Wind*

and Ghost, to Nymeria and Lady's shade? Do they want them to come home and be a pack together?

“Who can know the mind of a wolf?” Ser Rodrik Cassel said when Bran asked him why they howled. Bran’s lady mother had named him castellan of Winterfell in her absence, and his duties left him little time for idle questions.

“It’s freedom they’re calling for,” declared Farlen, who was kennelmaster and had no more love for the direwolves than his hounds did. “They don’t like being walled up, and who’s to blame them? Wild things belong in the wild, not in a castle.”

“They want to hunt,” agreed Gage the cook, as he tossed cubes of suet in a great kettle of stew. “A wolf smells better’n any man. Like as not, they’ve caught the scent o’prey.”

Maester Luwin did not think so. “Wolves often howl at the moon. These are howling at the comet. See how bright it is, Bran? Perchance they think it *is* the moon.”

When Bran repeated that to Osha, she laughed aloud. “Your wolves have more wit than your maester,” the wildling woman said. “They know truths the grey man has forgotten.” The way she said it made him shiver, and when he asked what the comet meant, she answered, “Blood and fire, boy, and nothing sweet.”

Bran asked Septon Chayle about the comet while they were sorting through some scrolls snatched from the library fire. “It is the sword that slays the season,” he replied, and soon after the white raven came from Oldtown bringing word of autumn, so doubtless he was right.

Though Old Nan did not think so, and she'd lived longer than any of them. "Dragons," she said, lifting her head and sniffing. She was near blind and could not see the comet, yet she claimed she could *smell* it. "It be dragons, boy," she insisted. Bran got no *princes* from Nan, no more than he ever had.

Hodor said only, "Hodor." That was all he ever said.

And still the direwolves howled. The guards on the walls muttered curses, hounds in the kennels barked furiously, horses kicked at their stalls, the Walders shivered by their fire, and even Maester Luwin complained of sleepless nights. Only Bran did not mind. Ser Rodrik had confined the wolves to the godswood after Shaggydog bit Little Walder, but the stones of Winterfell played queer tricks with sound, and sometimes it sounded as if they were in the yard right below Bran's window. Other times he would have sworn they were up on the curtain walls, loping round like sentries. He wished that he could see them.

He *could* see the comet hanging above the Guards Hall and the Bell Tower, and further back the First Keep, squat and round, its gargoyles black shapes against the bruised purple dusk. Once Bran had known every stone of those buildings, inside and out; he had climbed them all, scampering up walls as easily as other boys ran down stairs. Their rooftops had been his secret places, and the crows atop the broken tower his special friends.

And then he had fallen.

Bran did not remember falling, yet they said he had, so he supposed it must be true. He had almost died. When he saw

the weatherworn gargoyles atop the First Keep where it had happened, he got a queer tight feeling in his belly. And now he could not climb, nor walk nor run nor swordfight, and the dreams he'd dreamt of knighthood had soured in his head.

Summer had howled the day Bran had fallen, and for long after as he lay broken in his bed; Robb had told him so before he went away to war. Summer had mourned for him, and Shaggydog and Grey Wind had joined in his grief. And the night the bloody raven had brought word of their father's death, the wolves had known that too. Bran had been in the maester's turret with Rickon talking of the children of the forest when Summer and Shaggydog had drowned out Luwin with their howls.

Who are they mourning now? Had some enemy slain the King in the North, who used to be his brother Robb? Had his bastard brother Jon Snow fallen from the Wall? Had his mother died, or one of his sisters? Or was this something else, as maester and septon and Old Nan seemed to think?

If I were truly a direwolf, I would understand the song, he thought wistfully. In his wolf dreams, he could race up the sides of mountains, jagged icy mountains taller than any tower, and stand at the summit beneath the full moon with all the world below him, the way it used to be.

"Oooo," Bran cried tentatively. He cupped his hands around his mouth and lifted his head to the comet. "Oooooooooooooooooooooo, ahoooooooooooooooooooo," he howled. It sounded stupid, high and hollow and quavering, a little boy's

howl, not a wolf's. Yet Summer gave answer, his deep voice drowning out Bran's thin one, and Shaggydog made it a chorus. Bran *harooed* again. They howled together, last of their pack.

The noise brought a guard to his door, Hayhead with the wen on his nose. He peered in, saw Bran howling out the window, and said, "What's this, my prince?"

It made Bran feel queer when they called him prince, though he *was* Robb's heir, and Robb was King in the North now. He turned his head to howl at the guard. "*Oooooooooo, Oo-oo-oooooooooooooooo.*"

Hayhead screwed up his face. "Now you stop that there."

"*Ooo-ooo-oooooooo. Ooo-ooo-oooooooooooooooooooooooo.*"

The guardsman retreated. When he came back, Maester Luwin was with him, all in grey, his chain tight about his neck. "Bran, those beasts make sufficient noise without your help." He crossed the room and put his hand on the boy's brow. "The hour grows late, you ought to be fast asleep."

"I'm talking to the wolves." Bran brushed the hand away.

"Shall I have Hayhead carry you to your bed?"

"I can get to bed myself." Mikken had hammered a row of iron bars into the wall, so Bran could pull himself about the room with his arms. It was slow and hard and it made his shoulders ache, but he hated being carried. "Anyway, I don't have to sleep if I don't want to."

"All men must sleep, Bran. Even princes."

"When I sleep I turn into a wolf." Bran turned his face away

and looked back out into the night. “Do wolves dream?”

“All creatures dream, I think, yet not as men do.”

“Do dead men dream?” Bran asked, thinking of his father. In the dark crypts below Winterfell, a stonemason was chiseling out his father’s likeness in granite.

“Some say yes, some no,” the maester answered. “The dead themselves are silent on the matter.”

“Do trees dream?”

“Trees? No ...”

“They do,” Bran said with sudden certainty. “They dream tree dreams. I dream of a tree sometimes. A weirwood, like the one in the godswood. It calls to me. The wolf dreams are better. I smell things, and sometimes I can taste the blood.”

Maester Luwin tugged at his chain where it chafed his neck. “If you would only spend more time with the other children—”

“I hate the other children,” Bran said, meaning the Walders. “I commanded you to send them away.”

Luwin grew stern. “The Freys are your lady mother’s wards, sent here to be fostered at her express command. It is not for you to expel them, nor is it kind. If we turned them out, where would they go?”

“Home. It’s their fault you won’t let me have Summer.”

“The Frey boy did not ask to be attacked,” the maester said, “no more than I did.”

“That was Shaggydog.” Rickon’s big black wolf was so wild he even frightened Bran at times. “Summer never bit anyone.”

“Summer ripped out a man’s throat in this very chamber, or have you forgotten? The truth is, those sweet pups you and your brothers found in the snow have grown into dangerous beasts. The Frey boys are wise to be wary of them.”

“We should put the Walders in the godswood. They could play lord of the crossing all they want, and Summer could sleep with me again. If I’m the prince, why won’t you heed me? I wanted to ride Dancer, but Alebelly wouldn’t let me pass the gate.”

“And rightly so. The wolfswood is full of danger. Your last ride should have taught you that. Would you want some outlaw to take you captive and sell you to the Lannisters?”

“Summer would save me,” Bran insisted stubbornly. “Princes should be allowed to sail the sea and hunt boar in the wolfswood and joust with lances.”

“Bran, child, why do you torment yourself so? One day you may do some of these things, but now you are only a boy of eight.”

“I’d sooner be a wolf. Then I could live in the wood and sleep when I wanted, and I could find Arya and Sansa. I’d *smell* where they were and go save them, and when Robb went to battle I’d fight beside him like Grey Wind. I’d tear out the Kingslayer’s throat with my teeth, *rip*, and then the war would be over and everyone would come back to Winterfell. If I was a wolf ...” He howled. “*Ooo-ooo-ooooooooooooo.*”

Luwin raised his voice. “A true prince would welcome—”

“*AAHOOOOOOO,*” Bran howled, louder. “*OOOO-OOOO-*

0000.”

The maester surrendered. “As you will, child.” With a look that was part grief and part disgust, he left the bedchamber.

Howling lost its savor once Bran was alone. After a time he quieted. *I did welcome them*, he told himself, resentful. *I was the lord in Winterfell, a true lord, he can't say I wasn't*. When the Walders had arrived from the Twins, it had been Rickon who wanted them gone. A baby of four, he had screamed that he wanted mother and father and Robb, not these strangers. It had been up to Bran to soothe him and bid the Freys welcome. He had offered them meat and mead and a seat by the fire, and even Maester Luwin had said afterward that he'd done well.

Only that was before the game.

The game was played with a log, a staff, a body of water, and a great deal of shouting. The water was the most important, Walder and Walder assured Bran. You could use a plank or even a series of stones, and a branch could be your staff. You didn't *have* to shout. But without water, there was no game. As Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrik were not about to let the children go wandering off into the wolfswood in search of a stream, they made do with one of the murky pools in the godswood. Walder and Walder had never seen hot water bubbling from the ground before, but they both allowed how it would make the game even better.

Both of them were called Walder Frey. Big Walder said there were bunches of Walders at the Twins, all named after the boys' grandfather, Lord Walder Frey. “We have our *own* names at

Winterfell,” Rickon told them haughtily when he heard that.

The way their game was played, you laid the log across the water, and one player stood in the middle with the stick. He was the lord of the crossing, and when the other players came up, he had to say, “I am the lord of the crossing, who goes there?” And the other player had to make up a speech about who they were and why they should be allowed to cross. The lord could make them swear oaths and answer questions. They didn’t have to tell the truth, but the oaths were binding unless they said “Mayhaps,” so the trick was to say “Mayhaps” so the lord of the crossing didn’t notice. Then you could try to knock the lord into the water and *you* got to be lord of the crossing, but only if you’d said “Mayhaps.” Otherwise you were out of the game. The lord got to knock anyone in the water anytime he pleased, and he was the only one who got to use a stick.

In practice, the game seemed to come down to mostly shoving, hitting, and falling into the water, along with a lot of loud arguments about whether or not someone had said “Mayhaps.” Little Walder was lord of the crossing more often than not.

He was Little Walder even though he was tall and stout, with a red face and a big round belly. Big Walder was sharp-faced and skinny and half a foot shorter. “He’s fifty-two days older than me,” Little Walder explained, “so he was bigger at first, but I grew faster.”

“We’re cousins, not brothers,” added Big Walder, the little one. “I’m Walder son of Jammos. My father was Lord Walder’s

son by his fourth wife. He's Walder son of Merrett. His grandmother was Lord Walder's third wife, the Crakehall. He's ahead of me in the line of succession even though I'm older."

"Only by fifty-two days," Little Walder objected. "And neither of us will ever hold the Twins, stupid."

"I will," Big Walder declared. "We're not the only Walders either. Ser Stevron has a grandson, Black Walder, he's fourth in line of succession, and there's Red Walder, Ser Emmon's son, and Bastard Walder, who isn't in the line at all. He's called Walder Rivers not Walder Frey. Plus there's girls named Walda."

"And Tyr. You always forget Tyr."

"He's Waltyr, not Walder," Big Walder said airily. "And he's after us, so he doesn't matter. Anyhow, I never liked him."

Ser Rodrik decreed that they would share Jon Snow's old bedchamber, since Jon was in the Night's Watch and never coming back. Bran hated that; it made him feel as if the Freys were trying to steal Jon's place.

He had watched wistfully while the Walders contested with Turnip the cook's boy and Joseth's girls Bandy and Shyra. The Walders had decreed that Bran should be the judge and decide whether or not people had said "Mayhaps," but as soon as they started playing they forgot all about him.

The shouts and splashes soon drew others: Palla the kennel girl, Cayn's boy Calon, TomToo whose father Fat Tom had died with Bran's father at King's Landing. Before very long, every one of them was soaked and muddy. Palla was brown from head

to heel, with moss in her hair, breathless from laughter. Bran had not heard so much laughing since the night the bloody raven came. *If I had my legs, I'd knock all of them into the water*, he thought bitterly. *No one would ever be lord of the crossing but me.*

Finally, Rickon came running into the godswood, Shaggydog at his heels. He watched Turnip and Little Walder struggle for the stick until Turnip lost his footing and went in with a huge splash, arms waving. Rickon yelled, “Me! Me now! I want to play!” Little Walder beckoned him on, and Shaggydog started to follow. “No, Shaggy,” his brother commanded. “Wolves can’t play. You stay with Bran.” And he did ...

... until Little Walder had smacked Rickon with the stick, square across his belly. Before Bran could blink, the black wolf was flying over the plank, there was blood in the water, the Walders were shrieking red murder, Rickon sat in the mud laughing and Hodor came lumbering in shouting “Hodor! Hodor! Hodor!”

After that, oddly, Rickon decided he *liked* the Walders. They never played lord of the crossing again, but they played other games—monsters and maidens, rats and cats, come-into-my-castle, all sorts of things. With Rickon by their side, the Walders plundered the kitchens for pies and honeycombs, raced round the walls, tossed bones to the pups in the kennels, and trained with wooden swords under Ser Rodrik’s sharp eye. Rickon even showed them the deep vaults under the earth where the stonemason was carving father’s tomb. “You had no right!” Bran

screamed at his brother when he heard. “That was our place, a *Stark* place!” But Rickon never cared.

The door to his bedchamber opened. Maester Luwin was carrying a green jar, and this time Osha and Hayhead came with him. “I’ve made you a sleeping draught, Bran.”

Osha scooped him up in her bony arms. She was very tall for a woman, and wiry strong. She bore him effortlessly to his bed.

“This will give you dreamless sleep,” Maester Luwin said as he pulled the stopper from the jar. “Sweet, dreamless sleep.”

“It will?” Bran said, wanting to believe.

“Yes. Drink.”

Bran drank. The potion was thick and chalky, but there was honey in it, so it went down easy.

“Come the morn, you’ll feel better.” Luwin gave Bran a smile and a pat as he took his leave.

Osha lingered behind. “Is it the wolf dreams again?”

Bran nodded.

“You should not fight so hard, boy. I see you talking to the heart tree. Might be the gods are trying to talk back.”

“The gods?” he murmured, drowsy already. Osha’s face grew blurry and grey. *Sweet, dreamless sleep*, Bran thought.

Yet when the darkness closed over him, he found himself in the godswood, moving silently beneath green-grey sentinels and gnarled oaks as old as time. *I am walking*, he thought, exulting. Part of him knew that it was only a dream, but even the dream of walking was better than the truth of his bedchamber, walls and

ceiling and door.

It was dark amongst the trees, but the comet lit his way, and his feet were sure. He was moving on four *good* legs, strong and swift, and he could feel the ground underfoot, the soft crackling of fallen leaves, thick roots and hard stones, the deep layers of humus. It was a good feeling.

The smells filled his head, alive and intoxicating; the green muddy stink of the hot pools, the perfume of rich rotting earth beneath his paws, the squirrels in the oaks. The scent of squirrel made him remember the taste of hot blood and the way the bones would crack between his teeth. Slaver filled his mouth. He had eaten no more than half a day past, but there was no joy in dead meat, even deer. He could hear the squirrels chittering and rustling above him, safe among their leaves, but they knew better than to come down to where his brother and he were prowling.

He could smell his brother too, a familiar scent, strong and earthy, his scent as black as his coat. His brother was loping around the walls, full of fury. Round and round he went, night after day after night, tireless, searching ... for prey, for a way out, for his mother, his littermates, his pack ... searching, searching, and never finding.

Behind the trees the walls rose, piles of dead man-rock that loomed all about this speck of living wood. Speckled grey they rose, and moss-spotted, yet thick and strong and higher than any wolf could hope to leap. Cold iron and splintery wood closed off the only holes through the piled stones that hemmed them in. His

brother would stop at every hole and bare his fangs in rage, but the ways stayed closed.

He had done the same the first night, and learned that it was no good. Snarls would open no paths here. Circling the walls would not push them back. Lifting a leg and marking the trees would keep no men away. The world had tightened around them, but beyond the walled wood still stood the great grey caves of man-rock. *Winterfell*, he remembered, the sound coming to him sudden. Beyond its sky-tall man-cliffs the true world was calling, and he knew he must answer or die.

ARYA

They traveled dawn to dusk, past woods and orchards and neatly tended fields, through small villages, crowded market towns, and stout holdfasts. Come dark, they would make camp and eat by the light of the Red Sword. The men took turns standing watch. Arya would glimpse firelight flickering through the trees from the camps of other travelers. There seemed to be more camps every night, and more traffic on the kingsroad by day.

Morn, noon, and night they came, old folks and little children, big men and little ones, barefoot girls and women with babes at their breasts. Some drove farm wagons or bumped along in the back of ox carts. More rode; draft horses, ponies, mules, donkeys, anything that would walk or run or roll. One woman led a milk cow with a little girl on its back. Arya saw a smith pushing a wheelbarrow with his tools inside, hammers and tongs and even an anvil, and a little while later a different man with a different wheelbarrow, only inside this one were two babies in a blanket. Most came on foot, with their goods on their shoulders and weary, wary looks upon their faces. They walked south, toward the city, toward King's Landing, and only one in a hundred spared so much as a word for Yoren and his charges, traveling north. She wondered why no one else was going the same way as them.

Many of the travelers were armed; Arya saw daggers and

dirks, scythes and axes, and here and there a sword. Some had made clubs from tree limbs, or carved knobby staffs. They fingered their weapons and gave lingering looks at the wagons as they rolled by, yet in the end they let the column pass. Thirty was too many, no matter what they had in those wagons.

Look with your eyes, Syrio had said, listen with your ears.

One day a madwoman began to scream at them from the side of the road. "Fools! They'll kill you, fools!" She was scarecrow thin, with hollow eyes and bloody feet.

The next morning, a sleek merchant on a grey mare reined up by Yoren and offered to buy his wagons and everything in them for a quarter of their worth. "It's war, they'll take what they want, you'll do better selling to me, my friend." Yoren turned away with a twist of his crooked shoulders, and spat.

Arya noticed the first grave that same day; a small mound beside the road, dug for a child. A crystal had been set in the soft earth, and Lommy wanted to take it until the Bull told him he'd better leave the dead alone. A few leagues further on, Praed pointed out more graves, a whole row freshly dug. After that, a day hardly passed without one.

One time, Arya woke in the dark, frightened for no reason she could name. Above, the Red Sword shared the sky with half a thousand stars. The night seemed oddly quiet to her, though she could hear Yoren's muttered snores, the crackle of the fire, even the muffled stirrings of the donkeys. Yet somehow it felt as though the world was holding its breath, and the silence made

her shiver. She went back to sleep clutching Needle.

Come morning, when Praed did not awaken, Arya realized that it had been his coughing she had missed. They dug a grave of their own then, burying the sellsword where he'd slept. Yoren stripped him of his valuables before they threw the dirt on him. One man claimed his boots, another his dagger. His mail shirt and helm were parceled out. His longsword Yoren handed to the Bull. "Arms like yours, might be you can learn to use this," he told him. A boy called Tarber tossed a handful of acorns on top of Praed's body, so an oak might grow to mark his place.

That evening they stopped in a village at an ivy-covered inn. Yoren counted the coins in his purse and decided they had enough for a hot meal. "We'll sleep outside, same as ever, but they got a bathhouse here, if any of you feels the need o' hot water and a lick o' soap."

Arya did not dare, even though she smelled as bad as Yoren by now, all sour and stinky. Some of the creatures living in her clothes had come all the way from Flea Bottom with her. It didn't seem right to drown them. Tarber and Hot Pie and the Bull joined the line of men headed for the tubs. Others settled down in front of the bathhouse. The rest crowded into the common room. Yoren even sent Lommy out with tankards for the three in fetters, who'd been left chained up in the back of their wagon.

Washed and unwashed alike supped on hot pork pies and baked apples. The innkeep gave them a round of beer on the house. "I had a brother took the black, years ago. Serving boy,

clever, but one day he got seen filching pepper from m'lord's table. He liked the taste of it, is all. Just a pinch o' pepper, but Ser Malcolm was a hard man. You get pepper on the Wall?" When Yoren shook his head, the man sighed. "Shame. Lync loved that pepper."

Arya sipped at her tankard cautiously, between spoonfuls of pie still warm from the oven. Her father sometimes let them have a cup of beer, she remembered. Sansa used to make a face at the taste and say that wine was ever so much finer, but Arya had liked it well enough. It made her sad to think of Sansa and her father.

The inn was full of people moving south, and the common room erupted in scorn when Yoren said they were traveling the other way. "You'll be back soon enough," the innkeep vowed. "There's no going north. Half the fields are burnt, and what folks are left are walled up inside their holdfasts. One bunch rides off at dawn and another one shows up by dusk."

"That's nothing to us," Yoren insisted stubbornly. "Tully or Lannister, makes no matter. The Watch takes no part."

Lord Tully is my grandfather, Arya thought. It mattered to *her*, but she chewed her lip and kept quiet, listening.

"It's more than Lannister and Tully," the innkeep said. "There's wild men down from the Mountains of the Moon, try telling *them* you take no part. And the Starks are in it too, the young lord's come down, the dead Hand's son ..."

Arya sat up straight, straining to hear. Did he mean *Robb*?

"I heard the boy rides to battle on a wolf," said a yellow-haired

man with a tankard in his hand.

“Fool’s talk.” Yoren spat.

“The man I heard it from, he saw it himself. A wolf big as a horse, he swore.”

“Swearing don’t make it true, Hod,” the innkeep said. “You keep swearing you’ll pay what you owe me, and I’ve yet to see a copper.” The common room erupted in laughter, and the man with the yellow hair turned red.

“It’s been a bad year for wolves,” volunteered a sallow man in a travel-stained green cloak. “Around the Gods Eye, the packs have grown bolder’n anyone can remember. Sheep, cows, dogs, makes no matter, they kill as they like, and they got no fear of men. It’s worth your life to go into those woods by night.”

“Ah, that’s more tales, and no more true than the other.”

“I heard the same thing from my cousin, and she’s not the sort to lie,” an old woman said. “She says there’s this great pack, hundreds of them, mankillers. The one that leads them is a she-wolf, a bitch from the seventh hell.”

A she-wolf. Arya sloshed her beer, wondering. Was the Gods Eye near the Trident? She wished she had a map. It had been near the Trident that she’d left Nymeria. She hadn’t wanted to, but Jory said they had no choice, that if the wolf came back with them she’d be killed for biting Joffrey, even though he’d deserved it. They’d had to shout and scream and throw stones, and it wasn’t until a few of Arya’s stones struck home that the direwolf had finally stopped following them. *She probably wouldn’t even know*

me now, Arya thought. *Or if she did, she'd hate me.*

The man in the green cloak said, "I heard how this hellbitch walked into a village one day ... a market day, people everywhere, and she walks in bold as you please and tears a baby from his mother's arms. When the tale reached Lord Mooton, him and his sons swore they'd put an end to her. They tracked her to her lair with a pack of wolfhounds, and barely escaped with their skins. Not one of those dogs came back, not one."

"That's just a story," Arya blurted out before she could stop herself. "Wolves don't eat babies."

"And what would you know about it, lad?" asked the man in the green cloak.

Before she could think of an answer, Yoren had her by the arm. "The boy's greensick on beer, that's all it is."

"No I'm not. They *don't* eat babies ..."

"Outside, *boy* ... and see that you stay there until you learn to shut your mouth when men are talking." He gave her a stiff shove, toward the side door that led back to the stables. "Go on now. See that the stable boy has watered our horses."

Arya went outside, stiff with fury. "They *don't*," she muttered, kicking at a rock as she stalked off. It went rolling and fetched up under the wagons.

"Boy," a friendly voice called out. "Lovely boy."

One of the men in irons was talking to her. Warily, Arya approached the wagon, one hand on Needle's hilt.

The prisoner lifted an empty tankard, his chains rattling. "A

man could use another taste of beer. A man has a thirst, wearing these heavy bracelets.” He was the youngest of the three, slender, fine-featured, always smiling. His hair was red on one side and white on the other, all matted and filthy from cage and travel. “A man could use a bath too,” he said, when he saw the way Arya was looking at him. “A boy could make a friend.”

“I have friends,” Arya said.

“None I can see,” said the one without a nose. He was squat and thick, with huge hands. Black hair covered his arms and legs and chest, even his back. He reminded Arya of a drawing she had once seen in a book, of an ape from the Summer Isles. The hole in his face made it hard to look at him for long.

The bald one opened his mouth and *hissed* like some immense white lizard. When Arya flinched back, startled, he opened his mouth wide and wagged his tongue at her, only it was more a stump than a tongue. “Stop that,” she blurted.

“A man does not choose his companions in the black cells,” the handsome one with the red-and-white hair said. Something about the way he talked reminded her of Syrio; it was the same, yet different too. “These two, they have no courtesy. A man must ask forgiveness. You are called Arry, is that not so?”

“Lumpyhead,” said the noseless one. “Lumpyhead Lumpyface Stickboy. Have a care, Lorath, he’ll hit you with his stick.”

“A man must be ashamed of the company he keeps, Arry,” the handsome one said. “This man has the honor to be Jaqen H’ghar, once of the Free City of Lorath. Would that he were home. This

man's illbred companions in captivity are named Rorge ...” He waved his tankard at the noseless man. “... and Biter.” Biter *hissed* at her again, displaying a mouthful of yellowed teeth filed into points. “A man must have some name, is that not so? Biter cannot speak and Biter cannot write, yet his teeth are very sharp, so a man calls him Biter and he smiles. Are you charmed?”

Arya backed away from the wagon. “No.” *They can't hurt me*, she told herself, *they're all chained up*.

He turned his tankard upside down. “A man must weep.”

Rorge, the noseless one, flung his drinking cup at her with a curse. His manacles made him clumsy, yet even so he would have sent the heavy pewter tankard crashing into her head if Arya hadn't leapt aside. “You get us some beer, pimple. *Now!*”

“You shut your mouth!” Arya tried to think what Syrio would have done. She drew her wooden practice sword.

“Come closer,” Rorge said, “and I'll shove that stick up your bunghole and fuck you bloody.”

Fear cuts deeper than swords. Arya made herself approach the wagon. Every step was harder than the one before. *Fierce as a wolverine, calm as still water*. The words sang in her head. Syrio would not have been afraid. She was almost close enough to touch the wheel when Biter lurched to his feet and grabbed for her, his irons clanking and rattling. The manacles brought his hands up short, half a foot from her face. He *hissed*.

She hit him. Hard, right between his little eyes.

Screaming, Biter reeled back, and then threw all his weight

against his chains. The links slithered and turned and grew taut, and Arya heard the creak of old dry wood as the great iron rings strained against the floorboards of the wagon. Huge pale hands groped for her while veins bulged along Biter's arms, but the bonds held, and finally the man collapsed backwards. Blood ran from the weeping sores on his cheeks.

"A boy has more courage than sense," the one who had named himself Jaqen H'ghar observed.

Arya edged backwards away from the wagon. When she felt the hand on her shoulder, she whirled, bringing up her stick sword again, but it was only the Bull. "What are you doing?"

He raised his hands defensively. "Yoren said none of us should go near those three."

"They don't scare me," Arya said.

"Then you're stupid. They scare *me*." The Bull's hand fell to the hilt of his sword, and Rorge began to laugh. "Let's get away from them."

Arya scuffed at the ground with her foot, but she let the Bull lead her around to the front of the inn. Rorge's laughter and Biter's hissing followed them. "Want to fight?" she asked the Bull. She wanted to hit something.

He blinked at her, startled. Strands of thick black hair, still wet from the bathhouse, fell across his deep blue eyes. "I'd hurt you."

"You would not."

"You don't know how strong I am."

"You don't know how quick I am."

“You’re asking for it, Arry.” He drew Praed’s longsword. “This is cheap steel, but it’s a real sword.”

Arya unsheathed Needle. “This is good steel, so it’s realer than yours.”

The Bull shook his head. “Promise not to cry if I cut you?”

“I’ll promise if you will.” She turned sideways, into her water dancer’s stance, but the Bull did not move. He was looking at something behind her. “What’s wrong?”

“Gold cloaks.” His face closed up tight.

It couldn’t be, Arya thought, but when she glanced back, they were riding up the kingsroad, six in the black ringmail and golden cloaks of the City Watch. One was an officer; he wore a black enamel breastplate ornamented with four golden disks. They drew up in front of the inn. *Look with your eyes*, Syrio’s voice seemed to whisper. Her eyes saw white lather under their saddles; the horses had been ridden long and hard. Calm as still water, she took the Bull by the arm and drew him back behind a tall flowering hedge.

“What is it?” he asked. “What are you doing? Let go.”

“*Quiet as a shadow*,” she whispered, pulling him down.

Some of Yoren’s other charges were sitting in front of the bathhouse, waiting their turn at a tub. “You men,” one of the gold cloaks shouted. “You the ones left to take the black?”

“We might be,” came the cautious answer.

“We rather join you boys,” old Reysen said. “We hear it’s *cold* on that Wall.”

The gold cloak officer dismounted. “I have a warrant for a certain boy—”

Yoren stepped out of the inn, fingering his tangled black beard. “Who is it wants this boy?”

The other gold cloaks were dismounting to stand beside their horses. “Why are we hiding?” the Bull whispered.

“It’s me they want,” Arya whispered back. His ear smelled of soap. “You be quiet.”

“The queen wants him, old man, not that it’s your concern,” the officer said, drawing a ribbon from his belt. “Here, Her Grace’s seal and warrant.”

Behind the hedge, the Bull shook his head doubtfully. “Why would the queen want *you*, Arry?”

She punched his shoulder. “Be *quiet!*”

Yoren fingered the warrant ribbon with its blob of golden wax. “Pretty.” He spat. “Thing is, the boy’s in the Night’s Watch now. What he done back in the city don’t mean piss-all.”

“The queen’s not interested in your views, old man, and neither am I,” the officer said. “I’ll have the boy.”

Arya thought about running, but she knew she wouldn’t get far on her donkey when the gold cloaks had horses. And she was so tired of running. She’d run when Ser Meryn came for her, and again when they killed her father. If she was a real water dancer, she would go out there with Needle and kill all of them, and never run from anyone ever again.

“You’ll have no one,” Yoren said stubbornly. “There’s laws on

such things.”

The gold cloak drew a shortsword. “Here’s your law.”

Yoren looked at the blade. “That’s no law, just a sword. Happens I got one too.”

The officer smiled. “Old fool. I have five men with me.”

Yoren spat. “Happens I got thirty.”

The gold cloaks laughed. “This lot?” said a big lout with a broken nose. “Who’s first?” he shouted, showing his steel.

Tarber plucked a pitchfork out of a bale of hay. “I am.”

“No, I am,” called Cutjack, the plump stonemason, pulling his hammer off the leather apron he always wore.

“Me.” Kurz came up off the ground with his skinning knife in hand.

“Me and him.” Koss strung his longbow.

“All of us,” said Reysen, snatching up the tall hardwood walking staff he carried.

Dobber stepped naked out of the bathhouse with his clothes in a bundle, saw what was happening, and dropped everything but his dagger. “Is it a fight?” he asked.

“I guess,” said Hot Pie, scrambling on all fours for a big rock to throw. Arya could not believe what she was seeing. She *hated* Hot Pie! Why would he risk himself for her?

The one with the broken nose still thought it was funny. “You girls put away them rocks and sticks before you get spanked. None of you knows what end of a sword to hold.”

“*I do!*” Arya wouldn’t let them die for her like Syrio. She

wouldn't! Shoving through the hedge with Needle in hand, she slid into a water dancer's stance.

Broken Nose guffawed. The officer looked her up and down. "Put the blade away, little girl, no one wants to hurt you."

"I'm *not* a girl!" she yelled, furious. What was wrong with them? They rode all this way for her and here she was and they were just smiling at her. "I'm the one you want."

"*He's* the one we want." The officer jabbed his shortsword toward the Bull, who'd come forward to stand beside her, Praed's cheap steel in his hand.

But it was a mistake to take his eyes off Yoren, even for an instant. Quick as that, the black brother's sword was pressed to the apple of the officer's throat. "Neither's the one you get, less you want me to see if your apple's ripe yet. I got me ten, fifteen more brothers in that inn, if you still need convincing. I was you, I'd let loose of that gutcutter, spread my cheeks over that fat little horse, and gallop on back to the city." He spat, and poked harder with the point of his sword. "Now."

The officer's fingers uncurled. His sword fell in the dust.

"We'll just keep that," Yoren said. "Good steel's always needed on the Wall."

"As you say. For now. Men." The gold cloaks sheathed and mounted up. "You'd best scamper up to that Wall of yours in a hurry, old man. The next time I catch you, I believe I'll have your head to go with the bastard boy's."

"Better men than you have tried." Yoren slapped the rump of

the officer's horse with the flat of his sword and sent him reeling off down the kingsroad. His men followed.

When they were out of sight, Hot Pie began to whoop, but Yoren looked angrier than ever. "Fool! You think he's done with us? Next time he won't prance up and hand me no damn ribbon. Get the rest out o' them baths, we need to be moving. Ride all night, maybe we can stay ahead o' them for a bit." He scooped up the short sword the officer had dropped. "Who wants this?"

"Me!" Hot Pie yelled.

"Don't be using it on Arry." He handed the boy the sword, hilt first, and walked over to Arya, but it was the Bull he spoke to. "Queen wants you bad, boy."

Arya was lost. "Why should she want *him*?"

The Bull scowled at her. "Why should she want *you*? You're nothing but a little gutter rat!"

"Well, you're nothing but a bastard boy!" Or maybe he was only *pretending* to be a bastard boy. "What's your true name?"

"Gendry," he said, like he wasn't quite sure.

"Don't see why no one wants neither o' you," Yoren said, "but they can't have you regardless. You ride them two coursers. First sight of a gold cloak, make for the Wall like a dragon's on your tail. The rest o' us don't mean spit to them."

"Except for you," Arya pointed out. "That man said he'd take your head too."

"Well, as to that," Yoren said, "if he can get it off my shoulders, he's welcome to it."

JON

“Sam?” Jon called softly.

The air smelled of paper and dust and years. Before him, tall wooden shelves rose up into dimness, crammed with leather-bound books and bins of ancient scrolls. A faint yellow glow filtered through the stacks from some hidden lamp. Jon blew out the taper he carried, preferring not to risk an open flame amidst so much old dry paper. Instead he followed the light, wending his way down the narrow aisles beneath barrel-vaulted ceilings. All in black, he was a shadow among shadows, dark of hair, long of face, grey of eye. Black moleskin gloves covered his hands; the right because it was burned, the left because a man felt half a fool wearing only one glove.

Samwell Tarly sat hunched over a table in a niche carved into the stone of the wall. The glow came from the lamp hung over his head. He looked up at the sound of Jon’s steps.

“Have you been here all night?”

“Have I?” Sam looked startled.

“You didn’t break your fast with us, and your bed hadn’t been slept in.” Rast suggested that maybe Sam had deserted, but Jon never believed it. Desertion required its own sort of courage, and Sam had little enough of that.

“Is it morning? Down here there’s no way to know.”

“Sam, you’re a sweet fool,” Jon said. “You’ll miss that bed

when we're sleeping on the cold hard ground, I promise you."

Sam yawned. "Maester Aemon sent me to find maps for the Lord Commander. I never thought ... Jon, the *books*, have you ever seen their like? There are *thousands!*"

He gazed about him. "The library at Winterfell has more than a hundred. Did you find the maps?"

"Oh yes." Sam's hand swept over the table, fingers plump as sausages indicating the clutter of books and scrolls before him. "A dozen, at the least." He unfolded a square of parchment. "The paint has faded, but you can see where the mapmaker marked the sites of wildling villages, and there's another book ... where is it now? I was reading it a moment ago." He shoved some scrolls aside to reveal a dusty volume bound in rotted leather. "*This*," he said reverently, "is the account of a journey from the Shadow Tower all the way to Lorn Point on the Frozen Shore, written by a ranger named Redwyn. It's not dated, but he mentions a Dorren Stark as King in the North, so it must be from before the Conquest. Jon, they fought *giants!* Redwyn even traded with the children of the forest, it's all here." Ever so delicately, he turned pages with a finger. "He drew maps as well, see ..."

"Maybe you could write an account of our ranging, Sam."

He'd meant to sound encouraging, but it was the wrong thing to say. The last thing Sam needed was to be reminded of what faced them on the morrow. He shuffled the scrolls about aimlessly. "There's more maps. If I had time to search ... everything's a jumble. *I* could set it all to order, though, I know

I could, but it would take time ... well, *years*, in truth.”

“Mormont wanted those maps a little sooner than that.” Jon plucked a scroll from a bin, blew off the worst of the dust. A corner flaked off between his fingers as he unrolled it. “Look, this one is crumbling,” he said, frowning over the faded script.

“Be gentle.” Sam came around the table and took the scroll from his hand, holding it as if it were a wounded animal. “The important books used to be copied over when they needed it. Some of the oldest have been copied half a hundred times, probably.”

“Well, don’t bother copying that one. Twenty-three barrels of pickled cod, eighteen jars of fish oil, a cask of salt ...”

“An inventory,” Sam said, “or perhaps a bill of sale.”

“Who cares how much pickled cod they ate six hundred years ago?” Jon wondered.

“I would.” Sam carefully replaced the scroll in the bin from which Jon had plucked it. “You can learn so much from ledgers like that, truly you can. It can tell you how many men were in the Night’s Watch then, how they lived, what they ate ...”

“They ate food,” said Jon, “and they lived as we live.”

“You’d be surprised. This vault is a treasure, Jon.”

“If you say so.” Jon was doubtful. Treasure meant gold, silver, and jewels, not dust, spiders, and rotting leather.

“I do,” the fat boy blurted. He was older than Jon, a man grown by law, but it was hard to think of him as anything but a boy. “I found drawings of the faces in the trees, and a book

about the tongue of the children of the forest ... works that even the Citadel doesn't have, scrolls from old Valyria, counts of the seasons written by maesters dead a thousand years ...”

“The books will still be here when we return.”

“*If* we return ...”

“The Old Bear is taking two hundred seasoned men, three-quarters of them rangers. Qhorin Halfhand will be bringing another hundred brothers from the Shadow Tower. You'll be as safe as if you were back in your lord father's castle at Horn Hill.”

Samwell Tarly managed a sad little smile. “I was never very safe in my father's castle either.”

The gods play cruel jests, Jon thought. Pyp and Toad, all a lather to be a part of the great ranging, were to remain at Castle Black. It was Samwell Tarly the self-proclaimed coward, grossly fat, timid, and near as bad a rider as he was with a sword, who must face the haunted forest. The Old Bear was taking two cages of ravens, so they might send back word as they went. Maester Aemon was blind and far too frail to ride with them, so his steward must go in his place. “We need you for the ravens, Sam. And someone has to help me keep Grenn humble.”

Sam's chins quivered. “You could care for the ravens, or Grenn could, or *anyone*,” he said with a thin edge of desperation in his voice. “I could show you how. You know your letters too, you could write down Lord Mormont's messages as well as I.”

“I'm the Old Bear's steward. I'll need to squire for him, tend his horse, set up his tent. I won't have time to watch over birds

as well. Sam, you said the words. You're a brother of the Night's Watch now."

"A brother of the Night's Watch shouldn't be so scared."

"We're all scared. We'd be fools if we weren't." Too many rangers had been lost the past two years, even Benjen Stark, Jon's uncle. They had found two of his uncle's men in the wood, slain, but the corpses had risen in the chill of night. Jon's burnt fingers twitched as he remembered. He still saw the wight in his dreams, dead Othor with the burning blue eyes and the cold black hands, but that was the last thing Sam needed to be reminded of. "There's no shame in fear, my father told me, what matters is how we face it. Come, I'll help you gather up the maps."

Sam nodded unhappily. The shelves were so closely spaced that they had to walk single file as they left. The vault opened onto one of the tunnels the brothers called the wormwalks, winding subterranean passages that linked the keeps and towers of Castle Black under the earth. In summer the wormwalks were seldom used, save by rats and other vermin, but winter was a different matter. When the snows drifted forty and fifty feet high and the ice winds came howling out of the north, the tunnels were all that held Castle Black together.

Soon, Jon thought as they climbed. He'd seen the harbinger that had come to Maester Aemon with word of summer's end, the great raven of the Citadel, white and silent as Ghost. He had seen a winter once, when he was very young, but everyone agreed that it had been a short one, and mild. This one would be different.

He could feel it in his bones.

The steep stone steps had Sam puffing like a blacksmith's bellows by the time they reached the surface. They emerged into a brisk wind that made Jon's cloak swirl and snap. Ghost was stretched out asleep beneath the wattle-and-daub wall of the granary, but he woke when Jon appeared, bushy white tail held stiffly upright as he trotted to them.

Sam squinted up at the Wall. It loomed above them, an icy cliff seven hundred feet high. Sometimes it seemed to Jon almost a living thing, with moods of its own. The color of the ice was wont to change with every shift of the light. Now it was the deep blue of frozen rivers, now the dirty white of old snow, and when a cloud passed before the sun it darkened to the pale grey of pitted stone. The Wall stretched east and west as far as the eye could see, so huge that it shrunk the timbered keeps and stone towers of the castle to insignificance. It was the end of the world.

And we are going beyond it.

The morning sky was streaked by thin grey clouds, but the pale red line was there behind them. The black brothers had dubbed the wanderer Mormont's Torch, saying (only half in jest) that the gods must have sent it to light the old man's way through the haunted forest.

"The comet's so bright you can see it by day now," Sam said, shading his eyes with a fistful of books.

"Never mind about comets, it's maps the Old Bear wants."

Ghost loped ahead of them. The grounds seemed deserted this

morning, with so many rangers off at the brothel in Mole's Town, digging for buried treasure and drinking themselves blind. Grenn had gone with them. Pyp and Halder and Toad had offered to buy him his first woman to celebrate his first ranging. They'd wanted Jon and Sam to come as well, but Sam was almost as frightened of whores as he was of the haunted forest, and Jon had wanted no part of it. "Do what you want," he told Toad, "I took a vow."

As they passed the sept, he heard voices raised in song. *Some men want whores on the eve of battle, and some want gods.* Jon wondered who felt better afterwards. The sept tempted him no more than the brothel; his own gods kept their temples in the wild places, where the weirwoods spread their bone-white branches. *The Seven have no power beyond the Wall,* he thought, *but my gods will be waiting.*

Outside the armory, Ser Endrew Tarth was working with some raw recruits. They'd come in last night with Conwy, one of the wandering crows who roamed the Seven Kingdoms collecting men for the Wall. This new crop consisted of a greybeard leaning on a staff, two blond boys with the look of brothers, a foppish youth in soiled satin, a raggy man with a clubfoot, and some grinning loon who must have fancied himself a warrior. Ser Endrew was showing him the error of that presumption. He was a gentler master-at-arms than Ser Alliser Thorne had been, but his lessons would still raise bruises. Sam winced at every blow, but Jon Snow watched the swordplay closely.

"What do you make of them, Snow?" Donal Noye stood in the

door of his armory, barechested under a leather apron, the stump of his left arm uncovered for once. With his big gut and barrel chest, his flat nose and bristly black jaw, Noye did not make a pretty sight, but he was a welcome one nonetheless. The armorer had proved himself a good friend.

“They smell of summer,” Jon said as Ser Endrew bullrushed his foe and knocked him sprawling. “Where did Conwy find them?”

“A lord’s dungeon near Gulltown,” the smith replied. “A brigand, a barber, a beggar, two orphans, and a boy whore. With such do we defend the realms of men.”

“They’ll do.” Jon gave Sam a private smile. “We did.”

Noye drew him closer. “You’ve heard these tidings of your brother?”

“Last night.” Conwy and his charges had brought the news north with them, and the talk in the common room had been of little else. Jon was still not certain how he felt about it. Robb a king? The brother he’d played with, fought with, shared his first cup of wine with? *But not mother’s milk, no. So now Robb will sip summerwine from jeweled goblets, while I’m kneeling beside some stream sucking snowmelt from cupped hands.* “Robb will make a good king,” he said loyally.

“Will he now?” The smith eyed him frankly. “I hope that’s so, boy, but once I might have said the same of Robert.”

“They say you forged his warhammer,” Jon remembered.

“Aye. I was his man, a Baratheon man, smith and armorer at

Storm's End until I lost the arm. I'm old enough to remember Lord Steffon before the sea took him, and I knew those three sons of his since they got their names. I tell you this—Robert was never the same after he put on that crown. Some men are like swords, made for fighting. Hang them up and they go to rust.”

“And his brothers?” Jon asked.

The armorer considered that a moment. “Robert was the true steel. Stannis is pure iron, black and hard and strong, yes, but brittle, the way iron gets. He'll break before he bends. And Renly, that one, he's copper, bright and shiny, pretty to look at but not worth all that much at the end of the day.”

And what metal is Robb? Jon did not ask. Noye was a Baratheon man; likely he thought Joffrey the lawful king and Robb a traitor. Among the brotherhood of the Night's Watch, there was an unspoken pact never to probe too deeply into such matters. Men came to the Wall from all of the Seven Kingdoms, and old loves and loyalties were not easily forgotten, no matter how many oaths a man swore ... as Jon himself had good reason to know. Even Sam—his father's House was sworn to Highgarden, whose Lord Tyrell supported King Renly. Best not to talk of such things. The Night's Watch took no sides. “Lord Mormont awaits us,” Jon said.

“I won't keep you from the Old Bear.” Noye clapped him on the shoulder and smiled. “May the gods go with you on the morrow, Snow. You bring back that uncle of yours, you hear?”

“We will,” Jon promised him.

Lord Commander Mormont had taken up residence in the King's Tower after the fire had gutted his own. Jon left Ghost with the guards outside the door. "More stairs," said Sam miserably as they started up. "I hate stairs."

"Well, that's one thing we won't face in the wood."

When they entered the solar, the raven spied them at once. "*Snow!*" the bird shrieked. Mormont broke off his conversation. "Took you long enough with those maps." He pushed the remains of breakfast out of the way to make room on the table. "Put them here, I'll have a look at them later."

Thoren Smallwood, a sinewy ranger with a weak chin and a weaker mouth hidden under a thin scraggle of beard, gave Jon and Sam a cool look. He had been one of Alliser Thorne's henchmen, and had no love for either of them. "The Lord Commander's place is at Castle Black, lording and commanding," he told Mormont, ignoring the newcomers. "It seems to me."

The raven flapped big black wings. "*Me, me, me.*"

"If you are ever Lord Commander, you may do as you please," Mormont told the ranger, "but it seems to *me* that I have not died yet, nor have the brothers put you in my place."

"I'm First Ranger now, with Ben Stark lost and Ser Jaremy killed," Smallwood said stubbornly. "The command should be mine."

Mormont would have none of it. "I sent out Ben Stark, and Ser Waymar before him. I do not mean to send you after them

and sit wondering how long I must wait before I give you up for lost as well.” He pointed. “And Stark remains First Ranger until we know for a certainty that he is dead. Should that day come, it will be me who names his successor, not you. Now stop wasting my time. We ride at first light, or have you forgotten?”

Smallwood pushed to his feet. “As my lord commands.” On the way out, he frowned at Jon, as if it were somehow his fault.

“First Ranger!” The Old Bear’s eyes lighted on Sam. “I’d sooner name *you* First Ranger. He has the effrontery to tell me to my face that I’m too old to ride with him. Do I look old to you, boy?” The hair that had retreated from Mormont’s spotted scalp had regrouped beneath his chin in a shaggy grey beard that covered much of his chest. He thumped it hard. “Do I look *frail*?”

Sam opened his mouth, gave a little squeak. The Old Bear terrified him. “No, my lord,” Jon offered quickly. “You look strong as a ... a ...”

“Don’t cozen me, Snow, you know I won’t have it. Let me have a look at these maps.” Mormont pawed through them brusquely, giving each no more than a glance and a grunt. “Was this all you could find?”

“I ... m-m-my lord,” Sam stammered, “there ... there were more, b-b-but ... the dis-disorder ...”

“These are old,” Mormont complained, and his raven echoed him with a sharp cry of, “*Old, old.*”

“The villages may come and go, but the hills and rivers will be in the same places,” Jon pointed out.

“True enough. Have you chosen your ravens yet, Tarly?”

“M-m-maester Aemon m-means to p-pick them come evenfall, after the f-f-feeding.”

“I’ll have his best. Smart birds, and strong.”

“*Strong*,” his own bird said, preening. “*Strong, strong*.”

“If it happens that we’re all butchered out there, I mean for my successor to know where and how we died.”

Talk of butchery reduced Samwell Tarly to speechlessness. Mormont leaned forward. “Tarly, when I was a lad half your age, my lady mother told me that if I stood about with my mouth open, a weasel was like to mistake it for his lair and run down my throat. If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, beware of weasels.” He waved a brusque dismissal. “Off with you, I’m too busy for folly. No doubt the maester has some work you can do.”

Sam swallowed, stepped back, and scurried out so quickly he almost tripped over the rushes.

“Is that boy as big a fool as he seems?” the Lord Commander asked when he’d gone. “*Fool*,” the raven complained. Mormont did not wait for Jon to answer. “His lord father stands high in King Renly’s councils, and I had half a notion to dispatch him ... no, best not. Renly is not like to heed a quaking fat boy. I’ll send Ser Arnell. He’s a deal steadier, and his mother was one of the green apple Fossoways.”

“If it please my lord, what would you have of King Renly?”

“The same things I’d have of all of them, lad. Men, horses, swords, armor, grain, cheese, wine, wool, nails ... the Night’s

Watch is not proud, we take what is offered.” His fingers drummed against the rough-hewn planks of the table. “If the winds have been kind, Ser Alliser should reach King’s Landing by the turn of the moon, but whether this boy Joffrey will pay him any heed, I do not know. House Lannister has never been a friend to the Watch.”

“Thorne has the wight’s hand to show them.” A grisly pale thing with black fingers, it was, that twitched and stirred in its jar as if it were still alive.

“Would that we had another hand to send to Renly.”

“Dywen says you can find anything beyond the Wall.”

“Aye, Dywen says. And the last time he went ranging, he says he saw a bear fifteen feet tall.” Mormont snorted. “My sister is said to have taken a bear for her lover. I’d believe *that* before I’d believe one fifteen feet tall. Though in a world where dead come walking ... ah, even so, a man must believe his eyes. I have seen the dead walk. I’ve not seen any giant bears.” He gave Jon a long, searching look. “But we were speaking of hands. How is yours?”

“Better.” Jon peeled off his moleskin glove and showed him. Scars covered his arm halfway to the elbow, and the mottled pink flesh still felt tight and tender, but it was healing. “It itches, though. Maester Aemon says that’s good. He gave me a salve to take with me when we ride.”

“You can wield Longclaw despite the pain?”

“Well enough.” Jon flexed his fingers, opening and closing his fist the way the maester had shown him. “I’m to work the fingers

every day to keep them nimble, as Maester Aemon said.”

“Blind he may be, but Aemon knows what he’s about. I pray the gods let us keep him another twenty years. Do you know that he might have been king?”

Jon was taken by surprise. “He told me his father was king, but not ... I thought him perhaps a younger son.”

“So he was. His father’s father was Daeron Targaryen, the Second of His Name, who brought Dorne into the realm. Part of the pact was that he wed a Dornish princess. She gave him four sons. Aemon’s father Maekar was the youngest of those, and Aemon was *his* third son. Mind you, all this happened long before I was born, ancient as Smallwood would make me.”

“Maester Aemon was named for the Dragonknight.”

“So he was. Some say Prince Aemon was King Daeron’s true father, not Aegon the Unworthy. Be that as it may, our Aemon lacked the Dragonknight’s martial nature. He likes to say he had a slow sword but quick wits. Small wonder his grandfather packed him off to the Citadel. He was nine or ten, I believe ... and ninth or tenth in the line of succession as well.”

Maester Aemon had counted more than a hundred name days, Jon knew. Frail, shrunken, wizened, and blind, it was hard to imagine him as a little boy no older than Arya.

Mormont continued. “Aemon was at his books when the eldest of his uncles, the heir apparent, was slain in a tourney mishap. He left two sons, but they followed him to the grave not long after, during the Great Spring Sickness. King Daeron was also taken,

so the crown passed to Daeron's second son, Aerys."

"The Mad King?" Jon was confused. Aerys had been king before Robert, that wasn't so long ago.

"No, this was Aerys the First. The one Robert deposed was the second of that name."

"How long ago was this?"

"Eighty years or close enough," the Old Bear said, "and no, I *still* hadn't been born, though Aemon had forged half a dozen links of his maester's chain by then. Aerys wed his own sister, as the Targaryens were wont to do, and reigned for ten or twelve years. Aemon took his vows and left the Citadel to serve at some lordling's court ... until his royal uncle died without issue. The Iron Throne passed to the last of King Daeron's four sons. That was Maekar, Aemon's father. The new king summoned all his sons to court and would have made Aemon part of his councils, but he refused, saying that would usurp the place rightly belonging to the Grand Maester. Instead he served at the keep of his eldest brother, another Daeron. Well, that one died too, leaving only a feeblewitted daughter as heir. Some pox he caught from a whore, I believe. The next brother was Aerion."

"Aerion the Monstrous?" Jon knew that name. *The Prince Who Thought He Was A Dragon* was one of Old Nan's more gruesome tales. His little brother Bran had loved it.

"The very one, though he named himself Aerion Brightflame. One night, in his cups, he drank a jar of wildfire, after telling his friends it would transform him into a dragon, but the gods were

kind and it transformed him into a corpse. Not quite a year after, King Maekar died in battle against an outlaw lord.”

Jon was not entirely innocent of the history of the realm; his own maester had seen to that. “That was the year of the Great Council,” he said. “The lords passed over Prince Aerion’s infant son and Prince Daeron’s daughter and gave the crown to Aegon.”

“Yes and no. First they offered it, quietly, to Aemon. And quietly he refused. The gods meant for him to serve, not to rule, he told them. He had sworn a vow and would not break it, though the High Septon himself offered to absolve him. Well, no sane man wanted any blood of Aerion’s on the throne, and Daeron’s girl was a lackwit besides being female, so they had no choice but to turn to Aemon’s younger brother—Aegon, the Fifth of His Name. Aegon the Unlikely, they called him, born the fourth son of a fourth son. Aemon knew, and rightly, that if he remained at court those who disliked his brother’s rule would seek to use him, so he came to the Wall. And here he has remained, while his brother and his brother’s son and *his* son each reigned and died in turn, until Jaime Lannister put an end to the line of the dragonkings.”

“*King*,” croaked the raven. The bird flapped across the solar to land on Mormont’s shoulder. “*King*,” it said again, strutting back and forth.

“He likes that word,” Jon said, smiling.

“An easy word to say. An easy word to like.”

“*King*,” the bird said again.

“I think he means for you to have a crown, my lord.”

“The realm has three kings already, and that’s two too many for my liking.” Mormont stroked the raven under the beak with a finger, but all the while his eyes never left Jon Snow.

It made him feel odd. “My lord, why have you told me this, about Maester Aemon?”

“Must I have a reason?” Mormont shifted in his seat, frowning. “Your brother Robb has been crowned King in the North. You and Aemon have that in common. A king for a brother.”

“And this too,” said Jon. “A vow.”

The Old Bear gave a loud snort, and the raven took flight, flapping in a circle about the room. “Give me a man for every vow I’ve seen broken and the Wall will never lack for defenders.”

“I’ve always known that Robb would be Lord of Winterfell.”

Mormont gave a whistle, and the bird flew to him again and settled on his arm. “A lord’s one thing, a king’s another.” He offered the raven a handful of corn from his pocket. “They will garb your brother Robb in silks, satins, and velvets of a hundred different colors, while you live and die in black ringmail. He will wed some beautiful princess and father sons on her. You’ll have no wife, nor will you ever hold a child of your own blood in your arms. Robb will rule, you will serve. Men will call you a crow. Him they’ll call *Your Grace*. Singers will praise every little thing he does, while your greatest deeds go all unsung. Tell me that none of this troubles you, Jon ... and I’ll name you a liar, and know I have the truth of it.”

Jon drew himself up, taut as a bowstring. “And if it *did* trouble me, what might I do, bastard as I am?”

“What *will* you do?” Mormont asked. “Bastard as you are?”

“Be troubled,” said Jon, “and keep my vows.”

CATELYN

Her son's crown was fresh from the forge, and it seemed to Catelyn Stark that the weight of it pressed heavy on Robb's head.

The ancient crown of the Kings of Winter had been lost three centuries ago, yielded up to Aegon the Conqueror when Torrhen Stark knelt in submission. What Aegon had done with it no man could say but Lord Hoster's smith had done his work well, and Robb's crown looked much as the other was said to have looked in the tales told of the Stark kings of old; an open circlet of hammered bronze incised with the runes of the First Men, surmounted by nine black iron spikes wrought in the shape of longswords. Of gold and silver and gemstones, it had none; bronze and iron were the metals of winter, dark and strong to fight against the cold.

As they waited in Riverrun's Great Hall for the prisoner to be brought before them, she saw Robb push back the crown so it rested upon the thick auburn mop of his hair; moments later, he moved it forward again; later he gave it a quarter turn, as if that might make it sit more easily on his brow. *It is no easy thing to wear a crown*, Catelyn thought, watching, *especially for a boy of fifteen years*.

When the guards brought in the captive, Robb called for his sword. Olyvar Frey offered it up hilt first, and her son drew the blade and laid it bare across his knees, a threat plain for all to

see. “Your Grace, here is the man you asked for,” announced Ser Robin Ryger, captain of the Tully household guard.

“Kneel before the king, Lannister!” Theon Greyjoy shouted. Ser Robin forced the prisoner to his knees.

He did not look a lion, Catelyn reflected. This Ser Cleos Frey was a son of the Lady Genna who was sister to Lord Tywin Lannister, but he had none of the fabled Lannister beauty, the fair hair and green eyes. Instead he had inherited the stringy brown locks, weak chin, and thin face of his sire, Ser Emmon Frey, old Lord Walder’s second son. His eyes were pale and watery and he could not seem to stop blinking, but perhaps that was only the light. The cells below Riverrun were dark and damp ... and these days crowded as well.

“Rise, Ser Cleos.” Her son’s voice was not as icy as his father’s would have been, but he did not sound a boy of fifteen either. War had made a man of him before his time. Morning light glimmered faintly against the edge of the steel across his knees.

Yet it was not the sword that made Ser Cleos Frey anxious; it was the beast. Grey Wind, her son had named him. A direwolf large as any elkhound, lean and smoke-dark, with eyes like molten gold. When the beast padded forward and sniffed at the captive knight, every man in that hall could smell the scent of fear. Ser Cleos had been taken during the battle in the Whispering Wood, where Grey Wind had ripped out the throats of half a dozen men.

The knight scrambled up, edging away with such alacrity that

some of the watchers laughed aloud. "Thank you, my lord."

"*Your Grace*," barked Lord UMBER, the Greatjon, ever the loudest of Robb's northern bannermen ... and the truest and fiercest as well, or so he insisted. He had been the first to proclaim her son King in the North, and he would brook no slight to the honor of his new-made sovereign.

"Your Grace," Ser Cleos corrected hastily. "Pardons."

He is not a bold man, this one, Catelyn thought. More of a Frey than a Lannister, in truth. His cousin the Kingslayer would have been a much different matter. They would never had gotten that honorific through Ser Jaime Lannister's perfect teeth.

"I brought you from your cell to carry my message to your cousin Cersei Lannister in King's Landing. You'll travel under a peace banner, with thirty of my best men to escort you."

Ser Cleos was visibly relieved. "Then I should be most glad to bring His Grace's message to the queen."

"Understand," Robb said, "I am not giving you your freedom. Your grandfather Lord Walder pledged me his support and that of House Frey. Many of your cousins and uncles rode with us in the Whispering Wood, but *you* chose to fight beneath the lion banner. That makes you a Lannister, not a Frey. I want your pledge, on your honor as a knight, that after you deliver my message you'll return with the queen's reply, and resume your captivity."

Ser Cleos answered at once. "I do so vow."

"Every man in this hall has heard you," warned Catelyn's

brother Ser Edmure Tully, who spoke for Riverrun and the lords of the Trident in the place of their dying father. “If you do not return, the whole realm will know you forsworn.”

“I will do as I pledged,” Ser Cleos replied stiffly. “What is this message?”

“An offer of peace.” Robb stood, longsword in hand. Grey Wind moved to his side. The hall grew hushed. “Tell the Queen Regent that if she meets my terms, I will sheath this sword, and make an end to the war between us.”

In the back of the hall, Catelyn glimpsed the tall, gaunt figure of Lord Rickard Karstark shove through a rank of guards and out the door. No one else moved. Robb paid the disruption no mind. “Olyvar, the paper,” he commanded. The squire took his longsword and handed up a rolled parchment.

Robb unrolled it. “First, the queen must release my sisters and provide them with transport by sea from King’s Landing to White Harbor. It is to be understood that Sansa’s betrothal to Joffrey Baratheon is at an end. When I receive word from my castellan that my sisters have returned unharmed to Winterfell, I will release the queen’s cousins, the squire Willem Lannister and your brother Tion Frey, and give them safe escort to Casterly Rock or wheresoever she desires them delivered.”

Catelyn Stark wished she could read the thoughts that hid behind each face, each furrowed brow and pair of tightened lips.

“Second, my lord father’s bones will be returned to us, so he may rest beside his brother and sister in the crypts beneath

Winterfell, as he would have wished. The remains of the men of his household guard who died in his service at King's Landing must also be returned."

Living men had gone south, and cold bones would return. *Ned had the truth of it*, she thought. *His place was at Winterfell, he said as much, but would I hear him? No. Go, I told him, you must be Robert's Hand, for the good of our House, for the sake of our children ... my doing, mine, no other ...*

"Third, my father's greatsword Ice will be delivered to my hand, here at Riverrun."

She watched her brother Ser Edmure Tully as he stood with his thumbs hooked over his swordbelt, his face as still as stone.

"Fourth, the queen will command her father Lord Tywin to release those knights and lords bannermen of mine that he took captive in the battle on the Green Fork of the Trident. Once he does so, I shall release my own captives taken in the Whispering Wood and the Battle of the Camps, save Jaime Lannister alone, who will remain my hostage for his father's good behavior."

She studied Theon Greyjoy's sly smile, wondering what it meant. That young man had a way of looking as though he knew some secret jest that only he was privy to; Catelyn had never liked it.

"Lastly, King Joffrey and the Queen Regent must renounce all claims to dominion over the North. Henceforth we are no part of their realm, but a free and independent kingdom, as of old. Our domain shall include all the Stark lands north of the Neck,

and in addition the lands watered by the River Trident and its vassal streams, bounded by the Golden Tooth to the west and the Mountains of the Moon in the east.”

“*THE KING IN THE NORTH!*” boomed Greatjon Umber, a ham-sized fist hammering at the air as he shouted. “*Stark! Stark! The King in the North!*”

Robb rolled up the parchment again. “Maester Vyman has drawn a map, showing the borders we claim. You shall have a copy for the queen. Lord Tywin must withdraw beyond these borders, and cease his raiding, burning, and pillage. The Queen Regent and her son shall make no claims to taxes, incomes, nor service from my people, and shall free my lords and knights from all oaths of fealty, vows, pledges, debts, and obligations owed to the Iron Throne and the Houses Baratheon and Lannister. Additionally, the Lannisters shall deliver ten highborn hostages, to be mutually agreed upon, as a pledge of peace. These I will treat as honored guests, according to their station. So long as the terms of this pact are abided with faithfully, I shall release two hostages every year, and return them safely to their families.” Robb tossed the rolled parchment at the knight’s feet. “There are the terms. If she meets them, I’ll give her peace. If not—” He whistled, and Grey Wind moved forward snarling. “—I’ll give her another Whispering Wood.”

“*Stark!*” the Greatjon roared again, and now other voices took up the cry. “*Stark, Stark, King in the North!*” The direwolf threw back its head and howled.

Ser Cleos had gone the color of curdled milk. “The queen shall hear your message, my—Your Grace.”

“Good,” Robb said. “Ser Robin, see that he has a good meal and clean clothing. He’s to ride at first light.”

“As you command, Your Grace,” Ser Robin Ryger replied.

“Then we are done.” The assembled knights and lords bannermen bent their knees as Robb turned to leave, Grey Wind at his heels. Olyvar Frey scrambled ahead to open the door. Catelyn followed them out, her brother at her side.

“You did well,” she told her son in the gallery that led from the rear of the hall, “though that business with the wolf was japery more befitting a boy than a king.”

Robb scratched Grey Wind behind the ear. “Did you see the look on his face, mother?” he asked, smiling.

“What I saw was Lord Karstark, walking out.”

“As did I.” Robb lifted off his crown with both hands and gave it to Olyvar. “Take this thing back to my bedchamber.”

“At once, Your Grace.” The squire hurried off.

“I’ll wager there were others who felt the same as Lord Karstark,” her brother Edmure declared. “How can we talk of peace while the Lannisters spread like a pestilence over my father’s domains, stealing his crops and slaughtering his people? I say again, we ought to be marching on Harrenhal.”

“We lack the strength,” Robb said, though unhappily.

Edmure persisted. “Do we grow stronger sitting here? Our host dwindles every day.”

“And whose doing is that?” Catelyn snapped at her brother. It had been at Edmure’s insistence that Robb had given the river lords leave to depart after his crowning, each to defend his own lands. Ser Marq Piper and Lord Karyl Vance had been the first to go. Lord Jonos Bracken had followed, vowing to reclaim the burned shell of his castle and bury his dead, and now Lord Jason Mallister had announced his intent to return to his seat at Seagard, still mercifully untouched by the fighting.

“You cannot ask my river lords to remain idle while their fields are being pillaged and their people put to the sword,” Ser Edmure said, “but Lord Karstark is a northman. It would be an ill thing if he were to leave us.”

“I’ll speak with him,” said Robb. “He lost two sons in the Whispering Wood. Who can blame him if he does not want to make peace with their killers ... with my father’s killers ...”

“More bloodshed will not bring your father back to us, nor Lord Rickard’s sons,” Catelyn said. “An offer had to be made—though a wiser man might have offered sweeter terms.”

“Any sweeter and I would have gagged.” Her son’s beard had grown in redder than his auburn hair. Robb seemed to think it made him look fierce, royal ... older. But bearded or no, he was still a youth of fifteen, and wanted vengeance no less than Rickard Karstark. It had been no easy thing to convince him to make even this offer, poor as it was.

“Cersei Lannister will *never* consent to trade your sisters for a pair of cousins. It’s her brother she’ll want, as you know full

well.” She had told him as much before, but Catelyn was finding that kings do not listen half so attentively as sons.

“I can’t release the Kingslayer, not even if I wanted to. My lords would never abide it.”

“Your lords made you their king.”

“And can *unmake* me just as easy.”

“If your crown is the price we must pay to have Arya and Sansa returned safe, we should pay it willingly. Half your lords would like to murder Lannister in his cell. If he should die while he’s your prisoner, men will say—”

“—that he well deserved it,” Robb finished.

“And your sisters?” Catelyn asked sharply. “Will they deserve their deaths as well? I promise you, if any harm comes to her brother, Cersei will pay us back blood for blood—”

“Lannister won’t die,” Robb said. “No one so much as speaks to him without my warrant. He has food, water, clean straw, more comfort than he has any right to. But I won’t free him, not even for Arya and Sansa.”

Her son was looking *down* at her, Catelyn realized. *Was it war that made him grow so fast*, she wondered, *or the crown they had put on his head?* “Are you afraid to have Jaime Lannister in the field again, is that the truth of it?”

Grey Wind growled, as if he sensed Robb’s anger, and Edmure Tully put a brotherly hand on Catelyn’s shoulder. “Cat, don’t. The boy has the right of this.”

“Don’t call me *the boy*,” Robb said, rounding on his uncle,

his anger spilling out all at once on poor Edmure, who had only meant to support him. “I’m almost a man grown, and a king—*your* king, ser. And I don’t fear Jaime Lannister. I defeated him once, I’ll defeat him again if I must, only ...” He pushed a fall of hair out his eyes and gave a shake of the head. “I might have been able to trade the Kingslayer for father, but ...”

“... but not for the girls?” Her voice was icy quiet. “Girls are not important enough, are they?”

Robb made no answer, but there was hurt in his eyes. Blue eyes, Tully eyes, eyes she had given him. She had wounded him, but he was too much his father’s son to admit it.

That was unworthy of me, she told herself. Gods be good, what is become of me? He is doing his best, trying so hard, I know it, I see it, and yet ... I have lost my Ned, the rock my life was built on, I could not bear to lose the girls as well ...

“I’ll do all I can for my sisters,” Robb said. “If the queen has any sense, she’ll accept my terms. If not, I’ll make her rue the day she refused me.” Plainly, he’d had enough of the subject. “Mother, are you certain you will not consent to go to the Twins? You would be further from the fighting, and you could acquaint yourself with Lord Frey’s daughters to help me choose my bride when the war is done.”

He wants me gone, Catelyn thought wearily. Kings are not supposed to have mothers, it would seem, and I tell him things he does not want to hear. “You’re old enough to decide which of Lord Walder’s girls you prefer without your mother’s help,

Robb.”

“Then go with Theon. He leaves on the morrow. He’ll help the Mallisters escort that lot of captives to Seagard and then take ship for the Iron Islands. You could find a ship as well, and be back at Winterfell with a moon’s turn, if the winds were kind. Bran and Rickon need you.”

And you do not, is that what you mean to say? “My lord father has little enough time remaining him. So long as your grandfather lives, my place is at Riverrun with him.”

“I could command you to go. As king. I could.”

Catelyn ignored that. “I’ll say again, I would sooner you sent someone else to Pyke, and kept Theon close to you.”

“Who better to treat with Balon Greyjoy than his son?”

“Jason Mallister,” offered Catelyn. “Tytos Blackwood. Stevron Frey. Anyone ... but not Theon.”

Her son squatted beside Grey Wind, ruffling the wolf’s fur and incidentally avoiding her eyes. “Theon’s fought bravely for us. I told you how he saved Bran from those wildlings in the wolfswood. If the Lannisters won’t make peace, I’ll have need of Lord Greyjoy’s longships.”

“You’ll have them sooner if you keep his son as hostage.”

“He’s been a hostage half his life.”

“For good reason,” Catelyn said. “Balon Greyjoy is not a man to be trusted. He wore a crown himself, remember, if only for a season. He may aspire to wear one again.”

Robb stood. “I will not grudge him that. If I’m King in the

North, let him be King of the Iron Islands, if that's his desire. I'll give him a crown gladly, so long as he helps us bring down the Lannisters."

"Robb—"

"I'm sending Theon. Good day, mother. Grey Wind, come." Robb walked off briskly, the direwolf padding beside him.

Catelyn could only watch him go. Her son and now her king. How queer that felt. *Command*, she had told him back in Moat Cailin. And so he did. "I am going to visit father," she announced abruptly. "Come with me, Edmure."

"I need to have a word with those new bowmen Ser Desmond is training. I'll visit him later."

If he still lives, Catelyn thought, but she said nothing. Her brother would sooner face battle than that sickroom.

The shortest way to the central keep where her father lay dying was through the godswood, with its grass and wildflowers and thick stands of elm and redwood. A wealth of rustling leaves still clung to the branches of the trees, all ignorant of the word the white raven had brought to Riverrun a fortnight past. Autumn had come, the Conclave had declared, but the gods had not seen fit to tell the winds and woods as yet. For that Catelyn was duly grateful. Autumn was always a fearful time, with the spectre of winter looming ahead. Even the wisest man never knew whether his next harvest would be the last.

Hooster Tully, Lord of Riverrun, lay abed in his solar, with its commanding view to the east where the rivers Tumblestone

and Red Fork met beyond the walls of his castle. He was sleeping when Catelyn entered, his hair and beard as white as his featherbed, his once portly frame turned small and frail by the death that grew within him.

Beside the bed, still dressed in mail hauberk and travel-stained cloak, sat her father's brother, the Blackfish. His boots were dusty and spattered with dried mud. "Does Robb know you are returned, uncle?" Ser Brynden Tully was Robb's eyes and ears, the commander of his scouts and outriders.

"No. I came here straight from the stables, when they told me the king was holding court. His Grace will want to hear my tidings in private first, I'd think." The Blackfish was a tall, lean man, grey of hair and precise in his movements, his clean-shaven face lined and windburnt. "How is he?" he asked, and she knew he did not mean Robb.

"Much the same. The maester gives him dreamwine and milk of the poppy for his pain, so he sleeps most of the time, and eats too little. He seems weaker with each day that passes."

"Does he speak?"

"Yes ... but there is less and less sense to the things he says. He talks of his regrets, of unfinished tasks, of people long dead and times long past. Sometimes he does not know what season it is, or who I am. Once he called me by mother's name."

"He misses her still," Ser Brynden answered. "You have her face. I can see it in your cheekbones, and your jaw ..."

"You remember more of her than I do. It has been a long

time.” She seated herself on the bed and brushed away a strand of fine white hair that had fallen across her father’s face.

“Each time I ride out, I wonder if I shall find him alive or dead on my return.” Despite their quarrels, there was a deep bond between her father and the brother he had once disowned.

“At least you made your peace with him.”

They sat for a time in silence, until Catelyn raised her head. “You spoke of tidings that Robb needed to hear?” Lord Hoster moaned and rolled onto his side, almost as if he had heard.

Brynden stood. “Come outside. Best if we do not wake him.”

She followed him out onto the stone balcony that jutted three-sided from the solar like the prow of a ship. Her uncle glanced up, frowning. “You can see it by day now. My men call it the Red Messenger ... but what is the message?”

Catelyn raised her eyes, to where the faint red line of the comet traced a path across the deep blue sky like a long scratch across the face of god. “The Greatjon told Robb that the old gods have unfurled a red flag of vengeance for Ned. Edmure thinks it’s an omen of victory for Riverrun—he sees a fish with a long tail, in the Tully colors, red against blue.” She sighed. “I wish I had their faith. Crimson is a Lannister color.”

“That thing’s not crimson,” Ser Brynden said. “Nor Tully red, the mud red of the river. That’s blood up there, child, smeared across the sky.”

“Our blood or theirs?”

“Was there ever a war where only one side bled?” Her uncle

gave a shake of the head. “The riverlands are awash in blood and flame all around the Gods Eye. The fighting has spread south to the Blackwater and north across the Trident, almost to the Twins. Marq Piper and Karyl Vance have won some small victories, and this southron lordling Beric Dondarrion has been raiding the raiders, falling upon Lord Tywin’s foraging parties and vanishing back into the woods. It’s said that Ser Burton Crakehall was boasting that he’d slain Dondarrion, until he led his column into one of Lord Beric’s traps and got every man of them killed.”

“Some of Ned’s guard from King’s Landing are with this Lord Beric,” Catelyn recalled. “May the gods preserve them.”

“Dondarrion and this red priest who rides with him are clever enough to preserve themselves, if the tales be true,” her uncle said, “but your father’s bannermen make a sadder tale. Robb should never have let them go. They’ve scattered like quail, each man trying to protect his own, and it’s folly, Cat, folly. Jonos Bracken was wounded in the fighting amidst the ruins of his castle, and his nephew Hendry slain. Tytos Blackwood’s swept the Lannisters off his lands, but they took every cow and pig and speck of grain and left him nothing to defend but Raventree Hall and a scorched desert. Darry men recaptured their lord’s keep but held it less than a fortnight before Gregor Clegane descended on them and put the whole garrison to the sword, even their lord.”

Catelyn was horrorstruck. “Darry was only a child.”

“Aye, and the last of his line as well. The boy would have brought a fine ransom, but what does gold mean to a frothing

dog like Gregor Clegane? That beast's head would make a noble gift for all the people of the realm, I vow."

Catelyn knew Ser Gregor's evil reputation, yet still ... "Don't speak to me of heads, uncle. Cersei has mounted Ned's on a spike above the walls of the Red Keep, and left it for the crows and flies." Even now, it was hard for her to believe that he was truly gone. Some nights she would wake in darkness, half-asleep, and for an instant expect to find him there beside her. "Clegane is no more than Lord Tywin's catspaw." For Tywin Lannister—Lord of Casterly Rock, Warden of the West, father to Queen Cersei, Ser Jaime the Kingslayer, and Tyrion the Imp, and grandfather to Joffrey Baratheon, the new-crowned boy king—was the true danger, Catelyn believed.

"True enough," Ser Brynden admitted. "And Tywin Lannister is no man's fool. He sits safe behind the walls of Harrenhal, feeding his host on our harvest and burning what he does not take. Gregor is not the only dog he's loosed. Ser Amory Lorch is in the field as well, and some sellsword out of Qohor who'd sooner maim a man than kill him. I've seen what they leave behind them. Whole villages put to the torch, women raped and mutilated, butchered children left unburied to draw wolves and wild dogs ... it would sicken even the dead."

"When Edmure hears this, he will rage."

"And that will be just as Lord Tywin desires. Even terror has its purpose, Cat. Lannister wants to provoke us to battle."

"Robb is like to give him that wish," Catelyn said, fretful. "He

is restless as a cat sitting here, and Edmure and the Greatjon and the others will urge him on.” Her son had won two great victories, smashing Jaime Lannister in the Whispering Wood and routing his leaderless host outside the walls of Riverrun in the Battle of the Camps, but from the way some of his bannermen spoke of him, he might have been Aegon the Conqueror reborn.

Brynden Blackfish arched a bushy grey eyebrow. “More fool they. My first rule of war, Cat—*never* give the enemy his wish. Lord Tywin would like to fight on a field of his own choosing. He wants us to march on Harrenhal.”

“Harrenhal.” Every child of the Trident knew the tales told of Harrenhal, the vast fortress that King Harren the Black had raised beside the waters of Gods Eye three hundred years past, when the Seven Kingdoms had *been* seven kingdoms, and the riverlands were ruled by the ironmen from the islands. In his pride, Harren had desired the highest hall and tallest towers in all Westeros. Forty years it had taken, rising like a great shadow on the shore of the lake while Harren’s armies plundered his neighbors for stone, lumber, gold, and workers. Thousands of captives died in his quarries, chained to his sledges, or laboring on his five colossal towers. Men froze by winter and sweltered in summer. Weirwoods that had stood three thousand years were cut down for beams and rafters. Harren had beggared the riverlands and the Iron Islands alike to ornament his dream. And when at last Harrenhal stood complete, on the very day King Harren took up residence, Aegon the Conqueror had come ashore at King’s

Landing.

Catelyn could remember hearing Old Nan tell the story to her own children, back at Winterfell. “And King Harren learned that thick walls and high towers are small use against dragons,” the tale always ended. “For dragons *fly*.” Harren and all his line had perished in the fires that engulfed his monstrous fortress, and every house that held Harrenhal since had come to misfortune. Strong it might be, but it was a dark place, and cursed.

“I would not have Robb fight a battle in the shadow of that keep,” Catelyn admitted. “Yet we must do *something*, uncle.”

“And soon,” her uncle agreed. “I have not told you the worst of it, child. The men I sent west have brought back word that a new host is gathering at Casterly Rock.”

Another Lannister army. The thought made her ill. “Robb must be told at once. Who will command?”

“Ser Stafford Lannister, it’s said.” He turned to gaze out over the rivers, his red-and-blue cloak stirring in the breeze.

“Another nephew?” The Lannisters of Casterly Rock were a damnably large and fertile house.

“Cousin,” Ser Brynden corrected. “Brother to Lord Tywin’s late wife, so twice related. An old man and a bit of a dullard, but he has a son, Ser Daven, who is more formidable.”

“Then let us hope it is the father and not the son who takes this army into the field.”

“We have some time yet before we must face them. This lot will be sellswords, freeriders and green boys from the stews of

Lannisport. Ser Stafford must see that they are armed and drilled before he dare risk battle ... and make no mistake, Lord Tywin is not the Kingslayer. He will not rush in heedless. He will wait patiently for Ser Stafford to march before he stirs from behind the walls of Harrenhal.”

“Unless ...” said Catelyn.

“Yes?” Ser Brynden prompted.

“Unless he *must* leave Harrenhal,” she said, “to face some other threat.”

Her uncle looked at her thoughtfully. “Lord Renly.”

“*King* Renly.” If she would ask help from the man, she would need to grant him the style he had claimed for himself.

“Perhaps.” The Blackfish smiled a dangerous smile. “He’ll want something, though.”

“He’ll want what kings always want,” she said. “Homage.”

TYRION

Janos Slynt was a butcher's son, and he laughed like a man chopping meat. "More wine?" Tyrion asked him.

"I should not object," Lord Janos said, holding out his cup. He was built like a keg, and had a similar capacity. "I should not object at all. That's a fine red. From the Arbor?"

"Dornish." Tyrion gestured, and his serving man poured. But for the servants, he and Lord Janos were alone in the Small Hall, at a candlelit table surrounded by darkness. "Quite the find. Dornish wines are not often so rich."

"Rich," said the big frog-faced man, taking a healthy gulp. He was not a man for sipping, Janos Slynt. Tyrion had made note of that at once. "Yes, rich, that's the very word I was searching for, the *very* word. You have a gift for words, Lord Tyrion, if I might say so. And you tell a droll tale. Droll, yes."

"I'm pleased you think so ... but I'm not a lord, as you are. A simple *Tyrion* will suffice for me, Lord Janos."

"As you wish." He took another swallow, dribbling wine on the front of his black satin doublet. He was wearing a cloth-of-gold half-cape fastened with a miniature spear, its point enameled in dark red. And he was well and truly drunk.

Tyrion covered his mouth and belched politely. Unlike Lord Janos, he had gone easy on the wine, but he was very full. The first thing he had done after taking up residence in the Tower

of the Hand was inquire after the finest cook in the city and take her into his service. This evening they had supped on oxtail soup, summer greens tossed with pecans, grapes, red fennel, and crumbled cheese, hot crab pie, spiced squash, and quails drowned in butter. Each dish had come with its own wine. Lord Janos allowed that he had never eaten half so well. “No doubt that will change when you take your seat in Harrenhal,” Tyrion said.

“For a certainty. Perhaps I should ask this cook of yours to enter my service, what do you say?”

“Wars have been fought over less,” he said, and they both had a good long laugh. “You’re a bold man to take Harrenhal for your seat. Such a grim place, and *huge* ... costly to maintain. And some say cursed as well.”

“Should I fear a pile of stone?” He hooted at the notion. “A bold man, you said. You must be bold, to rise. As I have. To Harrenhal, yes! And why not? You know. You are a bold man too, I sense. Small, mayhap, but *bold*.”

“You are too kind. More wine?”

“No. No, truly, I ... oh, gods be damned, *yes*. Why not? A bold man drinks his fill!”

“Truly.” Tyrion filled Lord Slynt’s cup to the brim. “I have been glancing over the names you put forward to take your place as Commander of the City Watch.”

“Good men. Fine men. Any of the six will do, but I’d choose Allar Deem. My right arm. Good good man. Loyal. Pick him and you won’t be sorry. If he pleases the king.”

“To be sure.” Tyrion took a small sip of his own wine. “I had been considering Ser Jacelyn Bywater. He’s been captain on the Mud Gate for three years, and he served with valor during Balon Greyjoy’s Rebellion. King Robert knighted him at Pyke. And yet his name does not appear on your list.”

Lord Janos Slynt took a gulp of wine and sloshed it around in his mouth for a moment before swallowing. “Bywater. Well. Brave man, to be sure, yet ... he’s *rigid*, that one. A queer dog. The men don’t like him. A cripple too, lost his hand at Pyke, that’s what got him knighted. A poor trade, if you ask me, a hand for a *ser*.” He laughed. “Ser Jacelyn thinks overmuch of himself and his honor, as I see it. You’ll do better leaving that one where he is, my lor—Tyrion. Allar Deem’s the man for you.”

“Deem is little loved in the streets, I am told.”

“He’s feared. That’s better.”

“What was it I heard of him? Some trouble in a brothel?”

“That. Not his fault, my lo—Tyrion. No. He never meant to kill the woman, that was her own doing. He warned her to stand aside and let him do his duty.”

“Still ... mothers and children, he might have expected she’d try to save the babe.” Tyrion smiled. “Have some of this cheese, it goes splendidly with the wine. Tell me, why did you choose Deem for that unhappy task?”

“A good commander knows his men, Tyrion. Some are good for one job, some for another. Doing for a babe, and her still on the tit, that takes a certain sort. Not every man’d do it. Even if it

was only some whore and her whelp.”

“I suppose that’s so,” said Tyrion, hearing *only some whore* and thinking of Shae, and Tysha long ago, and all the other women who had taken his coin and his seed over the years.

Slynt went on, oblivious. “A hard man for a hard job, is Deem. Does as he’s told, and never a word afterward.” He cut a slice off the cheese. “This *is* fine. Sharp. Give me a good sharp knife and a good sharp cheese and I’m a happy man.”

Tyrion shrugged. “Enjoy it while you can. With the river lands in flame and Renly king in Highgarden, good cheese will soon be hard to come by. So who sent you after the whore’s bastard?”

Lord Janos gave Tyrion a wary look, then laughed and wagged a wedge of cheese at him. “You’re a sly one, Tyrion. Thought you could trick me, did you? It takes more than wine and cheese to make Janos Slynt tell more than he should. I pride myself. Never a question, and never a word afterward, not with me.”

“As with Deem.”

“Just the same. You make him your commander when I’m off to Harrenhal, and you won’t regret it.”

Tyrion broke off a nibble of the cheese. It was sharp indeed, and veined with wine. Very choice. “Whoever the king names will not have an easy time stepping into *your* armor, I can tell. Lord Mormont faces the same problem.”

Lord Janos looked puzzled. “I thought she was a lady. Mormont. Beds down with bears, that’s the one?”

“It was her brother I was speaking of. Jeor Mormont, the Lord

Commander of the Night's Watch. When I was visiting with him on the Wall, he mentioned how concerned he was about finding a good man to take his place. The Watch gets so few good men these days." Tyrion grinned. "He'd sleep easier if he had a man like you, I imagine. Or the valiant Allar Deem."

Lord Janos roared. "Small chance of that!"

"One would think," Tyrion said, "but life does take queer turns. Consider Eddard Stark, my lord. I don't suppose he ever imagined his life would end on the steps of Baelor's Sept."

"There were damn few as did," Lord Janos allowed, chuckling.

Tyrion chuckled too. "A pity I wasn't here to see it. They say even Varys was surprised."

Lord Janos laughed so hard his gut shook. "The Spider," he said. "Knows everything, they say. Well, he didn't know *that*."

"How could he?" Tyrion put the first hint of a chill in his tone. "He had helped persuade my sister that Stark should be pardoned, on the condition that he take the black."

"Eh?" Janos Slynt blinked vaguely at Tyrion.

"My sister Cersei," Tyrion repeated, a shade more strongly, in case the fool had some doubt who he meant. "The Queen Regent."

"Yes." Slynt took a swallow. "As to that, well ... the king commanded it, m'lord. The king himself."

"The king is thirteen," Tyrion reminded him.

"Still. He *is* the king." Slynt's jowls quivered when he frowned. "The Lord of the Seven Kingdoms."

“Well, one or two of them, at least,” Tyrion said, with a sour smile. “Might I have a look at your spear?”

“My spear?” Lord Janos blinked in confusion.

Tyrion pointed. “The clasp that fastens your cape.”

Hesitantly, Lord Janos drew out the ornament and handed it to Tyrion.

“We have goldsmiths in Lannisport who do better work,” he opined. “The red enamel blood is a shade much, if you don’t mind my saying. Tell me, my lord, did you drive the spear into the man’s back yourself, or did you only give the command?”

“I gave the command, and I’d give it again. Lord Stark was a traitor.” The bald spot in the middle of Slynt’s head was beet red, and his cloth-of-gold cape had slithered off his shoulders onto the floor. “The man tried to buy me.”

“Little dreaming that you had already been sold.”

Slynt slammed down his wine cup. “Are you drunk? If you think I will sit here and have my honor questioned ...”

“What honor is that? I do admit, you made a better bargain than Ser Jacelyn. A lordship and a castle for a spear thrust in the back, and you didn’t even need to thrust the spear.” He tossed the golden ornament back to Janos Slynt. It bounced off his chest and clattered to the floor as the man rose.

“I mislike the tone of your voice, my lo—*Imp*. I am the Lord of Harrenhal and a member of the king’s council, who are you to chastise me like this?”

Tyrion cocked his head sideways. “I think you know quite well

who I am. How many sons do you have?”

“What are my sons to you, dwarf?”

“*Dwarf?*” His anger flashed. “You should have stopped at Imp. I am Tyrion of House Lannister, and some day, if you have the sense the gods gave a sea slug, you will drop to your knees in thanks that it was me you had to deal with, and not my lord father. Now, *how many sons do you have?*”

Tyrion could see the sudden fear in Janos Slynt’s eyes. “Three, m’lord. And a daughter. Please, m’lord—”

“You need not beg.” He slid off his chair. “You have my word, no harm will come to them. The younger boys will be fostered out as squires. If they serve well and loyally, they may be knights in time. Let it never be said that House Lannister does not reward those who serve it. Your eldest son will inherit the title Lord Slynt, and this appalling sigil of yours.” He kicked at the little golden spear and sent it skittering across the floor. “Lands will be found for him, and he can build a seat for himself. It will not be Harrenhal, but it will be sufficient. It will be up to him to make a marriage for the girl.”

Janos Slynt’s face had gone from red to white. “Wh-what ... what do you ... ?” His jowls were quivering like mounds of suet.

“What do I mean to do with *you?*” Tyrion let the oaf tremble for a moment before he answered. “The carrack *Summer’s Dream* sails on the morning tide. Her master tells me she will call at Gulltown, the Three Sisters, the isle of Skagos, and Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. When you see Lord Commander Mormont, give him

my fond regards, and tell him that I have not forgotten the needs of the Night's Watch. I wish you long life and good service, my lord."

Once Janos Slynt realized he was not to be summarily executed, color returned to his face. He thrust his jaw out. "We will see about this, Imp. *Dwarf*. Perhaps it will be you on that ship, what do you think of that? Perhaps it will be you on the Wall." He gave a bark of anxious laughter. "You and your threats, well, we will see. I am the king's friend, you know. We shall hear what Joffrey has to say about this. And Littlefinger and the queen, oh, yes. Janos Slynt has a good many friends. We will see who goes sailing, I promise you. Indeed we will."

Slynt spun on his heel like the watchman he'd once been, and strode the length of the Small Hall, boots ringing on the stone. He clattered up the steps, threw open the door ... and came face-to-face with a tall, lantern-jawed man in black breastplate and gold cloak. Strapped to the stump of his right wrist was an iron hand. "Janos," he said, deepset eyes glinting under a prominent brow ridge and a shock of salt-and-pepper hair. Six gold cloaks moved quietly into the Small Hall behind him, as Janos Slynt backed away.

"Lord Slynt," Tyrion called out, "I believe you know Ser Jacelyn Bywater, our new Commander of the City Watch."

"We have a litter waiting for you, my lord," Ser Jacelyn told Slynt. "The docks are dark and distant, and the streets are not safe by night. Men."

As the gold cloaks ushered out their one-time commander, Tyrion called Ser Jacelyn to his side and handed him a roll of parchment. “It’s a long voyage, and Lord Slynt will want for company. See that these six join him on the *Summer’s Dream*.”

Bywater glanced over the names and smiled. “As you will.”

“There’s one,” Tyrion said, quietly. “Deem. Tell the captain it would not be taken amiss if that one should happen to be swept overboard before they reach Eastwatch.”

“I’m told those northern waters are very stormy, my lord.” Ser Jacelyn bowed and took his leave, his cloak rippling behind him. He trod on Slynt’s cloth-of-gold cape on his way.

Tyrion sat alone, sipping at what remained of the fine sweet Dornish wine. Servants came and went, clearing the dishes from the table. He told them to leave the wine. When they were done, Varys came gliding into the hall, wearing flowing lavender robes that matched his smell. “Oh, sweetly done, my good lord.”

“Then why do I have this bitter taste in my mouth?” He pressed his fingers into his temples. “I told them to throw Allar Deem into the sea. I am sore tempted to do the same with you.”

“You might be disappointed by the result,” Varys replied. “The storms come and go, the waves crash overhead, the big fish eat the little fish, and I keep on paddling. Might I trouble you for a taste of the wine that Lord Slynt enjoyed so much?”

Tyrion waved at the flagon, frowning.

Varys filled a cup. “Ah. Sweet as summer.” He took another sip. “I hear the grapes singing on my tongue.”

“I wondered what that noise was. Tell the grapes to keep still, my head is about to split. It was my sister. That was what the oh-so-loyal Lord Janos refused to say. *Cersei* sent the gold cloaks to that brothel.”

Varys tittered nervously. So he had known all along.

“You left that part out,” Tyrion said, accusingly.

“Your own sweet sister,” Varys said, so grief-stricken he looked close to tears. “It is a hard thing to tell a man, my lord. I was fearful how you might take it. Can you forgive me?”

“No,” Tyrion snapped. “Damn you. Damn *her*.” He could not touch Cersei, he knew. Not yet, not even if he’d wanted to, and he was far from certain that he did. Yet it rankled, to sit here and make a mummer’s show of justice by punishing the sorry likes of Janos Slynt and Allar Deem, while his sister continued on her savage course. “In future, you will tell me what you know, Lord Varys. *All* of what you know.”

The eunuch’s smile was sly. “That might take rather a long time, my good lord. I know quite a lot.”

“Not enough to save this child, it would seem.”

“Alas, no. There was another bastard, a boy, older. I took steps to see him removed from harm’s way ... but I confess, I never dreamed the babe would be at risk. A baseborn girl, less than a year old, with a whore for a mother. What threat could she pose?”

“She was Robert’s,” Tyrion said bitterly. “That was enough for Cersei, it would seem.”

“Yes. It is grievous sad. I must blame myself for the poor sweet

babe and her mother, who was so young and loved the king.”

“Did she?” Tyrion had never seen the dead girl’s face, but in his mind she was Shae and Tysha both. “Can a whore truly love anyone, I wonder? No, don’t answer. Some things I would rather not know.” He had settled Shae in a sprawling stone-and-timber manse, with its own well and stable and garden; he had given her servants to see to her wants, a white bird from the Summer Isles to keep her company, silks and silver and gemstones to adorn her, guards to protect her. And yet she seemed restive. She wanted to be with him more, she told him; she wanted to serve him and help him. “You help me most here, between the sheets,” he told her one night after their loving, as he lay beside her, his head pillowed against her breast, his groin aching with a sweet soreness. She made no reply, save with her eyes. He could see there that it was not what she’d wanted to hear.

Sighing, Tyrion started to reach for the wine again, then remembered Lord Janos and pushed the flagon away. “It does seem my sister was telling the truth about Stark’s death. We have my nephew to thank for that madness.”

“King Joffrey gave the command. Janos Slynt and Ser Ilyn Payne carried it out, swiftly, without hesitation ...”

“... almost as if they had expected it. Yes, we have been over this ground before, without profit. A folly.”

“With the City Watch in hand, my lord, you are well placed to see to it that His Grace commits no further ... follies? To be sure, there is still the queen’s household guard to consider ...”

“The red cloaks?” Tyrion shrugged. “Vylarr’s loyalty is to Casterly Rock. He knows I am here with my father’s authority. Cersei would find it hard to use his men against me . . . besides, they are only a hundred. I have half again as many men of my own. *And* six thousand gold cloaks, if Bywater is the man you claim.”

“You will find Ser Jacelyn to be courageous, honorable, obedient . . . and most grateful.”

“To whom, I wonder?” Tyrion did not trust Varys, though there was no denying his value. He knew things, beyond a doubt. “Why *are* you so helpful, my Lord Varys?” he asked, studying the man’s soft hands, the bald powdered face, the slimy little smile.

“You are the Hand. I serve the realm, the king, and you.”

“As you served Jon Arryn and Eddard Stark?”

“I served Lord Arryn and Lord Stark as best I could. I was saddened and horrified by their most untimely deaths.”

“Think how *I* feel. I’m like to be next.”

“Oh, I think not,” Varys said, swirling the wine in his cup. “Power is a curious thing, my lord. Perchance you have considered the riddle I posed you that day in the inn?”

“It has crossed my mind a time or two,” Tyrion admitted. “The king, the priest, the rich man—who lives and who dies? Who will the swordsman obey? It’s a riddle without an answer, or rather, too many answers. All depends on the man with the sword.”

“And yet he is no one,” Varys said. “He has neither crown nor gold nor favor of the gods, only a piece of pointed steel.”

“That piece of steel is the power of life and death.”

“Just so . . . yet if it is the swordsmen who rule us in truth, why do we pretend our kings hold the power? Why should a strong man with a sword *ever* obey a child king like Joffrey, or a wine-sodden oaf like his father?”

“Because these child kings and drunken oafs can call other strong men, with other swords.”

“Then these other swordsmen have the true power. Or do they? Whence came their swords? Why do *they* obey?” Varys smiled. “Some say knowledge is power. Some tell us that all power comes from the gods. Others say it derives from law. Yet that day on the steps of Baelor’s Sept, our godly High Septon and the lawful Queen Regent and your ever-so-knowledgeable servant were as powerless as any cobbler or cooper in the crowd. Who truly killed Eddard Stark, do you think? Joffrey, who gave the command? Ser Ilyn Payne, who swung the sword? Or . . . another?”

Tyrion cocked his head sideways. “Did you mean to answer your damned riddle, or only to make my head ache worse?”

Varys smiled. “Here, then. Power resides where men *believe* it resides. No more and no less.”

“So power is a mummer’s trick?”

“A shadow on the wall,” Varys murmured, “yet shadows can kill. And oftimes a very small man can cast a very large shadow.”

Tyrion smiled. “Lord Varys, I am growing strangely fond of you. I may kill you yet, but I think I’d feel sad about it.”

“I will take that as high praise.”

“What are you, Varys?” Tyrion found he truly wanted to know. “A spider, they say.”

“Spies and informers are seldom loved, my lord. I am but a loyal servant of the realm.”

“And a eunuch. Let us not forget that.”

“I seldom do.”

“People have called me a halfman too, yet I think the gods have been kinder to me. I am small, my legs are twisted, and women do not look upon me with any great yearning ... yet I’m still a man. Shae is not the first to grace my bed, and one day I may take a wife and sire a son. If the gods are good, he’ll look like his uncle and think like his father. You have no such hope to sustain you. Dwarfs are a jape of the gods ... but men make eunuchs. Who cut you, Varys? When and why? Who *are* you, truly?”

The eunuch’s smile never flickered, but his eyes glittered with something that was not laughter. “You are kind to ask, my lord, but my tale is long and sad, and we have treasons to discuss.” He drew a parchment from the sleeve of his robe. “The master of the King’s Galley *White Hart* plots to slip anchor three days hence to offer his sword and ship to Lord Stannis.”

Tyrion sighed. “I suppose we must make some sort of bloody lesson out of the man?”

“Ser Jacelyn could arrange for him to vanish, but a trial before the king would help assure the continued loyalty of the other

captains.”

And keep my royal nephew occupied as well. “As you say. Put him down for a dose of Joffrey’s justice.”

Varys made a mark on the parchment. “Ser Horas and Ser Hobber Redwyne have bribed a guard to let them out a postern gate, the night after next. Arrangements have been made for them to sail on the Pentoshi galley *Moonrunner*, disguised as oarsmen.”

“Can we *keep* them on those oars for a few years, see how they fancy it?” He smiled. “No, my sister would be distraught to lose such treasured guests. Inform Ser Jacelyn. Seize the man they bribed and explain what a honor it is to serve as a brother of the Night’s Watch. And have men posted around the *Moonrunner*, in case the Redwynes find a second guard short of coin.”

“As you will.” Another mark on the parchment. “Your man Timett slew a wineseller’s son this evening, at a gambling den on the Street of Silver. He accused him of cheating at tiles.”

“Was it true?”

“Oh, beyond a doubt.”

“Then the honest men of the city owe Timett a debt of gratitude. I shall see that he has the king’s thanks.”

The eunuch gave a nervous giggle and made another mark. “We also have a sudden plague of holy men. The comet has brought forth all manner of queer priests, preachers, and prophets, it would seem. They beg in the winesinks and pot shops and foretell doom and destruction to anyone who stops to listen.”

Tyrion shrugged. “We are close on the three hundredth year since Aegon’s Landing, I suppose it is only to be expected. Let them rant.”

“They are spreading fear, my lord.”

“I thought that was your job.”

Varys covered his mouth with his hand. “You are very cruel to say so. One last matter. Lady Tanda gave a small supper last night. I have the menu and the guest list for your inspection. When the wine was poured, Lord Gyles rose to lift a cup to the king, and Ser Balon Swann was heard to remark, ‘*We’ll need three cups for that.*’ Many laughed ...”

Tyrion raised a hand. “Enough. Ser Balon made a jest. I am not interested in treasonous table talk, Lord Varys.”

“You are as wise as you are gentle, my lord.” The parchment vanished up the eunuch’s sleeve. “We both have much to do. I shall leave you.”

When the eunuch had departed, Tyrion sat for a long time watching the candle and wondering how his sister would take the news of Janos Slynt’s dismissal. Not happily, if he was any judge, but beyond sending an angry protest to Lord Tywin in Harrenhal, he did not see what Cersei could hope to do about it. Tyrion had the City Watch now, plus a hundred-and-a-half fierce clansmen and a growing force of sellswords recruited by Bronn. He would seem well protected.

Doubtless, Eddard Stark thought the same.

The Red Keep was dark and still when Tyrion left the Small

Hall. Bronn was waiting in his solar. “Slynt?” he asked.

“Lord Janos will be sailing for the Wall on the morning tide. Varys would have me believe that I have replaced one of Joffrey’s men with one of my own. More likely, I have replaced Littlefinger’s man with one belonging to Varys, but so be it.”

“You’d best know, Timett killed a man—”

“Varys told me.”

The sellsword seemed unsurprised. “The fool figured a one-eyed man would be easier to cheat. Timett pinned his wrist to the table with a dagger and ripped out his throat barehanded. He has this trick where he stiffens his fingers—”

“Spare me the grisly details, my supper is sitting badly in my belly,” Tyrion said. “How goes your recruiting?”

“Well enough. Three new men tonight.”

“How do you know which ones to hire?”

“I look them over. I question them, to learn where they’ve fought and how well they lie.” Bronn smiled. “And then I give them a chance to kill me, while I do the same for them.”

“Have you killed any?”

“No one we could have used.”

“And if one of them kills you?”

“He’ll be one you’ll want to hire.”

Tyrion was a little drunk, and very tired. “Tell me, Bronn. If I told you to kill a babe ... an infant girl, say, still at her mother’s breast ... would you do it? Without question?”

“Without question? No.” The sellsword rubbed thumb and

forefinger together. “I’d ask how much.”

And why would I ever need your Allar Deem, Lord Slynt? Tyrion thought. *I have a hundred of my own.* He wanted to laugh; he wanted to weep; most of all, he wanted Shae.

ARYA

The road was little more than two ruts through the weeds.

The good part was, with so little traffic there'd be no one to point the finger and say which way they'd gone. The human flood that had flowed down the kingsroad was only a trickle here.

The bad part was, the road wound back and forth like a snake, tangling with even smaller trails and sometimes seeming to vanish entirely only to reappear half a league further on when they had all but given up hope. Arya hated it. The land was gentle enough, rolling hills and terraced fields interspersed with meadows and woodlands and little valleys where willows crowded close to slow shallow streams. Even so, the path was so narrow and crooked that their pace had dropped to a crawl.

It was the wagons that slowed them, lumbering along, axles creaking under the weight of their heavy loads. A dozen times a day they had to stop to free a wheel that had stuck in a rut, or double up the teams to climb a muddy slope. Once, in the middle of a dense stand of oak, they came face-to-face with three men pulling a load of firewood in an ox cart, with no way for either to get around. There had been nothing for it but to wait while the foresters unhitched their ox, led him through the trees, spun the cart, hitched the ox up again, and started back the way they'd come. The ox was even *slower* than the wagons, so that day they hardly got anywhere at all.

Arya could not help looking over her shoulder, wondering when the gold cloaks would catch them. At night, she woke at every noise to grab for Needle's hilt. They never made camp without putting out sentries now, but Arya did not trust them, especially the orphan boys. They might have done well enough in the alleys of King's Landing, but out here they were lost. When she was being quiet as a shadow, she could sneak past all of them, flitting out by starlight to make her water in the woods where no one would see. Once, when Lommy Greenhands had the watch, she shimmied up an oak and moved from tree to tree until she was right above his head, and he never saw a thing. She would have jumped down on top of him, but she knew his scream would wake the whole camp, and Yoren might take a stick to her again.

Lommy and the other orphans all treated the Bull like someone special now because the queen wanted his head, though he would have none of it. "I never did nothing to no queen," he said angrily. "I did my work, is all. Bellows and tongs and fetch and carry. I was 'sposed to be an armorer, and one day Master Mott says I got to join the Night's Watch, that's all I know." Then he'd go off to polish his helm. It was a beautiful helm, rounded and curved, with a slit visor and two great metal bull's horns. Arya would watch him polish the metal with an oilcloth, shining it so bright you could see the flames of the cookfire reflected in the steel. Yet he never actually put it on his head.

"I bet he's that traitor's bastard," Lommy said one night, in a hushed voice so Gendry would not hear. "The wolf lord, the one

they nicked on Baelor's steps."

"He is not," Arya declared. *My father only had one bastard, and that's Jon.* She stalked off into the trees, wishing she could just saddle her horse and ride home. She was a good horse, a chestnut mare with a white blaze on her forehead. And Arya had always been a good rider. She could gallop off and never see any of them, unless she wanted to. Only then she'd have no one to scout ahead of her, or watch behind, or stand guard while she napped, and when the gold cloaks caught her, she'd be all alone. It was safer to stay with Yoren and the others.

"We're not far from Gods Eye," the black brother said one morning. "The kingsroad won't be safe till we're across the Trident. So we'll come up around the lake along the western shore, they're not like to look for us there." At the next spot where two ruts cut across each other, he turned the wagons west.

Here, farmland gave way to forest, the villages and holdfasts were smaller and further apart, the hills higher and the valleys deeper. Food grew harder to come by. In the city, Yoren had loaded up the wagons with salt fish, hard bread, lard, turnips, sacks of beans and barley, and wheels of yellow cheese, but every bite of it had been eaten. Forced to live off the land, Yoren turned to Koss and Kurz, who'd been taken as poachers. He would send them ahead of the column, into the woods, and come dusk they would be back with a deer slung between them on a pole or a brace of quail swinging from their belts. The younger boys would be set to picking blackberries along the road, or climbing fences

to fill a sack with apples if they happened upon an orchard.

Arya was a skilled climber and a fast picker, and she liked to go off by herself. One day she came across a rabbit, purely by happenstance. It was brown and fat, with long ears and a twitchy nose. Rabbits ran faster than cats, but they couldn't climb trees half so well. She whacked it with her stick and grabbed it by its ears, and Yoren stewed it with some mushrooms and wild onions. Arya was given a whole leg, since it was her rabbit. She shared it with Gendry. The rest of them each got a spoonful, even the three in manacles. Jaqen H'ghar thanked her politely for the treat, and Biter licked the grease off his dirty fingers with a blissful look, but Rorge, the noseless one, only laughed and said, "There's a hunter now. Lumpyface Lumpyhead Rabbitkiller."

Outside a holdfast called Briarwhite, some fieldhands surrounded them in a cornfield, demanding coin for the ears they'd taken. Yoren eyed their scythes and tossed them a few coppers. "Time was, a man in black was feasted from Dorne to Winterfell, and even high lords called it an honor to shelter him under their roofs," he said bitterly. "Now cravens like you want hard coin for a bite of wormy apple." He spat.

"It's sweetcorn, better'n a stinking old black bird like you deserves," one of them answered roughly. "You get out of our field now, and take these sneaks and stabbers with you, or we'll stake you up in the corn to scare the other crows away."

They roasted the sweetcorn in the husk that night, turning the ears with long forked sticks, and ate it hot right off the cob. Arya

thought it tasted wonderful, but Yoren was too angry to eat. A cloud seemed to hang over him, ragged and black as his cloak. He paced about the camp restlessly, muttering to himself.

The next day, Koss came racing back to warn Yoren of a camp ahead. "Twenty or thirty men, in mail and halfhelms," he said. "Some of them are cut up bad, and one's dying, from the sound of him. With all the noise he was making, I got right up close. They got spears and shields, but only one horse, and that's lame. I think they been there a while, from the stink of the place."

"See a banner?"

"Spotted treecat, yellow and black, on a mud brown field."

Yoren folded a sourleaf into his mouth and chewed. "Can't say," he admitted. "Might be one side, might be t'other. If they're hurt that bad, likely they'd take our mounts no matter who they are. Might be they'd take more than that. I believe we'll go wide around them." It took them miles out of their way, and cost them two days at the least, but the old man said it was cheap at the price. "You'll have time enough on the Wall. The rest o' your lives, most like. Seems to me there's no rush to get there."

Arya saw men guarding the fields more and more when they turned north again. Often they stood silently beside the road, giving a cold eye to anyone who passed. Elsewhere they patrolled on horses, riding their fence lines with axes strapped to their saddles. At one place, she spotted a man perched up in a dead tree, with a bow in his hand and a quiver hanging from the branch beside him. The moment he spied them, he notched an arrow to

his bowstring, and never looked away until the last wagon was out of sight. All the while, Yoren cursed. “Him in his tree, let’s see how well he likes it up there when the Others come to take him. He’ll scream for the Watch then, that he will.”

A day later, Dobber spied a red glow against the evening sky. “Either this road went and turned again, or that sun’s setting in the north.”

Yoren climbed a rise to get a better look. “Fire,” he announced. He licked a thumb and held it up. “Wind should blow it away from us. Still bears watching.”

And watch it they did. As the world darkened, the fire seemed to grow brighter and brighter, until it looked as though the whole north was ablaze. From time to time, they could even smell the smoke, though the wind held steady and the flames never got any closer. By dawn the fire had burned itself out, but none of them slept very well that night.

It was midday when they arrived at the place where the village had been. The fields were a charred desolation for miles around, the houses blackened shells. The carcasses of burnt and butchered animals dotted the ground, under living blankets of carrion crows that rose, cawing furiously, when disturbed. Smoke still drifted from inside the holdfast. Its timber palisade looked strong from afar, but had not proved strong enough.

Riding out in front of the wagons on her horse, Arya saw burned bodies impaled on sharpened stakes atop the walls, their hands drawn up tight in front of their faces as if to fight off the

flames that had consumed them. Yoren called a halt when they were still some distance off, and told Arya and the other boys to guard the wagons while he and Murch and Cutjack went in on foot. A flock of ravens rose from inside the walls when they climbed through the broken gate, and the caged ravens in their wagons called out to them with *quorks* and raucous shrieks.

“Should we go in after them?” Arya asked Gendry after Yoren and the others had been gone a long time.

“Yoren said wait.” Gendry’s voice sounded hollow. When Arya turned to look, she saw that he was wearing his helm, all shiny steel and great curving horns.

When they finally returned, Yoren had a little girl in his arms, and Murch and Cutjack were carrying a woman in a sling made of an old torn quilt. The girl was no older than two and she cried all the time, a whimpery sound, like something was caught in her throat. Either she couldn’t talk yet or she had forgotten how. The woman’s right arm ended in a bloody stump at her elbow, and her eyes didn’t seem to see anything, even when she was looking right at it. She talked, but she only said one thing. “Please,” she cried, over and over. “Please. Please.” Rorge thought that was funny. He laughed through the hole in his face where his nose had been, and Biter started laughing too, until Murch cursed them and told them to shut up.

Yoren had them fix the woman a place in the back of a wagon. “And be quick about it,” he said. “Come dark, there’ll be wolves here, and worse.”

"I'm scared," Hot Pie murmured, when he saw the one-armed woman thrashing in the wagon.

"Me too," Arya confessed.

He squeezed her shoulder. "I never truly kicked no boy to death, Arry. I just sold my mommy's pies, is all."

Arya rode as far ahead of the wagons as she dared, so she wouldn't have to hear the little girl crying, or listen to the woman whisper, "Please." She remembered a story Old Nan had told once, about a man imprisoned in a dark castle by evil giants. He was very brave and smart and he tricked the giants and escaped ... but no sooner was he outside the castle than the Others took him, and drank his hot red blood. Now she knew how he must have felt.

The one-armed woman died at evenfall. Gendry and Cutjack dug her grave on a hillside beneath a weeping willow. When the wind blew, Arya thought she could hear the long trailing branches whispering, "Please. Please. Please." The little hairs on the back of her neck rose, and she almost ran from the graveside.

"No fire tonight," Yoren told them. Supper was a handful of wild radishes Koss found, a cup of dry beans, water from a nearby brook. The water had a funny taste to it, and Lommy told them it was the taste of bodies, rotting someplace upstream. Hot Pie would have hit him if old Reyser hadn't pulled them apart.

Arya drank too much water, just to fill her belly with something. She never thought she'd be able to sleep, yet somehow she did. When she woke, it was pitch black and her bladder

was full to bursting. Sleepers huddled all around her, wrapped in blankets and cloaks. Arya found Needle, stood, listened. She heard the soft footfalls of a sentry, men turning in restless sleep, Rorge's rattling snores, and the queer hissing sound that Biter made when he slept. From a different wagon came the steady rhythmic scrape of steel on stone as Yoren sat, chewing sourleaf and sharpening the edge of his dirk.

Hot Pie was one of the boys on watch. "Where you going?" he asked when he saw Arya heading for the trees.

Arya waved vaguely at the woods.

"No you're not," Hot Pie said. He had gotten bolder again now that he had a sword on his belt, even though it was just a short sword and he handled it like a cleaver. "The old man said for everyone to stay close tonight."

"I need to make water," Arya explained.

"Well, use that tree right there." He pointed. "You don't know what's out there, Arry. I heard wolves before."

Yoren wouldn't like it if she fought with him. She tried to look afraid. "Wolves? For true?"

"I heard," he assured her.

"I don't think I need to go after all." She went back to her blanket and pretended to sleep until she heard Hot Pie's footsteps going away. Then she rolled over and slipped off into the woods on the other side of the camp, quiet as a shadow. There were sentries out this way too, but Arya had no trouble avoiding them. Just to make sure, she went out twice as far as usual. When she

was sure there was no one near, she skinned down her breeches and squatted to do her business.

She was making water, her clothing tangled about her ankles, when she heard rustling from under the trees. *Hot Pie*, she thought in panic, *he followed me*. Then she saw the eyes shining out from the wood, bright with reflected moonlight. Her belly clenched tight as she grabbed for Needle, not caring if she pissed herself, counting eyes, two four eight twelve, a whole pack ...

One of them came padding out from under the trees. He stared at her, and bared his teeth, and all she could think was how stupid she'd been and how *Hot Pie* would gloat when they found her half-eaten body the next morning. But the wolf turned and raced back into the darkness, and quick as that the eyes were gone. Trembling, she cleaned herself and laced up and followed a distant scraping sound back to camp, and to Yoren. Arya climbed up into the wagon beside him, shaken. "Wolves," she whispered hoarsely. "In the woods."

"Aye. They would be." He never looked at her.

"They scared me."

"Did they?" He spat. "Seems to me your kind was fond o' wolves."

"Nymeria was a direwolf." Arya hugged herself. "That's different. Anyhow, she's gone. Jory and I threw rocks at her until she ran off, or else the queen would have killed her." It made her sad to talk about it. "I bet if she'd been in the city, she wouldn't have let them cut off father's head."

“Orphan boys got no fathers,” Yoren said, “or did you forget that?” The sourleaf had turned his spit red, so it looked like his mouth was bleeding. “The only wolves we got to fear are the ones wear manskin, like those who done for that village.”

“I wish I was home,” she said miserably. She tried so hard to be brave, to be fierce as a wolverine and all, but sometimes she felt like she was just a little girl after all.

The black brother peeled a fresh sourleaf from the bale in the wagon and stuffed it into his mouth. “Might be I should of left you where I found you, boy. All o’ you. Safer in the city, seems to me.”

“I don’t care. I want to go home.”

“Been bringing men to the Wall for close on thirty years.” Froth shone on Yoren’s lips, like bubbles of blood. “All that time, I only lost three. Old man died of a fever, city boy got snakebit taking a shit, and one fool tried to kill me in my sleep and got a red smile for his trouble.” He drew the dirk across his throat, to show her. “Three in thirty years.” He spat out the old sourleaf. “A ship now, might have been wiser. No chance o’ finding more men on the way, but still ... clever man, he’d go by ship, but me ... thirty years I been taking this kingsroad.” He sheathed his dirk. “Go to sleep, boy. Hear me?”

She did try. Yet as she lay under her thin blanket, she could hear the wolves howling ... and another sound, fainter, no more than a whisper on the wind, that might have been screams.

DAVOS

The morning air was dark with the smoke of burning gods.

They were all afire now, Maid and Mother, Warrior and Smith, the Crone with her pearl eyes and the Father with his gilded beard; even the Stranger, carved to look more animal than human. The old dry wood and countless layers of paint and varnish blazed with a fierce hungry light. Heat rose shimmering through the chill air; behind, the gargoyles and stone dragons on the castle walls seemed blurred, as if Davos were seeing them through a veil of tears. *Or as if the beasts were trembling, stirring*

...

“An ill thing,” Allard declared, though at least he had the sense to keep his voice low. Dale muttered agreement.

“Silence,” said Davos. “Remember where you are.” His sons were good men, but young, and Allard especially was rash. *Had I stayed a smuggler, Allard would have ended on the Wall. Stannis spared him from that end, something else I owe him ...*

Hundreds had come to the castle gates to bear witness to the burning of the Seven. The smell in the air was ugly. Even for soldiers, it was hard not to feel uneasy at such an affront to the gods most had worshiped all their lives.

The red woman walked round the fire three times, praying once in the speech of Asshai, once in High Valyrian, and once in the Common Tongue. Davos understood only the last. “R’hllor,

come to us in our darkness,” she called. “Lord of Light, we offer you these false gods, these seven who are one, and him the enemy. Take them and cast your light upon us, for the night is dark and full of terrors.” Queen Selyse echoed the words. Beside her, Stannis watched impassively, his jaw hard as stone under the blue-black shadow of his tight-cropped beard. He had dressed more richly than was his wont, as if for the sept.

Dragonstone’s sept had been where Aegon the Conqueror knelt to pray the night before he sailed. That had not saved it from the queen’s men. They had overturned the altars, pulled down the statues, and smashed the stained glass with warhammers. Septon Barre could only curse them, but Ser Hubard Rambton led his three sons to the sept to defend their gods. The Rambtons had slain four of the queen’s men before the others overwhelmed them. Afterwards, Guncer Sunglass, mildest and most pious of lords, told Stannis he could no longer support his claim. Now he shared a sweltering cell with the septon and Ser Hubard’s two surviving sons. The other lords had not been slow to take the lesson.

The gods had never meant much to Davos the smuggler, though like most men he had been known to make offerings to the Warrior before battle, to the Smith when he launched a ship, and to the Mother whenever his wife grew great with child. He felt ill as he watched them burn, and not only from the smoke.

Maester Cressen would have stopped this. The old man had challenged the Lord of Light and been struck down for his

impiety, or so the gossips told each other. Davos knew the truth. He had seen the maester slip something into the wine cup. *Poison. What else could it be? He drank a cup of death to free Stannis from Melisandre, but somehow her god shielded her.* He would gladly have killed the red woman for that, yet what chance would he have where a maester of the Citadel had failed? He was only a smuggler raised high, Davos of Flea Bottom, the Onion Knight.

The burning gods cast a pretty light, wreathed in their robes of shifting flame, red and orange and yellow. Septon Barre had once told Davos how they'd been carved from the masts of the ships that had carried the first Targaryens from Valyria. Over the centuries, they had been painted and repainted, gilded, silvered, jeweled. "Their beauty will make them more pleasing to R'hllor," Melisandre said, when she told Stannis to pull them down and drag them out the castle gates.

The Maiden lay athwart the Warrior, her arms widespread as if to embrace him. The Mother seemed almost to shudder as the flames came licking up her face. A longsword had been thrust through her heart, and its leather grip was alive with flame. The Father was on the bottom, the first to fall. Davos watched the hand of the Stranger writhe and curl as the fingers blackened and fell away one by one, reduced to so much glowing charcoal. Nearby, Lord Celtigar coughed fitfully and covered his wrinkled face with a square of linen embroidered in red crabs. The Myrmen swapped jokes as they enjoyed the warmth

of the fire, but young Lord Bar Emmon had turned a splotchy grey, and Lord Velaryon was watching the king rather than the conflagration.

Davos would have given much to know what he was thinking, but one such as Velaryon would never confide in him. The Lord of the Tides was of the blood of ancient Valyria, and his House had thrice provided brides for Targaryen princes; Davos Seaworth stank of fish and onions. It was the same with the other lordlings. He could trust none of them, nor would they ever include him in their private councils. They scorned his sons as well. *My grandsons will joust with theirs, though, and one day their blood may wed with mine. In time my little black ship will fly as high as Velaryon's seahorse or Celtigar's red crabs.*

That is, if Stannis won his throne. If he lost ...

Everything I am, I owe to him. Stannis had raised him to knighthood. He had given him a place of honor at his table, a war galley to sail in place of a smuggler's skiff. Dale and Allard captained galleys as well, Maric was oarmaster on the *Fury*, Matthos served his father on *Black Betha*, and the king had taken Devan as a royal squire. One day he would be knighted, and the two little lads as well. Marya was mistress of a small keep on Cape Wrath, with servants who called her "m'lady," and Davos could hunt red deer in his own woods. All this he had of Stannis Baratheon, for the price of a few finger joints. *It was just, what he did to me. I had flouted the king's laws all my life. He has earned my loyalty.* Davos touched the little pouch that hung from

the leather thong about his neck. His fingers were his luck, and he needed luck now. *As do we all. Lord Stannis most of all.*

Pale flames licked at the grey sky. Dark smoke rose, twisting and curling. When the wind pushed it toward them, men blinked and wept and rubbed their eyes. Allard turned his head away, coughing and cursing. *A taste of things to come*, thought Davos. Many and more would burn before this war was done.

Melisandre was robed all in scarlet satin and blood velvet, her eyes as red as the great ruby that glistened at her throat as if it too were afire. “In ancient books of Asshai it is written that there will come a day after a long summer when the stars bleed and the cold breath of darkness falls heavy on the world. In this dread hour a warrior shall draw from the fire a burning sword. And that sword shall be Lightbringer, the Red Sword of Heroes, and he who clasps it shall be Azor Ahai come again, and the darkness shall flee before him.” She lifted her voice, so it carried out over the gathered host. *“Azor Ahai, beloved of R’hllor! The Warrior of Light, the Son of Fire! Come forth, your sword awaits you! Come forth and take it into your hand!”*

Stannis Baratheon strode forward like a soldier marching into battle. His squires stepped up to attend him. Davos watched as his son Devan pulled a long padded glove over the king’s right hand. The boy wore a cream-colored doublet with a fiery heart sewn on the breast. Bryen Farring was similarly garbed as he tied a stiff leather cape around His Grace’s neck. Behind, Davos heard a faint clank and clatter of bells. “Under the sea, smoke rises in

bubbles, and flames burn green and blue and black,” Patchface sang somewhere. “I know, I know, oh, oh, oh.”

The king plunged into the fire with his teeth clenched, holding the leather cloak before him to keep off the flames. He went straight to the Mother, grasped the sword with his gloved hand and wrenched it free of the burning wood with a single hard jerk. Then he was retreating, the sword held high, jade green flames swirling around cherry red steel. Guards rushed to beat out the cinders that clung to the king’s clothing.

“*A sword of fire!*” shouted Queen Selyse. Ser Axell Florent and the other queen’s men took up the cry. “*A sword of fire! It burns! It burns! A sword of fire!*”

Melisandre lifted her hands above her head. “*Behold! A sign was promised, and now a sign is seen! Behold Lightbringer! Azor Ahai has come again! All hail the Warrior of Light! All hail the Son of Fire!*”

A ragged wave of shouts gave answer, just as Stannis’s glove began to smoulder. Cursing, the king thrust the point of the sword into the damp earth and beat out the flames against his leg. “Lord, cast your light upon us!” Melisandre called out.

“For the night is dark and full of terrors,” Selyse and her queen’s men replied. *Should I speak the words as well?* Davos wondered. *Do I owe Stannis that much? Is this fiery god truly his own?* His shortened fingers twitched.

Stannis peeled off the glove and let it fall to the ground. The gods in the pyre were scarcely recognizable any more. The head

fell off the Smith with a puff of ash and embers. Melisandre sang in the tongue of Asshai, her voice rising and falling like the tides of the sea. Stannis untied his singed leather cape and listened in silence. Thrust in the ground, Lightbringer still glowed ruddy hot, but the flames that clung to the sword were dwindling and dying.

By the time the song was done, only charwood remained of the gods, and the king's patience had run its course. He took the queen by the elbow and escorted her back into Dragonstone, leaving Lightbringer where it stood. The red woman remained a moment to watch as Devan knelt with Byren Farring and rolled up the burnt and blackened sword in the king's leather cloak. *The Red Sword of Heroes looks a proper mess*, thought Davos.

A few of the lords lingered to speak in quiet voices upwind of the fire. They fell silent when they saw Davos looking at them. *Should Stannis fall, they will pull me down in an instant*. Neither was he counted one of the queen's men, that group of ambitious knights and minor lordlings who had given themselves to this Lord of Light and so won the favor and patronage of Lady—*no, Queen, remember?*—Selyse.

The fire had started to dwindle by the time Melisandre and the squires departed with the precious sword. Davos and his sons joined the crowd making its way down to the shore and the waiting ships. "Devan acquitted himself well," he said as they went.

"He fetched the glove without dropping it, yes," said Dale. Allard nodded. "That badge on Devan's doublet, the fiery heart,

what was that? The Baratheon sigil is a crowned stag.”

“A lord can choose more than one badge,” Davos said.

Dale smiled. “A black ship *and* an onion, father?”

Allard kicked at a stone. “The Others take our onion ... *and* that flaming heart. It was an ill thing to burn the Seven.”

“When did you grow so devout?” Davos said. “What does a smuggler’s son know of the doings of gods?”

“I’m a knight’s son, father. If you won’t remember, why should they?”

“A knight’s son, but not a knight,” said Davos. “Nor will you ever be, if you meddle in affairs that do not concern you. Stannis is our rightful king, it is not for us to question him. We sail his ships and do his bidding. That is all.”

“As to that, father,” Dale said, “I dislike these water casks they’ve given me for *Wraith*. Green pine. The water will spoil on a voyage of any length.”

“I got the same for *Lady Marya*,” said Allard. “The queen’s men have laid claim to all the seasoned wood.”

“I will speak to the king about it,” Davos promised. Better it come from him than from Allard. His sons were good fighters and better sailors, but they did not know how to talk to lords. *They were lowborn, even as I was, but they do not like to recall that. When they look at our banner, all they see is a tall black ship flying on the wind. They close their eyes to the onion.*

The port was crowded as Davos had ever known it. Every dock teemed with sailors loading provisions, and every inn was

packed with soldiers dicing or drinking or looking for a whore ... a vain search, since Stannis permitted none on his island. Ships lined the strand; war galleys and fishing vessels, stout carracks and fat-bottomed cogs. The best berths had been taken by the largest vessels: Stannis's flagship *Fury* rocking between *Lord Steffon* and *Stag of the Sea*, Lord Velaryon's silver-hulled *Pride of Driftmark* and her three sisters, Lord Celtigar's ornate *Red Claw*, the ponderous *Swordfish* with her long iron prow. Out to sea at anchor rode Salladhor Saan's great *Valyrian* amongst the striped hulls of two dozen smaller Lysene galleys.

A weathered little inn sat on the end of the stone pier where *Black Betha*, *Wraith*, and *Lady Marya* shared mooring space with a half-dozen other galleys of one hundred oars or less. Davos had a thirst. He took his leave of his sons and turned his steps toward the inn. Out front squatted a waist-high gargoyle, so eroded by rain and salt that his features were all but obliterated. He and Davos were old friends, though. He gave a pat to the stone head as he went in. "Luck," he murmured.

Across the noisy common room, Salladhor Saan sat eating grapes from a wooden bowl. When he spied Davos, he beckoned him closer. "Ser knight, come sit with me. Eat a grape. Eat two. They are marvelously sweet." The Lyseni was a sleek, smiling man whose flamboyance was a byword on both sides of the narrow sea. Today he wore flashing cloth-of-silver, with dagged sleeves so long the ends of them pooled on the floor. His buttons were carved jade monkeys, and atop his wispy white

curls perched a jaunty green cap decorated with a fan of peacock feathers.

Davos threaded his way through the tables to a chair. In the days before his knighthood, he had often bought cargoes from Salladhor Saan. The Lyseni was a smuggler himself, as well as a trader, a banker, a notorious pirate, and the self-styled Prince of the Narrow Sea. *When a pirate grows rich enough, they make him a prince.* It had been Davos who had made the journey to Lys to recruit the old rogue to Lord Stannis's cause.

"You did not see the gods burn, my lord?" he asked.

"The red priests have a great temple on Lys. Always they are burning this and burning that, crying out to their R'hllor. They bore me with their fires. Soon they will bore King Stannis too, it is to be hoped." He seemed utterly unconcerned that someone might overhear him, eating his grapes and dribbling the seeds out onto his lip, flicking them off with a finger. "My *Bird of Thousand Colors* came in yesterday, good ser. She is not a warship, no, but a trader, and she paid a call on King's Landing. Are you sure you will not have a grape? Children go hungry in the city, it is said." He dangled the grapes before Davos and smiled.

"It's ale I need, and news."

"The men of Westeros are ever rushing," complained Salladhor Saan. "What good is this, I ask you? He who hurries through life hurries to his grave." He belched. "The Lord of Casterly Rock has sent his dwarf to see to King's Landing. Perhaps he hopes that his ugly face will frighten off attackers,

eh? Or that we will laugh ourselves dead when the Imp capers on the battlements, who can say? The dwarf has chased off the lout who ruled the gold cloaks and put in his place a knight with an iron hand.” He plucked a grape, and squeezed it between thumb and forefinger until the skin burst. Juice ran down between his fingers.

A serving girl pushed her way through, swatting at the hands that groped her as she passed. Davos ordered a tankard of ale, turned back to Saan, and said, “How well is the city defended?”

The other shrugged. “The walls are high and strong, but who will man them? They are building scorpions and spitfires, oh yes, but the men in the golden cloaks are too few and too green, and there are no others. A swift strike, like a hawk plummeting at a hare, and the great city will be ours. Grant us wind to fill our sails, and your king could sit upon his Iron Throne by evenfall on the morrow. We could dress the dwarf in motley and prick his little cheeks with the points of our spears to make him dance for us, and mayhaps your goodly king would make me a gift of the beautiful Queen Cersei to warm my bed for a night. I have been too long away from my wives, and all in his service.”

“Pirate,” said Davos. “You have no wives, only concubines, and you have been well paid for every day and every ship.”

“Only in promises,” said Salladhor Saan mournfully. “Good ser, it is gold I crave, not words on papers.” He popped a grape into his mouth.

“You’ll have your gold when we take the treasury in King’s

Landing. No man in the Seven Kingdoms is more honorable than Stannis Baratheon. He will keep his word.” Even as Davos spoke, he thought, *This world is twisted beyond hope, when lowborn smugglers must vouch for the honor of kings.*

“So he has said and said. And so I say, let us do this thing. Even these grapes could be no more ripe than that city, my old friend.”

The serving girl returned with his ale. Davos gave her a copper. “Might be we could take King’s Landing, as you say,” he said as he lifted the tankard, “but how long would we hold it? Tywin Lannister is known to be at Harrenhal with a great host, and Lord Renly ...”

“Ah, yes, the young brother,” said Salladhor Saan. “That part is not so good, my friend. King Renly bestirs himself. No, here he is *Lord Renly*, my pardons. So many kings, my tongue grows weary of the word. The brother Renly has left Highgarden with his fair young queen, his flowered lords and shining knights, and a mighty host of foot. He marches up your road of roses toward the very same great city we were speaking of.”

“He takes his *bride*?”

The other shrugged. “He did not tell me why. Perhaps he is loath to part with the warm burrow between her thighs, even for a night. Or perhaps he is that certain of his victory.”

“The king must be told.”

“I have attended to it, good ser. Though His Grace frowns so whenever he does see me that I tremble to come before him. Do

you think he would like me better if I wore a hair shirt and never smiled? Well, I will not do it. I am an honest man, he must suffer me in silk and samite. Or else I shall take my ships where I am better loved. That sword was not Lightbringer, my friend.”

The sudden shift in subject left Davos uneasy. “Sword?”

“A sword plucked from fire, yes. Men tell me things, it is my pleasant smile. How shall a burned sword serve Stannis?”

“A *burning* sword,” corrected Davos.

“Burned,” said Salladhor Saan, “and be glad of that, my friend. Do you know the tale of the forging of Lightbringer? I shall tell it to you. It was a time when darkness lay heavy on the world. To oppose it, the hero must have a hero’s blade, oh, like none that had ever been. And so for thirty days and thirty nights, Azor Ahai labored sleepless in the temple, forging a blade in the sacred fires. Heat and hammer and fold, heat and hammer and fold, oh yes, until the sword was done. Yet when he plunged it into water to temper the steel it burst asunder.

“Being a hero, it was not for him to shrug and go in search of excellent grapes such as these, so again he began. The second time it took him fifty days and fifty nights, and this sword seemed even finer than the first. Azor Ahai captured a lion, to temper the blade by plunging it through the beast’s red heart, but once more the steel shattered and split. Great was his woe and great was his sorrow then, for he knew what he must do.

“A hundred days and a hundred nights he labored on the third blade, and as it glowed white hot in the sacred fires, he

summoned his wife. ‘*Nissa Nissa*,’ he said to her, for that was her name, ‘*bare your breast, and know that I love you best of all that is in this world.*’ She did this thing, why I cannot say, and Azor Ahai thrust the smoking sword through her living heart. It is said that her cry of anguish and ecstasy left a crack across the face of the moon, but her blood and her soul and her strength and her courage all went into the steel. Such is the tale of the forging of Lightbringer, the Red Sword of Heroes.

“Now do you see my meaning? Be glad that it is just a burned sword that His Grace pulled from that fire. Too much light can hurt the eyes, my friend, and fire *burns*.” Salladhor Saan finished the last grape and smacked his lips. “When do you think the king will bid us sail, good ser?”

“Soon, I think,” said Davos, “if his god wills it.”

“*His* god, ser friend? Not yours? Where is the god of Ser Davos Seaworth, knight of the onion ship?”

Davos sipped his ale to give himself a moment. *The inn is crowded, and you are not Salladhor Saan*, he reminded himself. *Be careful how you answer.* “King Stannis is my god. He made me and blessed me with his trust.”

“I will remember.” Salladhor Saan got to his feet. “My pardons. These grapes have given me a hunger, and dinner awaits on my *Valyrian*. Minced lamb with pepper and roasted gull stuffed with mushrooms and fennel and onion. Soon we shall eat together in King’s Landing, yes? In the Red Keep we shall feast, while the dwarf sings us a jolly tune. When you speak to

King Stannis, mention if you would that he will owe me another thirty thousand dragons come the black of the moon. He ought to have given those gods to me. They were too beautiful to burn, and might have brought a noble price in Pentos or Myr. Well, if he grants me Queen Cersei for a night I shall forgive him.” The Lyseni clapped Davos on the back, and swaggered from the inn as if he owned it.

Ser Davos Seaworth lingered over his tankard for a good while, thinking. A year and a half ago, he had been with Stannis in King’s Landing when King Robert staged a tourney for Prince Joffrey’s name day. He remembered the red priest Thoros of Myr, and the flaming sword he had wielded in the melee. The man had made for a colorful spectacle, his red robes flapping while his blade writhed with pale green flames, but everyone knew there was no true magic to it, and in the end his fire had guttered out and Bronze Yohn Royce had brained him with a common mace.

A true sword of fire, now, that would be a wonder to behold. Yet at such a cost ... When he thought of Nissa Nissa, it was his own Marya he pictured, a good-natured plump woman with sagging breasts and a kindly smile, the best woman in the world. He tried to picture himself driving a sword through her, and shuddered. *I am not made of the stuff of heroes*, he decided. If that was the price of a magic sword, it was more than he cared to pay.

Davos finished his ale, pushed away the tankard, and left the

inn. On the way out he patted the gargoyle on the head and muttered, “Luck.” They would all need it.

It was well after dark when Devan came down to *Black Betha*, leading a snow white palfrey. “My lord father,” he announced, “His Grace commands you to attend him in the Chamber of the Painted Table. You are to ride the horse and come at once.”

It was good to see Devan looking so splendid in his squire’s raiment, but the summons made Davos uneasy. *Will he bid us sail?* he wondered. Salladhon Saan was not the only captain who felt that King’s Landing was ripe for an attack, but a smuggler must learn patience. *We have no hope of victory. I said as much to Maester Cressen, the day I returned to Dragonstone, and nothing has changed. We are too few, the foes too many. If we dip our oars, we die.* Nonetheless, he climbed onto the horse.

When Davos arrived at the Stone Drum, a dozen highborn knights and great bannermen were just leaving. Lords Celtigar and Velaryon each gave him a curt nod and walked on while the others ignored him utterly, but Ser Axell Florent stopped for a word.

Queen Selyse’s uncle was a keg of a man with thick arms and bandy legs. He had the prominent ears of a Florent, even larger than his niece’s. The coarse hair that sprouted from his ears did not stop him hearing most of what went on in the castle. For ten years Ser Axell had served as castellan of Dragonstone while Stannis sat on Robert’s council in King’s Landing, but of late he had emerged as the foremost of the queen’s men. “Ser Davos, it

is good to see you, as ever,” he said.

“And you, my lord.”

“I made note of you this morning as well. The false gods burned with a merry light, did they not?”

“They burned brightly.” Davos did not trust this man, for all his courtesy. House Florent had declared for Renly.

“The Lady Melisandre tells us that sometimes R’hllor permits his faithful servants to glimpse the future in flames. It seemed to me as I watched the fire this morning that I was looking at a dozen beautiful dancers, maidens garbed in yellow silk spinning and swirling before a great king. I think it was a true vision, ser. A glimpse of the glory that awaits His Grace after we take King’s Landing and the throne that is his by rights.”

Stannis has no taste for such dancing, Davos thought, but he dared not offend the queen’s uncle. “I saw only fire,” he said, “but the smoke was making my eyes water. You must pardon me, ser, the king awaits.” He pushed past, wondering why Ser Axell had troubled himself. *He is a queen’s man and I am the king’s.*

Stannis sat at his Painted Table with Maester Pylos at his shoulder, an untidy pile of papers before them. “Ser,” the king said when Davos entered, “come have a look at this letter.”

Obediently, he selected a paper at random. “It looks handsome enough, Your Grace, but I fear I cannot read the words.” Davos could decipher maps and charts as well as any, but letters and other writings were beyond his powers. *But my Devan has learned his letters, and young Steffon and Stannis as well.*

“I’d forgotten.” A furrow of irritation showed between the king’s brows. “Pylos, read it to him.”

“Your Grace.” The maester took up one of the parchments and cleared his throat. “*All men know me for the trueborn son of Steffon Baratheon, Lord of Storm’s End, by his lady wife Cassana of House Estermont. I declare upon the honor of my House that my beloved brother Robert, our late king, left no trueborn issue of his body, the boy Joffrey, the boy Tommen, and the girl Myrcella being abominations born of incest between Cersei Lannister and her brother Jaime the Kingslayer. By right of birth and blood, I do this day lay claim to the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. Let all true men declare their loyalty. Done in the Light of the Lord, under the sign and seal of Stannis of House Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.*” The parchment rustled softly as Pylos laid it down.

“Make it *Ser* Jaime the Kingslayer henceforth,” Stannis said, frowning. “Whatever else the man may be, he remains a knight. I don’t know that we ought to call Robert my *beloved* brother either. He loved me no more than he had to, nor I him.”

“A harmless courtesy, Your Grace,” Pylos said.

“A lie. Take it out.” Stannis turned to Davos. “The maester tells me that we have one hundred seventeen ravens on hand. I mean to use them all. One hundred seventeen ravens will carry one hundred seventeen copies of my letter to every corner of the realm, from the Arbor to the Wall. Perhaps a hundred will

win through against storm and hawk and arrow. If so, a hundred maesters will read my words to as many lords in as many solars and bedchambers ... and then the letters will like as not be consigned to the fire, and lips pledged to silence. These great lords love Joffrey, or Renly, or Robb Stark. I am their rightful king, but they will deny me if they can. So I have need of you.”

“I am yours to command, my king. As ever.”

Stannis nodded. “I mean for you to sail *Black Betha* north, to Gulltown, the Fingers, the Three Sisters, even White Harbor. Your son Dale will go south in *Wraith*, past Cape Wrath and the Broken Arm, all along the coast of Dorne as far as the Arbor. Each of you will carry a chest of letters, and you will deliver one to every port and holdfast and fishing village. Nail them to the doors of septs and inns for every man to read who can.”

Davos said, “That will be few enough.”

“Ser Davos speaks truly, Your Grace,” said Maester Pylos. “It would be better to have the letters read aloud.”

“Better, but more dangerous,” said Stannis. “These words will not be kindly received.”

“Give me knights to do the reading,” Davos said. “That will carry more weight than anything I might say.”

Stannis seemed well satisfied with that. “I can give you such men, yes. I have a hundred knights who would sooner read than fight. Be open where you can and stealthy where you must. Use every smuggler’s trick you know, the black sails, the hidden coves, whatever it requires. If you run short of letters, capture a

few septons and set them to copying out more. I mean to use your second son as well. He will take *Lady Marya* across the Narrow Sea, to Braavos and the other Free Cities, to deliver other letters to the men who rule there. The world will know of my claim, and of Cersei's infamy."

You can tell them, Davos thought, *but will they believe?* He glanced thoughtfully at Maester Pylos. The king caught the look. "Maester, perhaps you ought get to your writing. We will need a great many letters, and soon."

"As you will." Pylos bowed, and took his leave.

The king waited until he was gone before he said, "What is it you would not say in the presence of my maester, Davos?"

"My liege, Pylos is pleasant enough, but I cannot see the chain about his neck without mourning for Maester Cressen."

"Is it his fault the old man died?" Stannis glanced into the fire. "I never wanted Cressen at that feast. He'd angered me, yes, he'd given me bad counsel, but I did not want him dead. I'd hoped he might be granted a few years of ease and comfort. He had earned that much, at least, but ..." He ground his teeth together. "... but he died. And Pylos serves me ably."

"Pylos is the least of it. The letter ... what did your lords make of it, I wonder?"

Stannis snorted. "Celtigar pronounced it admirable. If I showed him the contents of my privy, he would declare that admirable as well. The others bobbed their heads up and down like a flock of geese, all but Velaryon, who said that steel would

decide the matter, not words on parchment. As if I had never suspected. The Others take my lords, I'll hear your views."

"Your words were blunt and strong."

"And true."

"And true. Yet you have no proof. Of this incest. No more than you did a year ago."

"There's proof of a sorts at Storm's End. Robert's bastard. The one he fathered on my wedding night, in the very bed they'd made up for me and my bride. Delena was a Florent, and a maiden when he took her, so Robert acknowledged the babe. Edric Storm, they call him. He is said to be the very image of my brother. If men were to see him, and then look again at Joffrey and Tommen, they could not help but wonder, I would think."

"Yet how are men to see him, if he is at Storm's End?"

Stannis drummed his fingers on the Painted Table. "It is a difficulty. One of many." He raised his eyes. "You have more to say about the letter. Well, get on with it. I did not make you a knight so you could learn to mouth empty courtesies. I have my lords for that. Say what you would say, Davos."

Davos bowed his head. "There was a phrase at the end. How did it go? *Done in the Light of the Lord ...*"

"Yes." The king's jaw was clenched.

"Your people will mislike those words."

"As you did?" said Stannis sharply.

"If you were to say instead, *Done in the sight of gods and men, or, By the grace of the gods old and new ...*"

“Have you gone devout on me, smuggler?”

“That was to be my question for you, my liege.”

“Was it now? It sounds as though you love my new god no more than you love my new maester.”

“I do not know this Lord of Light,” Davos admitted, “but I knew the gods we burned this morning. The Smith has kept my ships safe, while the Mother has given me seven strong sons.”

“Your wife has given you seven strong sons. Do you pray to her? It was wood we burned this morning.”

“That may be so,” Davos said, “but when I was a boy in Flea Bottom begging for a copper, sometimes the septons would feed me.”

“I feed you now.”

“You have given me an honored place at your table. And in return I give you truth. Your people will not love you if you take from them the gods they have always worshiped, and give them one whose very name sounds queer on their tongues.”

Stannis stood abruptly. “*R'hllor*. Why is that so hard? They will not love me, you say? When have they ever loved me? How can I lose something I have never owned?” He moved to the south window to gaze out at the moonlit sea. “I stopped believing in gods the day I saw the *Windproud* break up across the bay. Any gods so monstrous as to drown my mother and father would never have *my* worship, I vowed. In King’s Landing, the High Septon would prattle at me of how all justice and goodness flowed from the Seven, but all I ever saw of either was made by men.”

“If you do not believe in gods—”

“—why trouble with this new one?” Stannis broke in. “I have asked myself as well. I know little and care less of gods, but the red priestess has power.”

Yes, but what sort of power? “Cressen had wisdom.”

“I trusted in his wisdom and your wiles, and what did they avail me, smuggler? The storm lords sent you packing. I went to them a beggar and they laughed at me. Well, there will be no more begging, and no more laughing either. The Iron Throne is mine by rights, but how am I to take it? There are four kings in the realm, and three of them have more men and more gold than I do. I have ships ... and I have *her*. The red woman. Half my knights are afraid even to say her name, did you know? If she can do nothing else, a sorceress who can inspire such dread in grown men is not to be despised. A frightened man is a beaten man. And perhaps she *can* do more. I mean to find out.

“When I was a lad I found an injured goshawk and nursed her back to health. Proudwing, I named her. She would perch on my shoulder and flutter from room to room after me and take food from my hand, but she would not soar. Time and again I would take her hawking, but she never flew higher than the treetops. Robert called her Weakwing. He owned a gyrfalcon named Thunderclap who never missed her strike. One day our great uncle Ser Harbert told me to try a different bird. I was making a fool of myself with Proudwing, he said, and he was right.” Stannis Baratheon turned away from the window, and the

ghosts who moved upon the southern sea. “The Seven have never brought me so much as a sparrow. It is time I tried another hawk, Davos. A *red* hawk.”

THEON

There was no safe anchorage at Pyke, but Theon Greyjoy wished to look on his father's castle from the sea, to see it as he had seen it last, ten years before, when Robert Baratheon's war galley had borne him away to be a ward of Eddard Stark. On that day he had stood beside the rail, listening to the stroke of the oars and the pounding of the master's drum while he watched Pyke dwindle in the distance. Now he wanted to see it grow larger, to rise from the sea before him.

Obedient to his wishes, the *Myraham* beat her way past the point with her sails snapping and her captain cursing the wind and his crew and the follies of highborn lordlings. Theon drew the hood of his cloak up against the spray, and looked for home.

The shore was all sharp rocks and glowering cliffs, and the castle seemed one with the rest, its towers and walls and bridges quarried from the same grey-black stone, wet by the same salt waves, festooned with the same spreading patches of dark green lichen, speckled by the droppings of the same sea birds. The point of land on which the Greyjoys had raised their fortress had once thrust like a sword into the bowels of the ocean, but the waves had hammered at it day and night until the land broke and shattered, thousands of years past. All that remained were three bare and barren islands and a dozen towering stacks of rock that rose from the water like the pillars of some sea god's temple,

while the angry waves foamed and crashed among them.

Drear, dark, forbidding, Pyke stood atop those islands and pillars, almost a part of them, its curtain wall closing off the headland around the foot of the great stone bridge that leapt from the clifftop to the largest islet, dominated by the massive bulk of the Great Keep. Further out were the Kitchen Keep and the Bloody Keep, each on its own island. Towers and outbuildings clung to the stacks beyond, linked to each other by covered archways when the pillars stood close, by long swaying walks of wood and rope when they did not.

The Sea Tower rose from the outmost island at the point of the broken sword, the oldest part of the castle, round and tall, the sheer-sided pillar on which it stood half eaten through by the endless battering of the waves. The base of the tower was white from centuries of salt spray, the upper stories green from the lichen that crawled over it like a thick blanket, the jagged crown black with soot from its nightly watchfire.

Above the Sea Tower snapped his father's banner. The *Myraham* was too far off for Theon to see more than the cloth itself, but he knew the device it bore: the golden kraken of House Greyjoy, arms writhing and reaching against a black field. The banner streamed from an iron mast, shivering and twisting as the wind gusted, like a bird struggling to take flight. And here at least the direwolf of Stark did not fly above, casting its shadow down upon the Greyjoy kraken.

Theon had never seen a more stirring sight. In the sky behind

the castle, the fine red tail of the comet was visible through thin, scuttling clouds. All the way from Riverrun to Seagard, the Mallisters had argued about its meaning. *It is my comet*, Theon told himself, sliding a hand into his fur-lined cloak to touch the oilskin pouch snug in its pocket. Inside was the letter Robb Stark had given him, paper as good as a crown.

“Does the castle look as you remember it, milord?” the captain’s daughter asked as she pressed herself against his arm.

“It looks smaller,” Theon confessed, “though perhaps that is only the distance.” The *Myraham* was a fat-bellied southron merchanter up from Oldtown, carrying wine and cloth and seed to trade for iron ore. Her captain was a fat-bellied southron merchanter as well, and the stony sea that foamed at the feet of the castle made his plump lips quiver, so he stayed well out, further than Theon would have liked. An ironborn captain in a longship would have taken them along the cliffs and under the high bridge that spanned the gap between the gatehouse and the Great Keep, but this plump Oldtownner had neither the craft, the crew, nor the courage to attempt such a thing. So they sailed past at a safe distance, and Theon must content himself with seeing Pyke from afar. Even so, the *Myraham* had to struggle mightily to keep itself off those rocks.

“It must be windy there,” the captain’s daughter observed.

He laughed. “Windy and cold and damp. A miserable hard place, in truth . . . but my lord father once told me that hard places breed hard men, and hard men rule the world.”

The captain's face was as green as the sea when he came bowing up to Theon and asked, "May we make for port now, milord?"

"You may," Theon said, a faint smile playing about his lips. The promise of gold had turned the Oldtowner into a shameless lickspittle. It would have been a much different voyage if a longship from the islands had been waiting at Seagard as he'd hoped. Ironborn captains were proud and wilful, and did not go in awe of a man's blood. The islands were too small for awe, and a longship smaller still. If every captain was a king aboard his own ship, as was often said, it was small wonder they named the islands the land of ten thousand kings. And when you have seen your kings shit over the rail and turn green in a storm, it was hard to bend the knee and pretend they were gods. "The Drowned God makes men," old King Urron Redhand had once said, thousands of years ago, "but it's men who make crowns."

A longship would have made the crossing in half the time as well. The *Myraham* was a wallowing tub, if truth be told, and he would not care to be aboard her in a storm. Still, Theon could not be too unhappy. He was here, undrowned, and the voyage had offered certain other amusements. He put an arm around the captain's daughter. "Summon me when we make Lordsport," he told her father. "We'll be below, in my cabin." He led the girl away aft, while her father watched them go in sullen silence.

The cabin was the captain's, in truth, but it had been turned over to Theon's use when they sailed from Seagard. The captain's

daughter had not been turned over for his use, but she had come to his bed willingly enough all the same. A cup of wine, a few whispers, and there she was. The girl was a shade plump for his taste, with skin as splotchy as oatmeal, but her breasts filled his hands nicely and she had been a maiden the first time he took her. That was surprising at her age, but Theon found it diverting. He did not think the captain approved, and that was amusing as well, watching the man struggle to swallow his outrage while performing his courtesies to the high lord, the rich purse of gold he'd been promised never far from his thoughts.

As Theon shrugged out of his wet cloak, the girl said, "You must be so happy to see your home again, milord. How many years have you been away?"

"Ten, or close as makes no matter," he told her. "I was a boy of ten when I was taken to Winterfell as a ward of Eddard Stark." A ward in name, a hostage in truth. Half his days a hostage ... but no longer. His life was his own again, and nowhere a Stark to be seen. He drew the captain's daughter close and kissed her on her ear. "Take off your cloak."

She dropped her eyes, suddenly shy, but did as he bid her. When the heavy garment, sodden with spray, fell from her shoulders to the deck, she gave him a little bow, and smiled anxiously. She looked rather stupid when she smiled, if truth be told, but he had never required a woman to be clever. "Come here," he told her.

She did. "I have never seen the Iron Islands."

“Count yourself fortunate.” Theon stroked her hair. It was fine and dark, though the wind had made a tangle of it. “The islands are stern and stony places, scant of comfort and bleak of prospect. Death is never far here, and life is mean and meagre. Men spend their nights drinking ale and arguing over whose lot is worse, the fisherfolk who fight the sea or the farmers who try and scratch a crop from the poor thin soil. If truth be told, the miners have it worse than either, breaking their backs down in the dark, and for what? Iron, lead, tin, those are our treasures. Small wonder the ironmen of old turned to raiding.”

The stupid girl did not seem to be listening. “I could go ashore with you,” she said. “I would, if it please you ...”

“You could go ashore,” Theon agreed, squeezing her breast, “but not with me, I fear.”

“I’d work in your castle, milord. I can clean fish and bake bread and churn butter. Father says my peppercrab stew is the best he’s ever tasted. You could find me a place in your kitchens and I could make you peppercrab stew.”

“And warm my bed by night?” He reached for the laces of her bodice and began to undo them, his fingers deft and practiced. “Once I might have carried you home as a prize, and kept you to wife whether you willed it or no. The ironmen of old did such things. A man had his rock wife, his true bride, ironborn like himself, but he had his salt wives too, women captured on raids.”

The girl’s eyes grew wide, and not because he had bared her breasts. “I would be your salt wife, milord.”

“I fear those days are gone.” Theon’s finger circled one heavy teat, spiraling in toward the fat brown nipple. “No longer may we ride the wind with fire and sword, taking what we want. Now we scratch in the ground and toss lines in the sea like other men, and count ourselves lucky if we have salt cod and porridge enough to get us through a winter.” He took her nipple in his mouth, and bit it until she gasped.

“You can put it in me again, if it please you,” she whispered in his ear as he sucked.

When he raised his head from her breast, the skin was dark red where his mouth had marked her. “It would please me to teach you something new. Unlace me and pleasure me with your mouth.”

“With my mouth?”

His thumb brushed lightly over her full lips. “It’s what those lips were made for, sweetling. If you were my salt wife, you’d do as I command.”

She was timid at first, but learned quickly for such a stupid girl, which pleased him. Her mouth was as wet and sweet as her cunt, and this way he did not have to listen to her mindless prattle. *Once I would have kept her as a salt wife in truth*, he thought to himself as he slid his fingers through her tangled hair. *Once. When we still kept the Old Way, lived by the axe instead of the pick, taking what we would, be it wealth, women, or glory.* In those days, the ironborn did not work mines; that was labor for the captives brought back from the hostings, and so too the sorry

business of farming and tending goats and sheep. War was an ironman's proper trade. The Drowned God had made them to reave and rape, to carve out kingdoms and write their names in fire and blood and song.

Aegon the Dragon had destroyed the Old Way when he burnt Black Harren, gave Harren's kingdom back to the weakling rivermen, and reduced the Iron Islands to an insignificant backwater of a much greater realm. Yet the old red tales were still told around driftwood fires and smoky hearths all across the islands, even behind the high stone halls of Pyke. Theon's father numbered among his titles the style of Lord Reaper, and the Greyjoy words boasted that *We Do Not Sow*.

It had been to bring back the Old Way more than for the empty vanity of a crown that Lord Balon had staged his great rebellion. Robert Baratheon had written a bloody end to that hope, with the help of his friend Eddard Stark, but both men were dead now. Mere boys ruled in their stead, and the realm that Aegon the Conqueror had forged was smashed and sundered. *This is the season*, Theon thought as the captain's daughter slid her lips up and down the length of him, *the season, the year, the day, and I am the man*. He smiled crookedly, wondering what his father would say when Theon told him that he, the last-born, babe and hostage, *he* had succeeded where Lord Balon himself had failed.

His climax came on him sudden as a storm, and he filled the girl's mouth with his seed. Startled, she tried to pull away, but Theon held her tight by the hair. Afterward, she crawled up

beside him. "Did I please milord?"

"Well enough," he told her.

"It tasted salty," she murmured.

"Like the sea?"

She nodded. "I have always loved the sea, milord."

"As I have," he said, rolling her nipple idly between his fingers. It was true. The sea meant freedom to the men of the Iron Islands. He had forgotten that until the *Myraham* had raised sail at Seagard. The sounds brought old feelings back; the creak of wood and rope, the captain's shouted commands, the snap of the sails as the wind filled them, each as familiar as the beating of his own heart, and as comforting. *I must remember this*, Theon vowed to himself. *I must never go far from the sea again.*

"Take me with you, milord," the captain's daughter begged. "I don't need to go to your castle. I can stay in some town, and be your salt wife." She reached out to stroke his cheek.

Theon Greyjoy pushed her hand aside and climbed off the bunk. "My place is Pyke, and yours is on this ship."

"I can't stay here now."

He laced up his breeches. "Why not?"

"My father," she told him. "Once you're gone, he'll punish me, milord. He'll call me names and hit me."

Theon swept his cloak off its peg and over his shoulders. "Fathers are like that," he admitted, as he pinned the folds with a silver clasp. "Tell him he should be pleased. As many times as I've fucked you, you're likely with child. It's not every man

who has the honor of raising a king's bastard." She looked at him stupidly, so he left her there.

The *Myraham* was rounding a wooded point. Below the pine-clad bluffs, a dozen fishing boats were pulling in their nets. The big cog stayed well out from them, tacking. Theon moved to the bow for a better view. He saw the castle first, the stronghold of the Botleys. When he was a boy it had been timber and wattle, but Robert Baratheon had razed that structure to the ground. Lord Sawane had rebuilt in stone, for now a small square keep crowned the hill. Pale green flags drooped from the squat corner towers, each emblazoned with a shoal of silvery fish.

Beneath the dubious protection of the fish-ridden little castle lay the village of Lordsport, its harbor aswarm with ships. When last he'd seen Lordsport, it had been a smoking wasteland, the skeletons of burnt longships and smashed galleys littering the stony shore like the bones of dead leviathans, the houses no more than broken walls and cold ashes. After ten years, few traces of the war remained. The smallfolk had built new hovels with the stones of the old, and cut fresh sod for their roofs. A new inn had risen beside the landing, twice the size of the old one, with a lower story of cut stone and two upper stories of timber. The sept beyond had never been rebuilt, though; only a seven-sided foundation remained where it had stood. Robert Baratheon's fury had soured the ironmen's taste for the new gods, it would seem.

Theon was more interested in ships than gods. Among the masts of countless fishing boats, he spied a Tyroshi trading galley

offloading beside a lumbering Ibbenese cog with her black-tarred hull. A great number of longships, fifty or sixty at the least, stood out to sea or lay beached on the pebbled shore to the north. Some of the sails bore devices from the other islands; the blood moon of Wynch, Lord Goodbrother's banded black warhorn, Harlaw's silver scythe. Theon searched for his uncle Euron's *Silence*. Of that lean and terrible red ship he saw no sign, but his father's *Great Kraken* was there, her bow ornamented with a grey iron ram in the shape of its namesake.

Had Lord Balon anticipated him and called the Greyjoy banners? His hand went inside his cloak again, to the oilskin pouch. No one knew of his letter but Robb Stark; they were no fools, to entrust their secrets to a bird. Still, Lord Balon was no fool either. He might well have guessed why his son was coming home at long last, and acted accordingly.

The thought did not please him. His father's war was long done, and lost. This was Theon's hour—his plan, his glory, and in time, his crown. *Yet if the longships are hosting ...*

It might be only a caution, now that he thought on it. A defensive move, lest the war spill out across the sea. Old men were cautious by nature. His father was old now, and so too his uncle Victarion, who commanded the Iron Fleet. His uncle Euron was a different song, to be sure, but the *Silence* did not seem to be in port. *It's all for the good*, Theon told himself. *This way, I shall be able to strike all the more quickly.*

As the *Myraham* made her way landward, Theon paced the

deck restlessly, scanning the shore. He had not thought to find Lord Balon himself at quayside, but surely his father would have sent someone to meet him. Sylas Sourmouth the steward, Lord Botley, perhaps even Dagmer Cleftjaw. It would be good to look on Dagmer's hideous old face again. It was not as though they had no word of his arrival. Robb had sent ravens from Riverrun, and when they'd found no longship at Seagard, Jason Mallister had sent his own birds to Pyke, supposing that Robb's were lost.

Yet he saw no familiar faces, no honor guard waiting to escort him from Lordsport to Pyke, only smallfolk going about their small business. Shorehands rolled casks of wine off the Tyroshi trader, fisherfolk cried the day's catch, children ran and played. A priest in the seawater robes of the Drowned God was leading a pair of horses along the pebbled shore, while above him a slattern leaned out a window in the inn, calling out to some passing Ibbenese sailors.

A handful of Lordsport merchants had gathered to meet the ship. They shouted questions as the *Myraham* was tying up. "We're out of Oldtown," the captain called down, "bearing apples and oranges, wines from the Arbor, feathers from the Summer Isles. I have pepper, woven leathers, a bolt of Myrish lace, mirrors for milady, a pair of Oldtown woodharps sweet as any you ever heard." The gangplank descended with a creak and a thud. "And I've brought your heir back to you."

The Lordsport men gazed on Theon with blank, bovine eyes, and he realized that they did not know who he was. It made him

angry. He pressed a golden dragon into the captain's palm. "Have your men bring my things." Without waiting for a reply, he strode down the gangplank. "Innkeep," he barked, "I require a horse."

"As you say, m'lord," the man responded, without so much as a bow. He had forgotten how bold the ironborn could be. "Happens as I have one might do. Where would you be riding, m'lord?"

"Pyke." The fool *still* did not know him. He should have worn his good doublet, with the kraken embroidered on the breast.

"You'll want to be off soon, to reach Pyke afore dark," the innkeep said. "My boy will go with you and show you the way."

"Your boy will not be needed," a deep voice called, "nor your horse. I shall see my nephew back to his father's house."

The speaker was the priest he had seen leading the horses along the shoreline. As the man approached, the smallfolk bent the knee, and Theon heard the innkeep murmur, "Damphair."

Tall and thin, with fierce black eyes and a beak of a nose, the priest was garbed in mottled robes of green and grey and blue, the swirling colors of the Drowned God. A waterskin hung under his arm on a leather strap, and ropes of dried seaweed were braided through his waist-long black hair and untrimmed beard.

A memory prodded at Theon. In one of his rare curt letters, Lord Balon had written of his youngest brother going down in a storm, and turning holy when he washed up safe on shore. "Uncle Aeron?" he said, doubtfully.

"Nephew Theon," the priest replied. "Your lord father bid me

fetch you. Come.”

“In a moment, uncle.” He turned back to the *Myraham*. “My things,” he commanded the captain.

A sailor fetched him down his tall yew bow and quiver of arrows, but it was the captain’s daughter who brought the pack with his good clothing. “Milord.” Her eyes were red. When he took the pack, she made as if to embrace him, there in front of her own father and his priestly uncle and half the island.

Theon turned deftly aside. “You have my thanks.”

“Please,” she said, “I do love you well, milord.”

“I must go.” He hurried after his uncle, who was already well down the pier. Theon caught him with a dozen long strides. “I had not looked for you, uncle. After ten years, I thought perhaps my lord father and lady mother might come themselves, or send Dagmer with an honor guard.”

“It is not for you to question the commands of the Lord Reaper of Pyke.” The priest’s manner was chilly, most unlike the man Theon remembered. Aeron Greyjoy had been the most amiable of his uncles, feckless and quick to laugh, fond of songs, ale, and women. “As to Dagmer, the Cleftjaw is gone to Old Wyk at your father’s behest, to roust the Stonehouses and the Drumms.”

“To what purpose? Why are the longships hosting?”

“Why have longships ever hosted?” His uncle had left the horses tied up in front of the waterside inn. When they reached them, he turned to Theon. “Tell me true, nephew. Do you pray to the wolf gods now?”

Theon seldom prayed at all, but that was not something you confessed to a priest, even your father's own brother. "Ned Stark prayed to a tree. No, I care nothing for Stark's gods."

"Good. Kneel."

The ground was all stones and mud. "Uncle, I—"

"*Kneel*. Or are you too proud now, a lordling of the green lands come among us?"

Theon knelt. He had a purpose here, and might need Aeron's help to achieve it. A crown was worth a little mud and horseshit on his breeches, he supposed.

"Bow your head." Lifting the skin, his uncle pulled the cork and directed a thin stream of seawater down upon Theon's head. It drenched his hair and ran over his forehead into his eyes. Sheets washed down his cheeks, and a finger crept under his cloak and doublet and down his back, a cold rivulet along his spine. The salt made his eyes burn, until it was all he could do not to cry out. He could taste the ocean on his lips. "Let Theon your servant be born again from the sea, as you were," Aeron Greyjoy intoned. "Bless him with salt, bless him with stone, bless him with steel. Nephew, do you still know the words?"

"What is dead may never die," Theon said, remembering.

"What is dead may never die," his uncle echoed, "but rises again, harder and stronger. Stand."

Theon stood, blinking back tears from the salt in his eyes. Wordless, his uncle corked the water skin, untied his horse, and mounted. Theon did the same. They set off together, leaving the

inn and the harbor behind them, up past the castle of Lord Botley into the stony hills. The priest ventured no further word.

“I have been half my life away from home,” Theon said at last. “Will I find the islands changed?”

“Men fish the sea, dig in the earth, and die. Women birth children in blood and pain, and die. Night follows day. The winds and tides remain. The islands are as our god made them.”

Gods, he has grown grim, Theon thought. “Will I find my sister and my lady mother at Pyke?”

“You will not. Your mother dwells on Harlaw, with her own sister. It is less raw there, and her cough troubles her. Your sister has taken *Black Wind* to Great Wyk, with messages from your lord father. She will return ere long, you may be sure.”

Theon did not need to be told that *Black Wind* was Asha’s longship. He had not seen his sister in ten years, but that much he knew of her. Odd that she would call it that, when Robb Stark had a wolf named Grey Wind. “Stark is grey and Greyjoy’s black,” he murmured, smiling, “but it seems we’re both windy.”

The priest had nothing to say to that.

“And what of you, uncle?” Theon asked. “You were no priest when I was taken from Pyke. I remember how you would sing the old reaving songs standing on the table with a horn of ale in hand.”

“Young I was, and vain,” Aeron Greyjoy said, “but the sea washed my follies and my vanities away. That man drowned, nephew. His lungs filled with seawater, and the fish ate the scales

off his eyes. When I rose again, I saw clearly.”

He is mad as he is sour. Theon had liked what he remembered of the old Aeron Greyjoy. “Uncle, why has my father called his swords and sails?”

“Doubtless he will tell you at Pyke.”

“I would know his plans now.”

“From me, you shall not. We are commanded not to speak of this to any man.”

“Even to *me*?” Theon’s anger flared. He’d led men in war, hunted with a king, won honor in tourney melees, ridden with Brynden Blackfish and Greatjon Umber, fought in the Whispering Wood, bedded more girls than he could name, and yet this uncle was treating him as though he were still a child of ten. “If my father makes plans for war, I must know of them. I am not *any man*, I am heir to Pyke and the Iron Islands.”

“As to that,” his uncle said, “we shall see.”

The words were a slap in the face. “*We shall see?* My brothers are both dead. I am my lord father’s only living son.”

“Your sister lives.”

Asha, he thought, confounded. She was three years older than Theon, yet still ... “A woman may inherit only if there is no male heir in the direct line,” he insisted loudly. “I will not be cheated of my rights, I warn you.”

His uncle grunted. “You *warn* a servant of the Drowned God, boy? You have forgotten more than you know. And you are a great fool if you believe your lord father will ever hand these holy

islands over to a Stark. Now be silent. The ride is long enough without your magpie chattering.”

Theon held his tongue, though not without struggle. *So that is the way of it*, he thought. As if ten years in Winterfell could make a Stark. Lord Eddard had raised him among his own children, but Theon had never been one of them. The whole castle, from Lady Stark to the lowliest kitchen scullion, knew he was hostage to his father’s good behavior, and treated him accordingly. Even the bastard Jon Snow had been accorded more honor than he had.

Lord Eddard had tried to play the father from time to time, but to Theon he had always remained the man who’d brought blood and fire to Pyke and taken him from his home. As a boy, he had lived in fear of Stark’s stern face and great dark sword. His lady wife was, if anything, even more distant and suspicious.

As for their children, the younger ones had been mewling babes for most of his years at Winterfell. Only Robb and his baseborn half-brother Jon Snow had been old enough to be worth his notice. The bastard was a sullen boy, quick to sense a slight, jealous of Theon’s high birth and Robb’s regard for him. For Robb himself, Theon did have a certain affection, as for a younger brother ... but it would be best not to mention that. In Pyke, it would seem, the old wars were still being fought. That ought not surprise him. The Iron Islands lived in the past; the present was too hard and bitter to be borne. Besides, his father and uncles were old, and the old lords were like that; they took their dusty feuds to the grave, forgetting nothing and forgiving

less.

It had been the same with the Mallisters, his companions on the ride from Riverrun to Seagard. Patrek Mallister was not too ill a fellow; they shared a taste for wenches, wine, and hawking. But when old Lord Jason saw his heir growing overly fond of Theon's company, he had taken Patrek aside to remind him that Seagard had been built to defend the coast against reavers from the Iron Islands, the Greyjoys of Pyke chief among them. Their Booming Tower was named for its immense bronze bell, rung of old to call the townsfolk and farmhands into the castle when longships were sighted on the western horizon.

"Never mind that the bell has been rung just once in three hundred years," Patrek had told Theon the day after, as he shared his father's cautions and a jug of greenapple wine.

"When my brother stormed Seagard," Theon said. Lord Jason had slain Rodrik Greyjoy under the walls of the castle, and thrown the ironmen back into the bay. "If your father supposes I bear him some enmity for that, it's only because he never knew Rodrik." They had a laugh over that as they raced ahead to an amorous young miller's wife that Patrek knew. *Would that Patrek were with me now.* Mallister or no, he was a more amiable riding companion than this sour old priest that his uncle Aeron had turned into.

The path they rode wound up and up, into bare and stony hills. Soon they were out of sight of the sea, though the smell of salt still hung sharp in the damp air. They kept a steady plodding pace,

past a shepherd's croft and the abandoned workings of a mine. This new, holy Aeron Greyjoy was not much for talk. They rode in a gloom of silence. Finally Theon could suffer it no longer. "Robb Stark is Lord of Winterfell now," he said.

Aeron rode on. "One wolf is much like the other."

"Robb has broken fealty with the Iron Throne and crowned himself King in the North. There's war."

"The maester's ravens fly over salt as soon as rock. This news is old and cold."

"It means a new day, uncle."

"Every morning brings a new day, much like the old."

"In Riverrun, they would tell you different. They say the red comet is a herald of a new age. A messenger from the gods."

"A sign it is," the priest agreed, "but from our god, not theirs. A burning brand it is, such as our people carried of old. It is the flame the Drowned God brought from the sea, and it proclaims a rising tide. It is time to hoist our sails and go forth into the world with fire and sword, as he did."

Theon smiled. "I could not agree more."

"A man agrees with god as a raindrop with the storm."

This raindrop will one day be a king, old man. Theon had suffered quite enough of his uncle's gloom. He put his spurs into his horse and trotted on ahead, smiling.

It was nigh on sunset when they reached the walls of Pyke, a crescent of dark stone that ran from cliff to cliff, with the gatehouse in the center and three square towers to either side.

Theon could still make out the scars left by the stones of Robert Baratheon's catapults. A new south tower had risen from the ruins of the old, its stone a paler shade of grey, and as yet unmarred by patches of lichen. That was where Robert had made his breach, swarming in over the rubble and corpses with his warhammer in hand and Ned Stark at his side. Theon had watched from the safety of the Sea Tower, and sometimes he still saw the torches in his dreams, and heard the dull thunder of the collapse.

The gates stood open to him, the rusted iron portcullis drawn up. The guards atop the battlements watched with strangers' eyes as Theon Greyjoy came home at last.

Beyond the curtain wall were half a hundred acres of headland hard against the sky and the sea. The stables were here, and the kennels, and a scatter of other outbuildings. Sheep and swine huddled in their pens while the castle dogs ran free. To the south were the cliffs, and the wide stone bridge to the Great Keep. Theon could hear the crashing of waves as he swung down from his saddle. A stableman came to take his horse. A pair of gaunt children and some thralls stared at him with dull eyes, but there was no sign of his lord father, nor anyone else he recalled from boyhood. *A bleak and bitter homecoming*, he thought.

The priest had not dismounted. "Will you not stay the night and share our meat and mead, uncle?"

"Bring you, I was told. You are brought. Now I return to our god's business." Aeron Greyjoy turned his horse and rode slowly

out beneath the muddy spikes of the portcullis.

A bentback old crone in a shapeless grey dress approached him warily. "M'lord, I am sent to show you to chambers."

"By whose bidding?"

"Your lord father, m'lord."

Theon pulled off his gloves. "So you *do* know who I am. Why is my father not here to greet me?"

"He awaits you in the Sea Tower, m'lord. When you are rested from your trip."

And I thought Ned Stark cold. "And who are you?"

"Helya, who keeps this castle for your lord father."

"Sylas was steward here. They called him Sourmouth." Even now, Theon could recall the winey stench of the old man's breath.

"Dead these five years, m'lord."

"And what of Maester Qalen, where is he?"

"He sleeps in the sea. Wendamyr keeps the ravens now."

It is as if I were a stranger here, Theon thought. *Nothing has changed, and yet everything has changed.* "Show me to my chambers, woman," he commanded. Bowing stiffly, she led him across the headland to the bridge. That at least was as he remembered; the ancient stones slick with spray and spotted by lichen, the sea foaming under their feet like some great wild beast, the salt wind clutching at their clothes.

Whenever he'd imagined his homecoming, he had always pictured himself returning to the snug bedchamber in the Sea Tower where he'd slept as a child. Instead the old woman led

him to the Bloody Keep. The halls here were larger and better furnished, if no less cold nor damp. Theon was given a suite of chilly rooms with ceilings so high that they were lost in gloom. He might have been more impressed if he had not known that these were the very chambers that had given the Bloody Keep its name. A thousand years before, the sons of the River King had been slaughtered here, hacked to bits in their beds so that pieces of their bodies might be sent back to their father on the mainland.

But Greyjoys were not murdered in Pyke except once in a great while by their brothers, and his brothers were both dead. It was not fear of ghosts that made him glance about with distaste. The wall hangings were green with mildew, the mattress musty-smelling and sagging, the rushes old and brittle. Years had come and gone since these chambers had last been opened. The damp went bone deep. "I'll have a basin of hot water and a fire in this hearth," he told the crone. "See that they light braziers in the other rooms to drive out some of the chill. And gods be good, get someone in here at once to change these rushes."

"Yes, m'lord. As you command." She fled.

After some time, they brought the hot water he had asked for. It was only tepid, and soon cold, and seawater in the bargain, but it served to wash the dust of the long ride from his face and hair and hands. While two thralls lit his braziers, Theon stripped off his travel-stained clothing and dressed to meet his father. He chose boots of supple black leather, soft lambswool breeches of silvery-grey, a black velvet doublet with the golden kraken of

the Greyjoys embroidered on the breast. Around his throat he fastened a slender gold chain, around his waist a belt of bleached white leather. He hung a dirk at one hip and a longsword at the other, in scabbards striped black-and-gold. Drawing the dirk, he tested its edge with his thumb, pulled a whetstone from his belt pouch, and gave it a few licks. He prided himself on keeping his weapons sharp. “When I return, I shall expect a warm room and clean rushes,” he warned the thralls as he drew on a pair of black gloves, the silk decorated with a delicate scrollwork tracery in golden thread.

Theon returned to the Great Keep through a covered stone walkway, the echoes of his footsteps mingling with the ceaseless rumble of the sea below. To get to the Sea Tower on its crooked pillar, he had to cross three further bridges, each narrower than the one before. The last was made of rope and wood, and the wet salt wind made it sway underfoot like a living thing. Theon’s heart was in his mouth by the time he was halfway across. A long way below, the waves threw up tall plumes of spray as they crashed against the rock. As a boy, he used to *run* across this bridge, even in the black of night. *Boys believe nothing can hurt them*, his doubt whispered. *Grown men know better*.

The door was grey wood studded with iron, and Theon found it barred from the inside. He hammered on it with a fist, and cursed when a splinter snagged the fabric of his glove. The wood was damp and moldy, the iron studs rusted.

After a moment the door was opened from within by a guard

in a black iron breastplate and pothelm. “You are the son?”

“Out of my way, or you’ll learn who I am.” The man stood aside. Theon climbed the twisting steps to the solar. He found his father seated beside a brazier, beneath a robe of musty sealskins that covered him foot to chin. At the sound of boots on stone, the Lord of the Iron Islands lifted his eyes to behold his last living son. He was smaller than Theon remembered him. And so gaunt. Balon Greyjoy had always been thin, but now he looked as though the gods had put him in a cauldron and boiled every spare ounce of flesh from his bones, until nothing remained but hair and skin. Bone thin and bone hard he was, with a face that might have been chipped from flint. His eyes were flinty too, black and sharp, but the years and the salt winds had turned his hair the grey of a winter sea, flecked with whitecaps. Unbound, it hung past the small of the back.

“Nine years, is it?” Lord Balon said at last.

“Ten,” Theon answered, pulling off his torn gloves.

“A boy they took,” his father said. “What are you now?”

“A man,” Theon answered. “Your blood and your heir.”

Lord Balon grunted. “We shall see.”

“You shall,” Theon promised.

“Ten years, you say. Stark had you as long as I. And now you come as his envoy.”

“Not his,” Theon said. “Lord Eddard is dead, beheaded by the Lannister queen.”

“They are both dead, Stark and that Robert who took broke

my walls with his stones. I vowed I'd live to see them both in their graves, and I have." He grimaced. "Yet the cold and the damp still make my joints ache, as when they were alive. So what does it serve?"

"It serves." Theon moved closer. "I bring a letter—"

"Did Ned Stark dress you like that?" his father interrupted, squinting up from beneath his robe. "Was it his pleasure to garb you in velvets and silks and make you his own sweet daughter?"

Theon felt the blood rising to his face. "I am no man's daughter. If you mislike my garb, I will change it."

"You will." Throwing off the furs, Lord Balon pushed himself to his feet. He was not so tall as Theon remembered. "That bauble around your neck—was it bought with gold or iron?"

Theon touched the gold chain. He had forgotten. *It has been so long ...* In the Old Way, women might decorate themselves with ornaments bought with coin, but a warrior wore only the jewelry he took off the corpses of enemies slain by his own hand. *Paying the iron price*, it was called.

"You blush red as a maid, Theon. A question was asked. Is it the gold price you paid, or the iron?"

"The gold," Theon admitted.

His father slid his fingers under the necklace and gave it a yank so hard it was like to take Theon's head off, had the chain not snapped first. "My daughter has taken an axe for a lover," Lord Balon said. "I will not have my son bedeck himself like a whore." He dropped the broken chain onto the brazier, where it

slid down among the coals. “It is as I feared. The green lands have made you soft, and the Starks have made you theirs.”

“You’re wrong. Ned Stark was my gaoler, but my blood is still salt and iron.”

Lord Balon turned away to warm his bony hands over the brazier. “Yet the Stark pup sends you to me like a well-trained raven, clutching his little message.”

“There is nothing small about the letter I bear,” Theon said, “and the offer he makes is one *I* suggested to him.”

“This wolf king heeds your counsel, does he?” The notion seemed to amuse Lord Balon.

“He heeds me, yes. I’ve hunted with him, trained with him, shared meat and mead with him, warred at his side. I have earned his trust. He looks on me as an older brother, he—”

“*No.*” His father jabbed a finger at his face. “Not here, not in Pyke, not in my hearing, you will not name him *brother*, this son of the man who put your true brothers to the sword. Or have you forgotten Rodrik and Maron, who were your own blood?”

“I forget nothing.” Ned Stark had killed neither of his brothers, in truth. Rodrik had been slain by Lord Jason Mallister at Seagard, Maron crushed in the collapse of the old south tower ... but Stark *would* have done for them just as quick had the tide of battle chanced to sweep them together. “I remember my brothers very well,” Theon insisted. Chiefly, he remembered Rodrik’s drunken cuffs and Maron’s cruel japes and endless lies. “I remember when my father was a king, too.” He took

out Robb's letter and thrust it forward. "Here. Read it ... Your Grace."

Lord Balon broke the seal and unfolded the parchment. His black eyes flicked back and forth. "So the boy would give me a crown again," he said, "and all I need do is destroy his enemies." His thin lips twisted in a smile.

"By now, Robb is at the Golden Tooth," Theon said. "Once it falls, he'll be through the hills in a day. Lord Tywin's host is at Harrenhal, cut off from the west. The Kingslayer is a captive at Riverrun. Only Ser Stafford Lannister and the raw green levies he's been gathering remain to oppose Robb in the west. Ser Stafford will put himself between Robb's army and Lannisport, which means the city will be undefended when we descend on it by sea. If the gods are with us, even Casterly Rock itself may fall before the Lannisters so much as realize that we are upon them."

Lord Balon grunted. "Casterly Rock has never fallen."

"Until now." Theon smiled. *And how sweet that will be.*

His father did not return the smile. "So this is why Robb Stark sends you back to me, after so long? So you might win my consent to this plan of his?"

"It is my plan, not Robb's," Theon said proudly. *Mine, as the victory will be mine, and in time the crown.* "I will lead the attack myself, if it please you. As my reward I would ask that you grant me Casterly Rock for my own seat, once we have taken it from the Lannisters." With the Rock, he could hold Lannisport and the golden lands of the west. It would mean wealth and power

such as House Greyjoy had never known.

“You reward yourself handsomely for a notion and a few lines of scribbling.” His father read the letter again. “The pup says nothing about a reward. Only that you speak for him, and I am to listen, and give him my sails and swords, and in return he will give me a crown.” His flinty eyes lifted to meet his son’s. “He will *give* me a crown,” he repeated, his voice growing sharp.

“A poor choice of words, what is meant is—”

“What is meant is what is said. The boy will *give* me a crown. And what is given can be taken away.” Lord Balon tossed the letter onto the brazier, atop the necklace. The parchment curled, blackened, and took flame.

Theon was aghast. “Have you gone mad?”

His father laid a stinging backhand across his cheek. “Mind your tongue. You are not in Winterfell now, and I am not Robb the Boy, that you should speak to me so. I am the Greyjoy, Lord Reaper of Pyke, King of Salt and Rock, Son of the Sea Wind, and no man gives me a crown. I pay the iron price. I will *take* my crown, as Urron Redhand did five thousand years ago.”

Theon edged backwards, away from the sudden fury in his father’s tone. “Take it then,” he spat, his cheek still tingling. “Call yourself King of the Iron Islands, no one will care ... until the wars are over, and the victor looks about and spies the old fool perched off his shore with an iron crown on his head.”

Lord Balon laughed. “Well, at the least you are no craven. No more than I’m a fool. Do you think I gather my ships to watch

them rock at anchor? I mean to carve out a kingdom with fire and sword ... but not from the west, and not at the bidding of King Robb the Boy. Casterly Rock is too strong, and Lord Tywin too cunning by half. Aye, we might take Lannisport, but we should never keep it. No. I hunger for a different plum ... not so juicy sweet, to be sure, yet it hangs there ripe and undefended.”

Where? Theon might have asked, but by then he knew.

DAENERYS

The Dothraki named the comet *shierak qiya*, the Bleeding Star. The old men muttered that it omened ill, but Daenerys Targaryen had seen it first on the night she burnt Khal Drogo, the night her dragons had awakened. *It is the herald of my coming*, she told herself as she gazed up into the night sky with wonder in her heart. *The gods have sent it to show me the way.*

Yet when she put the thought into words, her handmaid Doreah quailed. “That way lies the red lands, *Khaleesi*. A grim place and terrible, the riders say.”

“The way the comet points is the way we must go,” Dany insisted ... though in truth, it was the only way open to her.

She dare not turn north onto the vast ocean of grass they called the Dothraki sea. The first *khalasar* they met would swallow up her ragged band, slaying the warriors and slaving the rest. The lands of the Lamb Men south of the river were likewise closed to them. They were too few to defend themselves even against that unwarlike folk, and the Lhazareen had small reason to love them. She might have struck downriver for the ports at Meereen and Yunkai and Astapor, but Rakharo warned her that Pono’s *khalasar* had ridden that way, driving thousands of captives before them to sell in the flesh marts that festered like open sores on the shores of Slaver’s Bay. “Why should I fear Pono?” Dany objected. “He was Drogo’s *ko*, and always spoke

me gently.”

“Ko Pono spoke you gently,” Ser Jorah Mormont said. “Khal Pono will kill you. He was the first to abandon Drogo. Ten thousand warriors went with him. You have a hundred.”

No, Dany thought. I have four. The rest are women, old sick men, and boys whose hair has never been braided. “I have the dragons,” she pointed out.

“Hatchlings,” Ser Jorah said. “One swipe from an *arakh* would put an end to them, though Pono is more like to seize them for himself. Your dragon eggs were more precious than rubies. A living dragon is beyond price. In all the world, there are only three. Every man who sees them will want them, my queen.”

“They are *mine*,” she said fiercely. They had been born from her faith and her need, given life by the deaths of her husband and unborn son and the *maegi* Mirri Maz Duur. Dany had walked into the flames as they came forth, and they had drunk milk from her swollen breasts. “No man will take them from me while I live.”

“You will not live long should you meet Khal Pono. Nor Khal Jhaqo, nor any of the others. You must go where they do not.”

Dany had named him the first of her Queensguard ... and when Mormont’s gruff counsel and the omens agreed, her course was clear. She called her people together and mounted her silver mare. Her hair had burned away in Drogo’s pyre, so her handmaids garbed her in the skin of the *hrakkar* Drogo had slain, the white lion of the Dothraki sea. Its fearsome head made a hood to cover her naked scalp, its pelt a cloak that flowed across her

shoulders and down her back. The cream-colored dragon sunk sharp black claws into the lion's mane and coiled its tail around her arm, while Ser Jorah took his accustomed place by her side.

"We follow the comet," Dany told her *khalasar*. Once it was said, no word was raised against it. They had been Drogo's people, but they were hers now. *The Unburnt*, they called her, and *Mother of Dragons*. Her word was their law.

They rode by night, and by day took refuge from the sun beneath their tents. Soon enough Dany learned the truth of Doreah's words. This was no kindly country. They left a trail of dead and dying horses behind them as they went, for Pono, Jhaqo, and the others had seized the best of Drogo's herds, leaving to Dany the old and the scrawny, the sickly and the lame, the broken animals and the ill-tempered. It was the same with the people. *They are not strong, she told herself, so I must be their strength. I must show no fear, no weakness, no doubt. However frightened my heart, when they look upon my face they must see only Drogo's queen.* She felt older than her fourteen years. If ever she had truly been a girl, that time was done.

Three days into the march, the first man died. A toothless oldster with cloudy blue eyes, he fell exhausted from his saddle and could not rise again. An hour later he was done. Blood flies swarmed about his corpse and carried his ill luck to the living. "His time was past," her handmaid Irri declared. "No man should live longer than his teeth." The others agreed. Dany bid them kill the weakest of their dying horses, so the dead man might go

mounted into the night lands.

Two nights later, it was an infant girl who perished. Her mother's anguished wailing lasted all day, but there was nothing to be done. The child had been too young to ride, poor thing. Not for her the endless black grasses of the night lands; she must be born again.

There was little forage in the red waste, and less water. It was a sere and desolate land of low hills and barren windswept plains. The rivers they crossed were dry as dead men's bones. Their mounts subsisted on the tough brown devilgrass that grew in clumps at the base of rocks and dead trees. Dany sent outriders ranging ahead of the column, but they found neither wells nor springs, only bitter pools, shallow and stagnant, shrinking in the hot sun. The deeper they rode into the waste, the smaller the pools became, while the distance between them grew. If there were gods in this trackless wilderness of stone and sand and red clay, they were hard dry gods, deaf to prayers for rain.

Wine gave out first, and soon thereafter the clotted mare's milk the horselords loved better than mead. Then their stores of flatbread and dried meat were exhausted as well. Their hunters found no game, and only the flesh of their dead horses filled their bellies. Death followed death. Weak children, wrinkled old women, the sick and the stupid and the heedless, the cruel land claimed them all. Doreah grew gaunt and hollow-eyed, and her soft golden hair turned brittle as straw.

Dany hungered and thirsted with the rest of them. The milk

in her breasts dried up, her nipples cracked and bled, and the flesh fell away from her day by day until she was lean and hard as a stick, yet it was her dragons she feared for. Her father had been slain before she was born, and her splendid brother Rhaegar as well. Her mother had died bringing her into the world while the storm screamed outside. Gentle Ser Willem Darry, who must have loved her after a fashion, had been taken by a wasting sickness when she was very young. Her brother Viserys, Khal Drogo who was her sun-and-stars, even her unborn son, the gods had claimed them all. *They will not have my dragons*, Dany vowed. *They will not.*

The dragons were no larger than the scrawny cats she had once seen skulking along the walls of Magister Illyrio's estate in Pentos ... until they unfolded their wings, delicate fans of translucent skin, gorgeously colored, stretched taut between long thin bones. When you looked hard, you could see that most of them was neck, tail, and wing. *Such little things*, she thought, as she fed them by hand. Or rather, tried to feed them, for the dragons would not eat. They would hiss and spit at each bloody morsel of horsemeat, steam rising from their nostrils, yet they would not take the food ... until Dany recalled something Viserys had told her when they were children.

Only dragons and men eat cooked meat, he had said.

When she had her handmaids char the horsemeat black, the dragons ripped at it eagerly, their heads striking like snakes. So long as the meat was seared, they gulped down several times

their own weight every day, and at last began to grow larger and stronger. Dany marveled at the smoothness of their scales, and the *heat* that poured off them, so palpable that on cold nights their whole bodies seemed to steam.

Each evenfall as the *khalasar* set out, she would choose a dragon to ride upon her shoulder. Irri and Jhiqui carried the others in a cage of woven wood slung between their mounts, and rode close behind her, so Dany was never out of their sight. It was the only way to keep them quiescent.

“Aegon’s dragons were named for the gods of Old Valyria,” she told her bloodriders one morning after a long night’s journey. “Visenya’s dragon was Vhagar, Rhaenys had Meraxes, and Aegon rode Balerion, the Black Dread. It was said that Vhagar’s breath was so hot that it could melt a knight’s armor and cook the man inside, that Meraxes swallowed horses whole, and Balerion ... his fire was as black as his scales, his wings so vast that whole towns were swallowed up in their shadow when he passed overhead.”

The Dothraki looked at her hatchlings uneasily. The largest of her three was shiny black, his scales slashed with streaks of vivid scarlet to match his wings and horns. “*Khaleesi*,” Aggo murmured, “there sits Balerion, come again.”

“It may be as you say, blood of my blood,” Dany replied gravely, “but he shall have a new name for this new life. I would name them all for those the gods have taken. The green one shall be Rhaegal, for my valiant brother who died on the green banks

of the Trident. The cream-and-gold I call Viserion. Viserys was cruel and weak and frightened, yet he was my brother still. His dragon will do what he could not.”

“And the black beast?” asked Ser Jorah Mormont.

“The black,” she said, “is Drogon.”

Yet even as her dragons prospered, her *khalasar* withered and died. Around them the land turned ever more desolate. Even devilgrass grew scant; horses dropped in their tracks, leaving so few that some of her people must trudge along on foot. Doreah took a fever and grew worse with every league they crossed. Her lips and hands broke with blood blisters, her hair came out in clumps, and one evenfall she lacked the strength to mount her horse. Jhogo said they must leave her or bind her to her saddle, but Dany remembered a night on the Dothraki sea, when the Lysene girl had taught her secrets so that Drogo might love her more. She gave Doreah water from her own skin, cooled her brow with a damp cloth, and held her hand until she died, shivering. Only then would she permit the *khalasar* to press on.

They saw no sign of other travelers. The Dothraki began to mutter fearfully that the comet had led them to some hell. Dany went to Ser Jorah one morning as they made camp amidst a jumble of black wind-scoured stones. “Are we lost?” she asked him. “Does this waste have no end to it?”

“It has an end,” he answered wearily. “I have seen the maps the traders draw, my queen. Few caravans come this way, that is so, yet there are great kingdoms to the east, and cities full of

wonders. Yi Ti, Qarth, Asshai by the Shadow ...”

“Will we live to see them?”

“I will not lie to you. The way is harder than I dared think.” The knight’s face was grey and exhausted. The wound he had taken to his hip the night he fought Khal Drogo’s bloodriders had never fully healed; she could see how he grimaced when he mounted his horse, and he seemed to slump in his saddle as they rode. “Perhaps we are doomed if we press on ... but I know for a certainty that we are doomed if we turn back.”

Dany kissed him lightly on the cheek. It heartened her to see him smile. *I must be strong for him as well*, she thought grimly. *A knight he may be, but I am the blood of the dragon.*

The next pool they found was scalding hot and stinking of brimstone, but their skins were almost empty. The Dothraki cooled the water in jars and pots and drank it tepid. The taste was no less foul, but water was water, and all of them thirsted. Dany looked at the horizon with despair. They had lost a third of their number, and still the waste stretched before them, bleak and red and endless. *The comet mocks my hopes*, she thought, lifting her eyes to where it scored the sky. *Have I crossed half the world and seen the birth of dragons only to die with them in this hard hot desert?* She would not believe it.

The next day, dawn broke as they were crossing a cracked and fissured plain of hard red earth. Dany was about to command them to make camp when her outriders came racing back at a gallop. “A city, *Khaleesi*,” they cried. “A city pale as the moon

and lovely as a maid. An hour's ride, no more."

"Show me," she said.

When the city appeared before her, its walls and towers shimmering white behind a veil of heat, it looked so beautiful that Dany was certain it must be a mirage. "Do you know what place this might be?" she asked Ser Jorah.

The exiled knight gave a weary shake of the head. "No, my queen. I have never traveled this far east."

The distant white walls promised rest and safety, a chance to heal and grow strong, and Dany wanted nothing so much as to rush toward them. Instead she turned to her bloodriders. "Blood of my blood, go ahead of us and learn the name of this city, and what manner of welcome we should expect."

"*Ai, Khaleesi,*" said Aggo.

Her riders were not long in returning. Rakharo swung down from his saddle. From his medallion belt hung the great curving *arakh* that Dany had bestowed on him when she named him bloodrider. "This city is dead, *Khaleesi*. Nameless and godless we found it, the gates broken, only wind and flies moving through the streets."

Jhiqui shuddered. "When the gods are gone, the evil ghosts feast by night. Such places are best shunned. It is known."

"It is known," Irri agreed.

"Not to me." Dany put her heels into her horse and showed them the way, trotting beneath the shattered arch of an ancient gate and down a silent street. Ser Jorah and her bloodriders

followed, and then, more slowly, the rest of the Dothraki.

How long the city had been deserted she could not know, but the white walls, so beautiful from afar, were cracked and crumbling when seen up close. Inside was a maze of narrow crooked alleys. The buildings pressed close, their facades blank, chalky, windowless. Everything was white, as if the people who lived here had known nothing of color. They rode past heaps of sun-washed rubble where houses had fallen in, and elsewhere saw the faded scars of fire. At a place where six alleys came together, Dany passed an empty marble plinth. Dothraki had visited this place before, it would seem. Perhaps even now the missing statue stood among the other stolen gods in Vaes Dothrak. She might have ridden past it a hundred times, never knowing. On her shoulder, Viserion *hissed*.

They made camp before the remnants of a gutted palace, on a windswept plaza where devilgrass grew between the paving stones. Dany sent out men to search the ruins. Some went reluctantly, yet they went ... and one scarred old man returned a brief time later, hopping and grinning, his hands overflowing with figs. They were small, withered things, yet her people grabbed for them greedily, jostling and pushing at each other, stuffing the fruit into their cheeks and chewing blissfully.

Other searchers returned with tales of other fruit trees, hidden behind closed doors in secret gardens. Aggo showed her a courtyard overgrown with twisting vines and tiny green grapes, and Jhogo discovered a well where the water was pure and

cold. Yet they found bones too, the skulls of the unburied dead, bleached and broken. “Ghosts,” Irri muttered. “Terrible ghosts. We must not stay here, *Khaleesi*, this is their place.”

“I fear no ghosts. Dragons are more powerful than ghosts.” *And figs are more important.* “Go with Jhiqui and find me some clean sand for a bath, and trouble me no more with silly talk.”

In the coolness of her tent, Dany blackened horsemeat over a brazier and reflected on her choices. There was food and water here to sustain them, and enough grass for the horses to regain their strength. How pleasant it would be to wake every day in the same place, to linger among shady gardens, eat figs, and drink cool water, as much as she might desire.

When Irri and Jhiqui returned with pots of white sand, Dany stripped and let them scrub her clean. “Your hair is coming back, *Khaleesi*,” Jhiqui said as she scraped sand off her back. Dany ran a hand over the top of her head, feeling the new growth. Dothraki men wore their hair in long oiled braids, and cut them only when defeated. *Perhaps I should do the same*, she thought, *To remind them that Drogo’s strength lives within me now.* Khal Drogo had died with his hair uncut, a boast few men could make.

Across the tent, Rhaegal unfolded green wings to flap and flutter a half foot before thumping to the carpet. When he landed, his tail lashed back and forth in fury, and he raised his head and screamed. *If I had wings, I would want to fly too*, Dany thought. The Targaryens of old had ridden upon dragonback when they went to war. She tried to imagine what it would feel like, to

straddle a dragon's neck and soar high into the air. *It would be like standing on a mountaintop, only better. The whole world would be spread out below. If I flew high enough, I could even see the Seven Kingdoms, and reach up and touch the comet.*

Irri broke her reverie to tell her that Ser Jorah Mormont was outside, awaiting her pleasure. "Send him in," Dany commanded, sand-scrubbed skin tingling. She wrapped herself in the lionskin. The *hrakkar* had been much bigger than Dany, so the pelt covered everything that wanted covering.

"I've brought you a peach," Ser Jorah said, kneeling. It was so small she could almost hide it in her palm, and overripe too, but when she took the first bite, the flesh was so sweet she almost cried. She ate it slowly, savoring every mouthful, while Ser Jorah told her of the tree it had been plucked from, in a garden near the western wall.

"Fruit and water and shade," Dany said, her cheeks sticky with peach juice. "The gods were good to bring us to this place."

"We should rest here until we are stronger," the knight urged. "The red lands are not kind to the weak."

"My handmaids say there are ghosts here."

"There are ghosts everywhere," Ser Jorah said softly. "We carry them with us wherever we go."

Yes, she thought. *Viserys, Khal Drogo, my son Rhaego, they are with me always.* "Tell me the name of your ghost, Jorah. You know all of mine."

His face grew very still. "Her name was Lynesse."

“Your wife?”

“My second wife.”

It pains him to speak of her, Dany saw, but she wanted to know the truth. “Is that all you would say of her?” The lion pelt slid off one shoulder and she tugged it back into place. “Was she beautiful?”

“Very beautiful.” Ser Jorah lifted his eyes from her shoulder to her face. “The first time I beheld her, I thought she was a goddess come to earth, the Maid herself made flesh. Her birth was far above my own. She was the youngest daughter of Lord Leyton Hightower of Oldtown. The White Bull who commanded your father’s Kingsguard was her great uncle. The Hightowers are an ancient family, very rich and very proud.”

“And loyal,” Dany said. “I remember, Viserys said the Hightowers were among those who stayed true to my father.”

“That’s so,” he admitted.

“Did your fathers make the match?”

“No,” he said. “Our marriage ... that makes a long tale and a dull one, Your Grace. I would not trouble you with it.”

“I have nowhere to go,” she said. “Please.”

“As my queen commands.” Ser Jorah frowned. “My home ... you must understand that to understand the rest. Bear Island is beautiful, but remote. Imagine old gnarled oaks and tall pines, flowering thorn bushes, grey stones bearded with moss, little creeks running icy down steep hillsides. The hall of the Mormonts is built of huge logs and surrounded by an earthen

palisade. Aside from a few crofters, my people live along the coasts and fish the seas. The island lies far to the north, and our winters are more terrible than you can imagine, *Khaleesi*.

“Still, the island suited me well enough, and I never lacked for women. I had my share of fishwives and crofters’ daughters, before and after I was wed. I married young, to a bride of my father’s choosing, a Glover of Deepwood Motte. Ten years we were wed, or near enough as makes no matter. She was a plain-faced woman, but not unkind. I suppose I came to love her after a fashion, though our relations were dutiful rather than passionate. Three times she miscarried while trying to give me an heir. The last time she never recovered. She died not long after.”

Dany put her hand on his and gave his fingers a squeeze. “I am sorry for you, truly.”

Ser Jorah nodded. “By then my father had taken the black, so I was Lord of Bear Island in my own right. I had no lack of marriage offers, but before I could reach a decision Lord Balon Greyjoy rose in rebellion against the Usurper, and Ned Stark called his banners to help his friend Robert. The final battle was on Pyke. When Robert’s stonethrowers opened a breach in King Balon’s wall, a priest from Myr was the first man through, but I was not far behind. For that I won my knighthood.

“To celebrate his victory, Robert ordained that a tourney should be held outside Lannisport. It was there I saw Lynesse, a maid half my age. She had come up from Oldtown with her father to see her brothers joust. I could not take my eyes off her.

In a fit of madness, I begged her favor to wear in the tourney, never dreaming she would grant my request, yet she did.

“I fight as well as any man, *Khaleesi*, but I have never been a tourney knight. Yet with Lynesse’s favor knotted round my arm, I was a different man. I won joust after joust. Lord Jason Mallister fell before me, and Bronze Yohn Royce. Ser Ryman Frey, his brother Ser Hosteen, Lord Whent, Strongboar, even Ser Boros Blount of the Kingsguard, I unhorsed them all. In the last match, I broke nine lances against Jaime Lannister to no result, and King Robert gave me the champion’s laurel. I crowned Lynesse queen of love and beauty, and that very night went to her father and asked for her hand. I was drunk, as much on glory as on wine. By rights I should have gotten a contemptuous refusal, but Lord Leyton accepted my offer. We were married there in Lannisport, and for a fortnight I was the happiest man in the wide world.”

“Only a fortnight?” asked Dany. *Even I was given more happiness than that, with Drogo who was my sun-and-stars.*

“A fortnight was how long it took us to sail from Lannisport back to Bear Island. My home was a great disappointment to Lynesse. It was too cold, too damp, too far away, my castle no more than a wooden longhall. We had no masques, no mummer shows, no balls nor fairs. Seasons might pass without a singer ever coming to play for us, and there’s not a goldsmith on the island. Even meals became a trial. My cook knew little beyond his roasts and stews, and Lynesse soon lost her taste for fish and venison.

“I lived for her smiles, so I sent all the way to Oldtown for a

new cook, and brought a harpist from Lannisport. Goldsmiths, jewelers, dressmakers, whatever she wanted I found for her, but it was never enough. Bear Island is rich in bears and trees, and poor in aught else. I built a fine ship for her and we sailed to Lannisport and Oldtown for festivals and fairs, and once even to Braavos, where I borrowed heavily from the moneylenders. It was as a tourney champion that I had won her hand and heart, so I entered other tourneys for her sake, but the magic was gone. I never distinguished myself again, and each defeat meant the loss of another charger and another suit of jousting armor, which must be ransomed or replaced. The cost could not be borne. Finally I insisted we return home, but there matters soon grew even worse than before. I could no longer pay the cook and the harpist, and Lynesse grew wild when I spoke of pawning her jewels.

“The rest ... I did things it shames me to speak of. For gold. So Lynesse might keep her jewels, her harpist, and her cook. In the end it cost me all. When I heard that Eddard Stark was coming to Bear Island, I was so lost to honor that rather than stay and face his judgement, I took her with me into exile. Nothing mattered but our love, I told myself. We fled to Lys, where I sold my ship for gold to keep us.”

His voice was thick with grief, and Dany was reluctant to press him any further, yet she had to know how it ended. “Did she die there?” she asked him gently.

“Only to me,” he said. “In half a year my gold was gone, and

I was obliged to take service as a sellsword. While I was fighting Braavosi on the Rhoyme, Lynesse moved into the manse of a merchant prince named Tregar Ormollen. They say she is his chief concubine now, and even his wife goes in fear of her.”

Dany was horrified. “Do you hate her?”

“Almost as much as I love her,” Ser Jorah answered. “Pray excuse me, my queen. I find I am very tired.”

She gave him leave to go, but as he was lifting the flap of her tent, she could not stop herself calling after him with one last question. “What did she look like, your Lady Lynesse?”

Ser Jorah smiled sadly. “Why, she looked a bit like you, Daenerys.” He bowed low. “Sleep well, my queen.”

Dany shivered, and pulled the lionskin tight about her. *She looked like me.* It explained much that she had not truly understood. *He wants me,* she realized. *He loves me as he loved her, not as a knight loves his queen but as a man loves a woman.* She tried to imagine herself in Ser Jorah’s arms, kissing him, pleasuring him, letting him enter her. It was no good. When she closed her eyes, his face kept changing into Drogo’s.

Khal Drogo had been her sun-and-stars, her first, and perhaps he must be her last. The *maegi* Mirri Maz Duur had sworn she should never bear a living child, and what man would want a barren wife? And what man could hope to rival Drogo, who had died with his hair uncut and rode now through the night lands, the stars his *khalasar*?

She had heard the longing in Ser Jorah’s voice when he spoke

of his Bear Island. *He can never have me, but one day I can give him back his home and honor. That much I can do for him.*

No ghosts troubled her sleep that night. She dreamt of Drogo and the first ride they had taken together on the night they were wed. In the dream it was not horses they rode, but dragons.

The next morn, she summoned her bloodriders. “Blood of my blood,” she told the three of them, “I have need of you. Each of you is to choose three horses, the hardiest and healthiest that remain to us. Load as much water and food as your mounts can bear, and ride forth for me. Aggo shall strike southwest, Rakharo due south. Jhogo, you are to follow *shierak qiya* on southeast.”

“What shall we seek, *Khaleesi*?” asked Jhogo.

“Whatever there is,” Dany answered. “Seek for other cities, living and dead. Seek for caravans and people. Seek for rivers and lakes and the great salt sea. Find how far this waste extends before us, and what lies on the other side. When I leave this place, I do not mean to strike out blind again. I will know where I am bound, and how best to get there.”

And so they went, the bells in their hair ringing softly, while Dany settled down with her small band of survivors in the place they named *Vaes Tolorro*, the city of bones. Day followed night followed day. Women harvested fruit from the gardens of the dead. Men groomed their mounts and mended saddles, stirrups, and shoes. Children wandered the twisty alleys and found old bronze coins and bits of purple glass and stone flagons with handles carved like snakes. One woman was stung by a red

scorpion, but hers was the only death. The horses began to put on some flesh. Dany tended Ser Jorah's wound herself, and it began to heal.

Rakharo was the first to return. Due south the red waste stretched on and on, he reported, until it ended on a bleak shore beside the poison water. Between here and there lay only swirling sand, wind-scoured rocks, and plants bristly with sharp thorns. He had passed the bones of a dragon, he swore, so immense that he had ridden his horse through its great black jaws. Other than that, he had seen nothing.

Dany gave him charge of a dozen of her strongest men, and set them to pulling up the plaza to get to the earth beneath. If devilgrass could grow between the paving stones, other grasses would grow when the stones were gone. They had wells enough, no lack of water. Given seed, they could make the plaza bloom.

Aggo was back next. The southwest was barren and burned, he swore. He had found the ruins of two more cities, smaller than Vaes Tolorro but otherwise the same. One was warded by a ring of skulls mounted on rusted iron spears, so he dared not enter, but he had explored the second for as long as he could. He showed Dany an iron bracelet he had found, set with a uncut fire opal the size of her thumb. There were scrolls as well, but they were dry and crumbling and Aggo had left them where they lay.

Dany thanked him and told him to see to the repair of the gates. If enemies had crossed the waste to destroy these cities in ancient days, they might well come again. "If so, we must be

ready,” she declared.

Jhogo was gone so long that Dany feared him lost, but finally when they had all but ceased to look for him, he came riding up from the southeast. One of the guards that Aggo had posted saw him first and gave a shout, and Dany rushed to the walls to see for herself. It was true. Jhogo came, yet not alone. Behind him rode three queerly garbed strangers atop ugly humped creatures that dwarfed any horse.

They drew rein before the city gates, and looked up to see Dany on the wall above him. “Blood of my blood,” Jhogo called, “I have been to the great city Qarth, and returned with three who would look on you with their own eyes.”

Dany stared down at the strangers. “Here I stand. Look, if that is your pleasure ... but first tell me your names.”

The pale man with the blue lips replied in guttural Dothraki, “I am Pyat Pree, the great warlock.”

The bald man with the jewels in his nose answered in the Valyrian of the Free Cities, “I am Xaro Xhoan Daxos of the Thirteen, a merchant prince of Qarth.”

The woman in the lacquered wooden mask said in the Common Tongue of the Seven Kingdoms, “I am Quaithe of the Shadow. We come seeking dragons.”

“Seek no more,” Daenerys Targaryen told them. “You have found them.”

JON

Whitetree, the village was named on Sam's old maps. Jon did not think it much of a village. Four tumbledown one-room houses of unmortared stone surrounded an empty sheepfold and a well. The houses were roofed with sod, the windows shuttered with ragged pieces of hide. And above them loomed the pale limbs and dark red leaves of a monstrous great weirwood.

It was the biggest tree Jon Snow had ever seen, the trunk near eight feet wide, the branches spreading so far that the entire village was shaded beneath their canopy. The size did not disturb him so much as the face ... the mouth especially, no simple carved slash, but a jagged hollow large enough to swallow a sheep.

Those are not sheep bones, though. Nor is that a sheep's skull in the ashes.

"An old tree." Mormont sat his horse, frowning. "*Old,*" his raven agreed from his shoulder. "*Old, old, old.*"

"And powerful." Jon could feel the power.

Thoren Smallwood dismounted beside the trunk, dark in his plate and mail. "Look at that face. Small wonder men feared them, when they first came to Westeros. I'd like to take an axe to the bloody thing myself."

Jon said, "My lord father believed no man could tell a lie in front of a heart tree. The old gods know when men are lying."

“My father believed the same,” said the Old Bear. “Let me have a look at that skull.”

Jon dismounted. Slung across his back in a black leather shoulder sheath was Longclaw, the hand-and-a-half bastard blade the Old Bear had given him for saving his life. *A bastard sword for a bastard*, the men joked. The hilt had been fashioned new for him, adorned with a wolf’s head pommel in pale stone, but the blade itself was Valyrian steel, old and light and deadly sharp.

He knelt and reached a gloved hand down into the maw. The inside of the hollow was red with dried sap and blackened by fire. Beneath the skull he saw another, smaller, the jaw broken off. It was half-buried in ash and bits of bone.

When he brought the skull to Mormont, the Old Bear lifted it in both hands and stared into the empty sockets. “The wildlings burn their dead. We’ve always known that. Now I wished I’d asked them why, when there were still a few around to ask.”

Jon Snow remembered the wight rising, its eyes shining blue in the pale dead face. He knew why, he was certain.

“Would that bones could talk,” the Old Bear grumbled. “This fellow could tell us much. How he died. Who burned him, and why. Where the wildlings have gone.” He sighed. “The children of the forest could speak to the dead, it’s said. But I can’t.” He tossed the skull back into the mouth of the tree, where it landed with a puff of fine ash. “Go through all these houses. Giant, get to the top of this tree, have a look. I’ll have the hounds brought

up too. Perchance this time the trail will be fresher.” His tone did not suggest that he held out much hope of the last.

Two men went through each house, to make certain nothing was missed. Jon was paired with dour Eddison Tollett, a squire grey of hair and thin as a pike, whom the other brothers called Dolorous Edd. “Bad enough when the dead come walking,” he said to Jon as they crossed the village, “now the Old Bear wants them talking as well? No good will come of *that*, I’ll warrant. And who’s to say the bones wouldn’t lie? Why should death make a man truthful, or even clever? The dead are likely dull fellows, full of tedious complaints—the ground’s too cold, my gravestone should be larger, why does *he* get more worms than I do ...”

Jon had to stoop to pass through the low door. Within he found a packed dirt floor. There were no furnishings, no sign that people had lived here but for some ashes beneath the smokehole in the roof. “What a dismal place to live,” he said.

“I was born in a house much like this,” declared Dolorous Edd. “Those were my enchanted years. Later I fell on hard times.” A nest of dry straw bedding filled one corner of the room. Edd looked at it with longing. “I’d give all the gold in Casterly Rock to sleep in a bed again.”

“You’d call that a bed?”

“If it’s softer than the ground and has a roof over it, I call it a bed.” Dolorous Edd sniffed the air. “I smell dung.”

The smell was very faint. “Old dung,” said Jon. The house felt as though it had been empty for some time. Kneeling, he

searched through the straw with his hands to see if anything had been concealed beneath, then made a round of the walls. It did not take very long. “There’s nothing here.”

Nothing was what he had expected; Whitetree was the fourth village they had passed, and it had been the same in all of them. The people were gone, vanished with their scant possessions and whatever animals they may have had. None of the villages showed any signs of having been attacked. They were simply ... empty. “What do you think happened to them all?” Jon asked.

“Something worse than we can imagine,” suggested Dolorous Edd. “Well, *I* might be able to imagine it, but I’d sooner not. Bad enough to know you’re going to come to some awful end without thinking about it aforetime.”

Two of the hounds were sniffing around the door as they re-emerged. Other dogs ranged through the village. Chett was cursing them loudly, his voice thick with the anger he never seemed to put aside. The light filtering through the red leaves of the weirwood made the boils on his face look even more inflamed than usual. When he saw Jon his eyes narrowed; there was no love lost between them.

The other houses had yielded no wisdom. “*Gone,*” cried Mormont’s raven, flapping up into the weirwood to perch above them. “*Gone, gone, gone.*”

“There were wildlings at Whitetree only a year ago.” Thoren Smallwood looked more a lord than Mormont did, clad in Ser Jaremy Rykker’s gleaming black mail and embossed breastplate.

His heavy cloak was richly trimmed with sable, and clasped with the crossed hammers of the Rykkers, wrought in silver. Ser Jaremy's cloak, once ... but the wight had claimed Ser Jaremy, and the Night's Watch wasted nothing.

"A year ago, Robert was king, and the realm was at peace," declared Jarman Buckwell, the square stolid man who commanded the scouts. "Much can change in a year's time."

"One thing hasn't changed," Ser Mallador Locke declared. "Fewer wildlings means fewer worries. I won't mourn, whatever's become of them. Raiders and murderers, the lot of them."

Jon heard a rustling from the red leaves above. Two branches parted, and he glimpsed a little man moving from limb to limb as easily as a squirrel. Bedwyck stood no more than five feet tall, but the grey streaks in his hair showed his age. The other rangers called him Giant. He sat in a fork of the tree over their heads and said, "There's water to the north. A lake, might be. A few flint hills rising to the west, not very high. Nothing else to see, my lords."

"We might camp here tonight," Smallwood suggested. The Old Bear glanced up, searching for a glimpse of sky through the pale limbs and red leaves of the weirwood. "No," he declared. "Giant, how much daylight remains to us?"

"Three hours, my lord."

"We'll press on north," Mormont decided. "If we reach this lake, we can make camp by the shore, perchance catch a few fish. Jon, fetch me paper, it's past time I wrote Maester Aemon."

Jon found parchment, quill, and ink in his saddlebag and brought them to the Lord Commander. *At Whitetree, Mormont scrawled. The fourth village. All empty. The wildlings are gone.* “Find Tarly and see that he gets this on its way,” he said as he handed Jon the message. When he whistled, his raven came flapping down to land on his horse’s head. “*Corn,*” the raven suggested, bobbing. The horse whickered.

Jon mounted his garron, wheeled him about, and trotted off. Beyond the shade of the great weirwood the men of the Night’s Watch stood beneath lesser trees, tending their horses, chewing strips of salt beef, pissing, scratching, and talking. When the command was given to move out again, the talk died, and they climbed back into their saddles. Jarman Buckwell’s scouts rode out first, with the vanguard under Thoren Smallwood heading the column proper. Then came the Old Bear with the main force, Ser Mallador Locke with the baggage train and pack horses, and finally Ser Ootyn Wythers and the rear guard. Two hundred men all told, with half again as many mounts.

By day they followed game trails and stream beds, the “ranger’s roads” that led them ever deeper into the wilderness of leaf and root. At night they camped beneath a starry sky and gazed up at the comet. The black brothers had left Castle Black in good spirits, joking and trading tales, but of late the brooding silence of the wood seemed to have sombered them all. Jests had grown fewer and tempers shorter. No one would admit to being afraid—they were men of the Night’s Watch, after all—

but Jon could feel the unease. Four empty villages, no wildlings anywhere, even the game seemingly fled. The haunted forest had never seemed more haunted, even veteran rangers agreed.

As he rode, Jon peeled off his glove to air his burned fingers. *Ugly things*. He remembered suddenly how he used to muss Arya's hair. His little stick of a sister. He wondered how she was faring. It made him a little sad to think that he might never muss her hair again. He began to flex his hand, opening and closing the fingers. If he let his sword hand stiffen and grow clumsy, it well might be the end of him, he knew. A man needed his sword beyond the Wall.

Jon found Samwell Tarly with the other stewards, watering his horses. He had three to tend: his own mount, and two pack horses, each bearing a large wire-and-wicker cage full of ravens. The birds flapped their wings at Jon's approach and screamed at him through the bars. A few shrieks sounded suspiciously like words. "Have you been teaching them to talk?" he asked Sam.

"A few words. Three of them can say *snow*."

"One bird croaking my name was bad enough," said Jon, "and snow's nothing a black brother wants to hear about." Snow often meant death in the north.

"Was there anything in Whitetree?"

"Bones, ashes, and empty houses." Jon handed Sam the roll of parchment. "The Old Bear wants word sent back to Aemon."

Sam took a bird from one of the cages, stroked its feathers, attached the message, and said, "Fly home now, brave one.

Home.” The raven *quorked* something unintelligible back at him, and Sam tossed it into the air. Flapping, it beat its way skyward through the trees. “I wish he could carry me with him.”

“Still?”

“Well,” said Sam, “yes, but ... I’m not as frightened as I was, truly. The first night, every time I heard someone getting up to make water, I thought it was wildlings creeping in to slit my throat. I was afraid that if I closed my eyes, I might never open them again, only ... well ... dawn came after all.” He managed a wan smile. “I may be craven, but I’m not *stupid*. I’m sore and my back aches from riding and from sleeping on the ground, but I’m hardly scared at all. Look.” He held out a hand for Jon to see how steady it was. “I’ve been working on my maps.”

The world is strange, Jon thought. Two hundred brave men had left the Wall, and the only one who was not growing more fearful was Sam, the self-confessed coward. “We’ll make a ranger of you yet,” he joked. “Next thing, you’ll want to be an outrider like Grenn. Shall I speak to the Old Bear?”

“Don’t you dare!” Sam pulled up the hood of his enormous black cloak and clambered awkwardly back onto his horse. It was a plough horse, big and slow and clumsy, but better able to bear his weight than the little garrons the rangers rode. “I had hoped we might stay the night in the village,” he said wistfully. “It would be nice to sleep under a roof again.”

“Too few roofs for all of us.” Jon mounted again, gave Sam a parting smile, and rode off. The column was well underway,

so he swung wide around the village to avoid the worst of the congestion. He had seen enough of Whitetree.

Ghost emerged from the undergrowth so suddenly that the garron shied and reared. The white wolf hunted well away from the line of march, but he was not having much better fortune than the foragers Smallwood sent out after game. The woods were as empty as the villages, Dywen had told him one night around the fire. “We’re a large party,” Jon had said. “The game’s probably been frightened away by all the noise we make on the march.”

“Frightened away by *something*, no doubt,” Dywen said.

Once the horse had settled, Ghost loped along easily beside him. Jon caught up to Mormont as he was wending his way around a hawthorn thicket. “Is the bird away?” the Old Bear asked.

“Yes, my lord. Sam is teaching them to talk.”

The Old Bear snorted. “He’ll regret that. Damned things make a lot of noise, but they never say a thing worth hearing.”

They rode in silence, until Jon said, “If my uncle found all these villages empty as well—”

“—he would have made it his purpose to learn why,” Lord Mormont finished for him, “and it may well be someone or something did not want that known. Well, we’ll be three hundred when Qhorin joins us. Whatever enemy waits out here will not find us so easy to deal with. We will find them, Jon, I promise you.”

Or they will find us, thought Jon.

ARYA

The river was a blue-green ribbon shining in the morning sun. Reeds grew thick in the shallows along the banks, and Arya saw a water snake skimming across the surface, ripples spreading out behind it as it went. Overhead a hawk flew in lazy circles.

It seemed a peaceful place ... until Koss spotted the dead man. "There, in the reeds." He pointed, and Arya saw it. The body of a soldier, shapeless and swollen. His sodden green cloak had hung up on a rotted log, and a school of tiny silver fishes were nibbling at his face. "I told you there was bodies," Lommy announced. "I could taste them in that water."

When Yoren saw the corpse, he spat. "Dobber, see if he's got anything worth the taking. Mail, knife, a bit o' coin, what have you." He spurred his gelding and rode out into the river, but the horse struggled in the soft mud and beyond the reeds the water deepened. Yoren rode back angry, his horse covered in brown slime up to the knees. "We won't be crossing here. Koss, you'll come with me upriver, look for a ford. Woth, Gerren, you go downstream. The rest o' you wait here. Put a guard out."

Dobber found a leather purse in the dead man's belt. Inside were four coppers and a little hank of blonde hair tied up with a red ribbon. Lommy and Tarber stripped naked and went wading, and Lommy scooped up handfuls of slimy mud and threw them at Hot Pie, shouting, "Mud Pie! Mud Pie!" In the back of their

wagon, Rorge cursed and threatened and told them to unchain him while Yoren was gone, but no one paid him any mind. Kurz caught a fish with his bare hands. Arya saw how he did it, standing over a shallow pool, calm as still water, his hand darting out quick as a snake when the fish swam near. It didn't look as hard as catching cats. Fish didn't have claws.

It was midday when the others returned. Woth reported a wooden bridge half a mile downstream, but someone had burnt it up. Yoren peeled a sourleaf off the bale. "Might be we could swim the horses over, maybe the donkeys, but there's no way we'll get those wagons across. And there's smoke to the north and west, more fires, could be this side o' the river's the place we want to be." He picked up a long stick and drew a circle in the mud, a line trailing down from it. "That's Gods Eye, with the river flowing south. We're here." He poked a hole beside the line of the river, under the circle. "We can't go round west of the lake, like I thought. East takes us back to the kingsroad." He moved the stick up to where the line and circle met. "Near, as I recall, there's a town here. The holdfast's stone, and there's a lordling got his seat there too, just a towerhouse, but he'll have a guard, might be a knight or two. We follow the river north, should be there before dark. They'll have boats, so I mean to sell all we got and hire us one." He drew the stick up through the circle of the lake, from bottom to top. "Gods be good, we'll find a wind and sail across the Gods Eye to Harrentown." He thrust the point down at the top of the circle. "We can buy new mounts there,

or else take shelter at Harrenhal. That's Lady Whent's seat, and she's always been a friend o' the Watch."

Hot Pie's eyes got wide. "There's ghosts in Harrenhal ..."

Yoren spat. "There's for your ghosts." He tossed the stick down in the mud. "Mount up."

Arya was remembering the stories Old Nan used to tell of Harrenhal. Evil King Harren had walled himself up inside, so Aegon unleashed his dragons and turned the castle into a pyre. Nan said that fiery spirits still haunted the blackened towers. Sometimes men went to sleep safe in their beds and were found dead in the morning, all burned up. Arya didn't really believe that, and anyhow it had all happened a long time ago. Hot Pie was being silly; it wouldn't be ghosts at Harrenhal, it would be *knights*. Arya could reveal herself to Lady Whent, and the knights would escort her home and keep her safe. That was what knights did; they kept you safe, especially women. Maybe Lady Whent would even help the crying girl.

The river track was no kingsroad, yet it was not half bad for what it was, and for once the wagons rolled along smartly. They saw the first house an hour shy of evenfall, a snug little thatch-roofed cottage surrounded by fields of wheat. Yoren rode out ahead, hallooing, but got no answer. "Dead, might be. Or hiding. Dobber, Rey, with me." The three men went into the cottage. "Pots is gone, no sign o' any coin laid by," Yoren muttered when they returned. "No animals. Run, most like. Might be we met 'em on the kingsroad." At least the house and field had not been

burnt, and there were no corpses about. Tarber found a garden out back, and they pulled some onions and radishes and filled a sack with cabbages before they went on their way.

A little further up the road, they glimpsed a forester's cabin surrounded by old trees and neatly stacked logs ready for the splitting, and later a ramshackle stilt-house leaning over the river on poles ten feet tall, both deserted. They passed more fields, wheat and corn and barley ripening in the sun, but here there were no men sitting in trees, nor walking the rows with scythes. Finally the town came into view; a cluster of white houses spread out around the walls of the holdfast, a big sept with a shingled wooden roof, the lord's towerhouse sitting on a small rise to the west ... and no sign of any people, anywhere.

Yoren sat on his horse, frowning through his tangle of beard. "Don't like it," he said, "but there it is. We'll go have us a look. A *careful* look. See maybe there's some folk hiding. Might be they left a boat behind, or some weapons we can use."

The black brother left ten to guard the wagons and the whimpery little girl, and split the rest of them into four groups of five to search the town. "Keep your eyes and ears open," he warned them, before he rode off to the towerhouse to see if there was any sign of the lordling or his guards.

Arya found herself with Gendry, Hot Pie, and Lommy. Squat, kettle-bellied Woth had pulled an oar on a galley once, which made him the next best thing they had to a sailor, so Yoren told him to take them down to the lakefront and see if

they could find a boat. As they rode between the silent white houses, gooseprickles crawled up Arya's arms. This empty town frightened her almost as much as the burned holdfast where they'd found the crying girl and the one-armed woman. Why would people run off and leave their homes and everything? What could scare them so much?

The sun was low to the west, and the houses cast long dark shadows. A sudden clap of sound made Arya reach for Needle, but it was only a shutter banging in the wind. After the open river shore, the closeness of the town unnerved her.

When she glimpsed the lake ahead between houses and trees, Arya put her knees into her horse, galloping past Woth and Gendry. She burst out onto the grassy sward beside the pebbled shore. The setting sun made the tranquil surface of the water shimmer like a sheet of beaten copper. It was the biggest lake she had ever seen, with no hint of a far shore. She saw a rambling inn to her left, built out over the water on heavy wooden pilings. To her right, a long pier jutted into the lake, and there were other docks further east, wooden fingers reaching out from the town. But the only boat in view was an upside-down rowboat abandoned on the rocks beneath the inn, its bottom thoroughly rotted out. "They're gone," Arya said, dejected. What would they do now?

"There's an inn," Lommy said, when the others rode up. "Do you think they left any food? Or ale?"

"Let's go see," Hot Pie suggested.

“Never you mind about no inn,” snapped Woth. “Yoren said we’re to find a boat.”

“They took the boats.” Somehow Arya knew it was true; they could search the whole town, and they’d find no more than the upside-down rowboat. Despondent, she climbed off her horse and knelt by the lake. The water lapped softly around her legs. A few lantern bugs were coming out, their little lights blinking on and off. The green water was warm as tears, but there was no salt in it. It tasted of summer and mud and growing things. Arya plunged her face down into it to wash off the dust and dirt and sweat of the day. When she leaned back, the trickles ran down the back of her neck and under her collar. They felt good. She wished she could take off her clothes and swim, gliding through the warm water like a skinny pink otter. Maybe she could swim all the way to Winterfell.

Woth was shouting at her to help search, so she did, peering into boathouses and sheds while her horse grazed along the shore. They found some sails, some nails, buckets of tar gone hard, and a mother cat with a litter of newborn kittens. But no boats.

The town was as dark as any forest when Yoren and the others reappeared. “Tower’s empty,” he said. “Lord’s gone off to fight maybe, or to get his smallfolk to safety, no telling. Not a horse or pig left in town, but we’ll eat. Saw a goose running loose, and some chickens, and there’s good fish in the Gods Eye.”

“The boats are gone,” Arya reported.

“We could patch the bottom of that rowboat,” said Koss.

“Might do for four o’ us,” Yoren said.

“There’s nails,” Lommy pointed out. “And there’s trees all around. We could build us all boats.”

Yoren spat. “You know anything ’bout boat-building, dyer’s boy?” Lommy looked blank.

“A raft,” suggested Gendry. “Anyone can build a raft, and long poles for pushing.”

Yoren looked thoughtful. “Lake’s too deep to pole across, but if we stayed to the shallows near shore ... it’d mean leaving the wagons. Might be that’s best. I’ll sleep on it.”

“Can we stay at the inn?” Lommy wanted to ask.

“We’ll stay in the holdfast, with the gates barred,” the old man said. “I like the feel o’ stone walls about me when I sleep.”

Arya could not keep quiet. “We shouldn’t stay here,” she blurted. “The people didn’t. They all ran off, even their lord.”

“Arry’s scared,” Lommy announced, braying laughter.

“I’m *not*,” she snapped back, “but *they* were.”

“Smart boy,” said Yoren. “Thing is, the folks who lived here were at war, like it or no. We’re not. Night’s Watch takes no part, so no man’s our enemy.”

And no man’s our friend, she thought, but this time she held her tongue. Lommy and the rest were looking at her, and she did not want to seem craven in front of them.

The holdfast gates were studded with iron nails. Within, they found a pair of iron bars the size of saplings, with post holes in the ground and metal brackets on the gate. When they slotted the

bars through the brackets, they made a huge X brace. It was no Red Keep, Yoren announced when they'd explored the holdfast top to bottom, but it was better than most, and should do for a night well enough. The walls were rough unmortared stone ten feet high, with a wooden catwalk inside the battlements. There was a postern gate to the north, and Gerren discovered a trap under the straw in the old wooden barn, leading to a narrow, winding tunnel. He followed it a long way under the earth and came out by the lake. Yoren had them roll a wagon on top of the trap, to make certain no one came in that way. He divided them into three watches, and sent Tarber, Kurz, and Cutjack off to the abandoned towerhouse to keep an eye out from on high. Kurz had a hunting horn to sound if danger threatened.

They drove their wagons and animals inside and barred the gates behind them. The barn was a ramshackle thing, large enough to hold half the animals in the town. The haven, where the townfolk would shelter in times of trouble, was even larger, low and long and built of stone, with a thatched roof. Koss went out the postern gate and brought the goose back, and two chickens as well, and Yoren allowed a cookfire. There was a big kitchen inside the holdfast, though all the pots and kettles had been taken. Gendry, Dobber, and Arya drew cook duty. Dobber told Arya to pluck the fowl while Gendry split wood. "Why can't I split the wood?" she asked, but no one listened. Sullenly, she set to plucking a chicken while Yoren sat on the end of the bench sharpening the edge of his dirk with a whetstone.

When the food was ready, Arya ate a chicken leg and a bit of onion. No one talked much, not even Lommy. Gendry went off by himself afterward, polishing his helm with a look on his face like he wasn't even there. The crying girl whimpered and wept, but when Hot Pie offered her a bit of goose she gobbled it down and looked for more.

Arya drew second watch, so she found a straw pallet in the haven. Sleep did not come easy, so she borrowed Yoren's stone and set to honing Needle. Syrio Forel had said that a dull blade was like a lame horse. Hot Pie squatted on the pallet beside her, watching her work. "Where'd you get a good sword like that?" he asked. When he saw the look she gave him, he raised his hands defensively. "I never said you stole it, I just wanted to know where you got it, is all."

"My brother gave it to me," she muttered.

"I never knew you had no brother."

Arya paused to scratch under her shirt. There were fleas in the straw, though she couldn't see why a few more would bother her. "I have lots of brothers."

"You do? Are they bigger than you, or littler?"

I shouldn't be talking like this. Yoren said I should keep my mouth shut. "Bigger," she lied. "They have swords too, big longswords, and they showed me how to kill people who bother me."

"I was talking, not bothering." Hot Pie went off and let her alone and Arya curled up on her pallet. She could hear the crying

girl from the far side of the haven. *I wish she'd just be quiet. Why does she have to cry all the time?*

She must have slept, though she never remembered closing her eyes. She dreamed a wolf was howling, and the sound was so terrible that it woke her at once. Arya sat up on her pallet with her heart thumping. "Hot Pie, wake up." She scrambled to her feet. "Woth, Gendry, didn't you hear?" She pulled on a boot.

All around her, men and boys stirred and crawled from their pallets. "What's wrong?" Hot Pie asked. "Hear what?" Gendry wanted to know. "Arry had a bad dream," someone else said.

"No, I heard it," she insisted. "A wolf."

"Arry has wolves in his head," sneered Lommy.

"Let them howl," Gerren said. "They're out there, we're in here."

Woth agreed. "Never saw no wolf could storm a holdfast."

Hot Pie was saying, "I never heard nothing."

"It was a *wolf*," she shouted at them, as she yanked on her second boot. "Something's wrong, someone's coming, get *up*!"

Before they could hoot her down again, the sound came shuddering through the night—only it was no wolf this time, it was Kurz blowing his hunting horn, sounding danger. In a heartbeat, all of them were pulling on clothes and snatching for whatever weapons they owned. Arya ran for the gate as the horn sounded again. As she dashed past the barn, Biter threw himself furiously against his chains, and Jaqen H'ghar called out from the back of their wagon. "Boy! Sweet boy! Is it war, red war? Boy,

free us. A man can fight. *Boy!*” She ignored him and plunged on. By then she could hear horses and shouts beyond the wall.

She scrambled up onto the catwalk. The parapets were a bit too high and Arya a bit too short; she had to wedge her toes into the holes between the stones to see over. For a moment she thought the town was full of lantern bugs. Then she realized they were men with torches, galloping between the houses. She saw a roof go up, flames licking at the belly of the night with hot orange tongues as the thatch caught. Another followed, and then another, and soon there were fires blazing everywhere.

Gendry climbed up beside her, wearing his helm. “How many?”

Arya tried to count, but they were riding too fast, torches spinning through the air as they flung them. “A hundred,” she said. “Two hundred, I don’t know.” Over the roar of the flames, she could hear shouts. “They’ll come for us soon.”

“There,” Gendry said, pointing.

A column of riders moved between the burning buildings toward the holdfast. Firelight glittered off metal helms and spattered their mail and plate with orange and yellow highlights. One carried a banner on a tall lance. She thought it was red, but it was hard to tell in the night, with the fires roaring all around. Everything seemed red or black or orange.

The fire leapt from one house to another. Arya saw a tree consumed, the flames creeping across its branches until it stood against the night in robes of living orange. Everyone was awake

now, manning the catwalks or struggling with the frightened animals below. She could hear Yoren shouting commands. Something bumped against her leg, and she glanced down to discover the crying girl clutching her. “Get away!” She wrenched her leg free. “What are you doing up here? Run and hide someplace, you stupid.” She shoved the girl away.

The riders reined up before the gates. “*You in the holdfast!*” shouted a knight in a tall helm with a spiked crest. “*Open, in the name of the king!*”

“Aye, and which king is that?” old Reysen yelled back down, before Woth cuffed him into silence.

Yoren climbed the battlement beside the gate, his faded black cloak tied to a wooden staff. “*You men hold down here!*” he shouted. “*The townfolk’s gone.*”

“And who are you, old man? One of Lord Beric’s cravens?” called the knight in the spiked helm. “If that fat fool Thoros is in there, ask him how he likes *these* fires.”

“Got no such man here,” Yoren shouted back. “Only some lads for the Watch. Got no part o’ your war.” He hoisted up the staff, so they could all see the color of his cloak. “Have a look. That’s black, for the Night’s Watch.”

“Or black for House Dondarrion,” called the man who bore the enemy banner. Its colors could be seen more clearly now in the light of the burning town; a golden lion on red. “Lord Beric’s sigil is a purple lightning bolt on a black field.”

Suddenly Arya remembered the morning she had thrown the

orange in Sansa's face and gotten juice all over her stupid ivory silk gown. There had been some southron lordling at the tourney, her sister's stupid friend Jeyne was in love with him. He had a lightning bolt on his shield and her father had sent him out to behead the Hound's brother. It seemed a thousand years ago now, something that had happened to a different person in a different life ... to Arya Stark the Hand's daughter, not Arry the orphan boy. How would Arry know lords and such?

"Are you blind, man?" Yoren waved his staff back and forth, making the cloak ripple. "You see a bloody lightning bolt?"

"By night all banners look black," the knight in the spiked helm observed. "Open, or we'll know you for outlaws in league with the king's enemies."

Yoren spat. "Who's got your command?"

"I do." The reflections of burning houses glimmered dully on the armor of his warhorse as the others parted to let him pass. He was a stout man with a manticore on his shield, and ornate scrollwork crawling across his steel breastplate. Through the open visor of his helm, a face pale and piggy peered up. "Ser Amory Lorch, bannerman to Lord Tywin Lannister of Casterly Rock, the Hand of the King. The *true* king, Joffrey." He had a high, thin voice. "In his name, I command you to open these gates."

All around them, the town burned. The night air was full of smoke, and the drifting red embers outnumbered the stars. Yoren scowled. "Don't see the need. Do what you want to the town, it's

nought to me, but leave us be. We're no foes to you."

Look with your eyes, Arya wanted to shout at the men below. "Can't they *see* we're no lords or knights?" she whispered.

"I don't think they care, Arry," Gendry whispered back.

And she looked at Ser Amory's face, the way Syrio had taught her to look, and she saw that he was right.

"If you are no traitors, open your gates," Ser Amory called. "We'll make certain you're telling it true and be on our way."

Yoren was chewing sourleaf. "Told you, no one here but us. You got my word on that."

The knight in the spiked helm laughed. "The crow gives us his *word*."

"You lost, old man?" mocked one of the spearmen. "The Wall's a long way north o' here."

"I command you once more, in King Joffrey's name, to prove the loyalty you profess and open these gates," said Ser Amory.

For a long moment Yoren considered, chewing. Then he spat. "Don't think I will."

"So be it. You defy the king's command, and so proclaim yourselves rebels, black cloaks or no."

"Got me young boys in here," Yoren shouted down.

"Young boys and old men die the same." Ser Amory raised a languid fist, and a spear came hurtling from the fire-bright shadows behind. Yoren must have been the target, but it was Woth beside him who was hit. The spearhead went in his throat and exploded out the back of his neck dark and wet. Woth

grabbed at the shaft, and fell boneless from the walk.

“Storm the walls and kill them all,” Ser Amory said in a bored voice. More spears flew. Arya yanked down Hot Pie by the back of his tunic. From outside came the rattle of armor, the scrape of sword on scabbard, the banging of spears on shields, mingled with curses and the hoofbeats of racing horses. A torch sailed spinning above their heads, trailing fingers of fire as it thumped down in the dirt of the yard.

“*Blades!*” Yoren shouted. “Spread apart, defend the wall wherever they hit. Koss, Urreg, hold the postern. Lommy, pull that spear out of Woth and get up where he was.”

Hot Pie dropped his shortsword when he tried to unsheath it. Arya shoved the blade back into his hand. “I don’t know how to swordfight,” he said, white-eyed.

“It’s easy,” Arya said, but the lie died in her throat as a *hand* grasped the top of the parapet. She saw it by the light of the burning town, so clear that it was as if time had stopped. The fingers were blunt, callused, wiry black hairs grew between the knuckles, there was dirt under the nail of the thumb. *Fear cuts deeper than swords*, she remembered, as the top of a pothelm loomed up behind the hand.

She slashed down hard, and Needle’s castle-forged steel bit into the grasping fingers between the knuckles. “*Winterfell!*” she screamed. Blood spurted, fingers flew, and the helmed face vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

“Behind!” Hot Pie yelled. Arya whirled. The second man was

bearded and helmetless, his dirk between his teeth to leave both hands free for climbing. As he swung his leg over the parapet, she drove her point at his eyes. Needle never touched him; he reeled backwards and fell. *I hope he falls on his face and cuts off his tongue.* “Watch them, not me!” she screamed at Hot Pie. The next time someone tried to climb their part of the wall, the boy hacked at his hands with his shortsword until the man dropped away.

Ser Amory had no ladders, but the holdfast walls were rough-cut and unmortared, easy to climb, and there seemed to be no end to the foes. For each one Arya cut or stabbed or shoved back, another was coming over the wall. The knight in the spiked helm reached the rampart, but Yoren tangled his black banner around his spike, and forced the point of his dirk through his armor while the man was fighting the cloth. Every time Arya looked up, more torches were flying, trailing long tongues of flame that lingered behind her eyes. She saw a gold lion on a red banner and thought of Joffrey, wishing he was here so she could drive Needle through his sneery face.

When four men assaulted the gate with axes, Koss shot them down with arrows, one by one. Dobber wrestled a man off the walk, and Lommy smashed his head with a rock before he could rise, and hooted until he saw the knife in Dobber’s belly and realized he wouldn’t be getting up either. Arya jumped over a dead boy no older than Jon, lying with his arm cut off. She didn’t think she’d done it, but she wasn’t sure. She heard Qyle beg for

mercy before a knight with a wasp on his shield smashed his face in with a spiked mace. Everything smelled of blood and smoke and iron and piss, but after a time it seemed like that was only one smell. She never saw how the skinny man got over the wall, but when he did she fell on him with Gendry and Hot Pie. Gendry's sword shattered on the man's helm, tearing it off his head. Underneath he was bald and scared looking, with missing teeth and a speckly-grey beard, but even as she was feeling sorry for him she was killing him, shouting, "*Winterfell! Winterfell!*" while Hot Pie screamed "*Hot Pie!*" beside her as he hacked at the man's scrawny neck.

When the skinny man was dead, Gendry stole his sword and leapt down into the yard to fight some more. Arya looked past him, and saw steel shadows running through the holdfast, firelight shining off mail and blades, and she knew that they'd gotten over the wall somewhere, or broken through at the postern. She jumped down beside Gendry, landing the way Syrio had taught her. The night rang to the clash of steel and the cries of the wounded and dying. For a moment Arya stood uncertain, not knowing which way to go. Death was all around her.

And then Yoren was there, shaking her, screaming in her face. "*Boy!*" he yelled, the way he always yelled it. "Get *out*, it's done, we've lost. Herd up all you can, you and him and the others, the boys, you get them out. *Now!*"

"How?" Arya said.

"That trap," he screamed. "Under the barn." Quick as that he

was gone, off to fight, sword in hand.

Arya grabbed Gendry by the arm. “He said *go*,” she shouted, “the barn, the way out.”

Through the slits of his helm, the Bull’s eyes shone with reflected fire. He nodded. They called Hot Pie down from the wall and found Lommy Greenhands where he lay bleeding from a spear thrust through his calf. They found Gerren too, but he was hurt too bad to move. As they were running toward the barn, Arya spied the crying girl sitting in the middle of the chaos, surrounded by smoke and slaughter. She grabbed her by the hand and pulled her to her feet as the others raced ahead. The girl wouldn’t walk, even when slapped. Arya dragged her with her right hand while she held Needle in the left. Ahead, the night was a sullen red. *The barn’s on fire*, she thought. Flames were licking up its sides from where a torch had fallen on straw, and she could hear the screaming of the animals trapped within. Hot Pie stepped out of the barn. “Arry, *come on!* Lommy’s *gone*, leave her if she won’t come!”

Stubbornly, Arya dragged all the harder, pulling the crying girl along. Hot Pie scuttled back inside, abandoning them ... but Gendry came back, the fire shining so bright on his polished helm that the horns seemed to glow orange. He ran to them, and hoisted the crying girl up over his shoulder. “*Run!*”

Rushing through the barn doors was like running into a furnace. The air was swirling with smoke, the back wall a sheet of fire ground to roof. Their horses and donkeys were kicking and

rearing and screaming. *The poor animals*, Arya thought. Then she saw the wagon, and the three men manacled to its bed. Biter was flinging himself against the chains, blood running down his arms from where the irons clasped his wrists. Rorge screamed curses, kicking at the wood. “Boy!” called Jaqen H’ghar. “Sweet boy!”

The open trap was only a few feet ahead, but the fire was spreading fast, consuming the old wood and dry straw faster than she would have believed. Arya remembered the Hound’s horrible burned face. “Tunnel’s narrow,” Gendry shouted. “How do we get her through?”

“Pull her,” Arya said. “Push her.”

“Good boys, kind boys,” called Jaqen H’ghar, coughing.

“*Get these fucking chains off!*” Rorge screamed.

Gendry ignored them. “You go first, then her, then me. Hurry, it’s a long way.”

“When you split the firewood,” Arya remembered, “where did you leave the axe?”

“Out by the haven.” He spared a glance for the chained men. “I’d save the donkeys first. There’s no time.”

“You take her!” she yelled. “You get her out! You do it!” The fire beat at her back with hot red wings as she fled the burning barn. It felt blessedly cool outside, but men were dying all around her. She saw Koss throw down his blade to yield, and she saw them kill him where he stood. Smoke was everywhere. There was no sign of Yoren, but the axe was where Gendry had left it, by the

woodpile outside the haven. As she wrenched it free, a mailed hand grabbed her arm. Spinning, Arya drove the head of the axe hard between her assailant's legs. She never saw his face, only the dark blood seeping between the links of his hauberk. Going back into that barn was the hardest thing she ever did. Smoke was pouring out the open door like a writhing black snake, and she could hear the screams of the poor animals inside, donkeys and horses and men. She chewed her lip, and darted through the doors, crouched low where the smoke wasn't quite so thick.

A donkey was caught in a ring of fire, shrieking in terror and pain. She could smell the stench of burning hair. The roof was gone up too, and things were falling down, pieces of flaming wood and bits of straw and hay. Arya put a hand over her mouth and nose. She couldn't see the wagon for the smoke, but she could still hear Biter screaming. She crawled toward the sound.

And then a wheel was looming over her. The wagon *jumped* and moved a half-foot when Biter threw himself against his chains again. Jaqen saw her, but it was too hard to breathe, let alone talk. She threw the axe into the wagon. Rorge caught it and lifted it over his head, rivers of sooty sweat pouring down his noseless face. Arya was running, coughing. She heard the steel crash through the old wood, and again, again. An instant later came a *crack* as loud as thunder, and the bottom of the wagon came ripping loose in an explosion of splinters.

Arya rolled headfirst into the tunnel and dropped five feet. She got dirt in her mouth but she didn't care, the taste was fine.

The taste was mud and water and worms and life. Under the earth the air was cool and dark. Above was nothing but blood and roaring red and choking smoke and the screams of dying horses. She moved her belt around so Needle would not be in her way, and began to crawl. A dozen feet down the tunnel she heard the sound, like the roar of some monstrous beast, and a cloud of hot smoke and black dust came billowing up behind her, smelling of hell. Arya held her breath and kissed the mud on the floor of the tunnel and cried. For who, she could not say.

TYRION

The queen was not disposed to wait on Varys. “Treason is vile enough,” she declared furiously, “but this is barefaced naked villainy, and I do not need that mincing eunuch to tell me what must be done with villains.”

Tyrion took the letters from his sister’s hand and compared them side by side. There were two copies, the words exactly alike, though they had been written by different hands.

“Maester Frenken received the first missive at Castle Stokeworth,” Grand Maester Pycelle explained. “The second copy came through Lord Gyles.”

Littlefinger fingered his beard. “If Stannis bothered with *them*, it’s past certain every other lord in the Seven Kingdoms saw a copy as well.”

“I want these letters burnt, every one,” Cersei declared. “No hint of this must reach my son’s ears, or my father’s.”

“I imagine father’s heard rather more than a hint by now,” Tyrion said drily. “Doubtless Stannis sent a bird to Casterly Rock, and another to Harrenhal. As for burning the letters, to what point? The song is sung, the wine is spilled, the wench is pregnant. And this is not as dire it seems, in truth.”

Cersei turned on him in green-eyed fury. “Are you utterly witless? Did you read what he says? *The boy Joffrey*, he calls him. And he dares to accuse *me* of incest, adultery, and treason!”

Only because you're guilty. It was astonishing to see how angry Cersei could wax over accusations she knew perfectly well to be true. *If we lose the war, she ought to take up mummery, she has a gift for it.* Tyrion waited until she was done and said, “Stannis must have some pretext to justify his rebellion. What did you expect him to write? ‘Joffrey is my brother’s trueborn son and heir, but I mean to take his throne for all that?’”

“I will not suffer to be called a whore!”

Why, sister, he never claims Jaime paid you. Tyrion made a show of glancing over the writing again. There had been some niggling phrase ... “Done in the Light of the Lord,” he read. “A queer choice of words, that.”

Pycelle cleared his throat. “These words often appear in letters and documents from the Free Cities. They mean no more than, let us say, *written in the sight of god*. The god of the red priests. It is their usage, I do believe.”

“Varys told us some years past that Lady Selyse had taken up with some red priest,” Littlefinger reminded them.

Tyrion tapped the paper. “And now it would seem her lord husband has done the same. We can use that against him. Urge the High Septon to reveal how Stannis has turned against the gods as well as his rightful king ...”

“Yes, yes,” the queen said impatiently, “but first we must stop this filth from spreading further. The council must issue an edict. Any man heard speaking of incest or calling Joff a bastard should lose his tongue for it.”

“A prudent measure,” said Grand Maester Pycelle, his chain of office clinking as he nodded.

“A folly,” sighed Tyrion. “When you tear out a man’s tongue, you are not proving him a liar, you’re only telling the world that you fear what he might say.”

“So what would *you* have us do?” his sister demanded.

“Very little. Let them whisper, they’ll grow bored with the tale soon enough. Any man with a thimble of sense will see it for a clumsy attempt to justify usurping the crown. Does Stannis offer proof? How could he, when it never happened?” Tyrion gave his sister his sweetest smile.

“That’s so,” she had to say. “Still ...”

“Your Grace, your brother has the right of this.” Petyr Baelish steepled his fingers. “If we attempt to silence this talk, we only lend it credence. Better to treat it with contempt, like the pathetic lie it is. And meantime, fight fire with fire.”

Cersei gave him a measuring look. “What sort of fire?”

“A tale of somewhat the same nature, perhaps. But more easily believed. Lord Stannis has spent most of his marriage apart from his wife. Not that I fault him, I’d do the same were I married to Lady Selyse. Nonetheless, if we put it about that her daughter is baseborn and Stannis a cuckold, well ... the smallfolk are always eager to believe the worst of their lords, particularly those as stern, sour, and prickly-proud as Stannis Baratheon.”

“He has never been much loved, that’s true.” Cersei considered a moment. “So we pay him back in his own coin. Yes,

I like this. Who can we name as Lady Selyse's lover? She has two brothers, I believe. And one of her uncles has been with her on Dragonstone all this time ...”

“Ser Axell Florent is her castellan.” Loath as Tyrion was to admit it, Littlefinger's scheme had promise. Stannis had never been enamored of his wife, but he was bristly as a hedgehog where his honor was concerned and mistrustful by nature. If they could sow discord between him and his followers, it could only help their cause. “The child has the Florent ears, I'm told.”

Littlefinger gestured languidly. “A trade envoy from Lys once observed to me that Lord Stannis must love his daughter very well, since he'd erected hundreds of statues of her all along the walls of Dragonstone. ‘My lord,’ I had to tell him, ‘those are gargoyles.’” He chuckled. “Ser Axell might serve for Shireen's father, but in my experience, the more bizarre and shocking a tale the more apt it is to be repeated. Stannis keeps an especially grotesque fool, a lackwit with a tattooed face.”

Grand Maester Pycelle gaped at him, aghast. “Surely you do not mean to suggest that Lady Selyse would ask a *fool* into her bed?”

“You'd have to be a fool to want to bed Selyse Florent,” said Littlefinger. “Doubtless Patchface reminded her of Stannis. And the best lies contain within them nuggets of truth, enough to give a listener pause. As it happens, this fool is utterly devoted to the girl and follows her everywhere. They even look somewhat alike. Shireen has a mottled, half-frozen face as well.”

Pycelle was lost. “But that is from the greyscale that near killed her as a babe, poor thing.”

“I like my tale better,” said Littlefinger, “and so will the smallfolk. Most of them believe that if a woman eats rabbit while pregnant, her child will be born with long floppy ears.”

Cersei smiled the sort of smile she customarily reserved for Jaime. “Lord Petyr, you are a wicked creature.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“And a most accomplished liar,” Tyrion added, less warmly. *This one is more dangerous than I knew*, he reflected.

Littlefinger’s grey-green eyes met the dwarf’s mismatched stare with no hint of unease. “We all have our gifts, my lord.”

The queen was too caught up in her revenge to take note of the exchange. “Cuckolded by a halfwit fool! Stannis will be laughed at in every winesink this side of the narrow sea.”

“The story should not come from us,” Tyrion said, “or it will be seen for a self-serving lie.” *Which it is, to be sure.*

Once more Littlefinger supplied the answer. “Whores love to gossip, and as it happens I own a brothel or three. And no doubt Varys can plant seeds in the alehouses and pot shops.”

“Varys,” Cersei said, frowning. “Where *is* Varys?”

“I have been wondering about that myself, Your Grace.”

“The Spider spins his secret webs day and night,” Grand Maester Pycelle said ominously. “I mistrust that one, my lords.”

“And he speaks so kindly of you.” Tyrion pushed himself off his chair. As it happened, he knew what the eunuch was about,

but it was nothing the other councillors needed to hear. “Pray excuse me, my lords. Other business calls.”

Cersei was instantly suspicious. “King’s business?”

“Nothing you need trouble yourself about.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“Would you spoil my surprise?” Tyrion said. “I’m having a gift made for Joffrey. A little chain.”

“What does he need with another chain? He has gold chains and silver, more than he can wear. If you think for a moment you can buy Joff’s love with gifts—”

“Why, surely I *have* the king’s love, as he has mine. And *this* chain I believe he may one day treasure above all others.” The little man bowed and waddled to the door.

Bronn was waiting outside the council chambers to escort him back to the Tower of the Hand. “The smiths are in your audience chamber, waiting your pleasure,” he said as they crossed the ward.

“Waiting my pleasure. I like the ring of that, Bronn. You almost sound a proper courtier. Next you’ll be kneeling.”

“Fuck you, dwarf.”

“That’s Shae’s task.” Tyrion heard Lady Tanda calling to him merrily from the top of the serpentine steps. Pretending not to notice her, he waddled a bit faster. “See that my litter is readied, I’ll be leaving the castle as soon as I’m done here.” Two of the Moon Brothers had the door guard. Tyrion greeted them pleasantly, and grimaced before starting up the stairs. The climb

to his bedchamber made his legs ache.

Within he found a boy of twelve laying out clothing on the bed; his squire, such that he was. Podrick Payne was so shy he was furtive. Tyrion had never quite gotten over the suspicion that his father had inflicted the boy on him as a joke.

“Your garb, my lord,” the boy mumbled when Tyrion entered, staring down at his boots. Even when he worked up the courage to speak, Pod could never quite manage to look at you. “For the audience. And your chain. The Hand’s chain.”

“Very good. Help me dress.” The doublet was black velvet covered with golden studs in the shape of lion’s heads, the chain a loop of solid gold hands, the fingers of each clasping the wrist of the next. Pod brought him a cloak of crimson silk fringed in gold, cut to his height. On a normal man, it would be no more than a half-cape.

The Hand’s private audience chamber was not so large as the king’s, nor a patch on the vastness of the throne room, but Tyrion liked its Myrish rugs, wall hangings, and sense of intimacy. As he entered, his steward cried out, “Tyrion Lannister, Hand of the King.” He liked that too. The gaggle of smiths, armorers, and ironmongers that Bronn had collected fell to their knees.

He hoisted himself up into the high seat under the round golden window and bid them rise. “Goodmen, I know you are all busy, so I will be succinct. Pod, if you please.” The boy handed him a canvas sack. Tyrion yanked the drawstring and upended the bag. Its contents spilled onto the rug with a muffled *thunk*

of metal on wool. "I had these made at the castle forge. I want a thousand more just like them."

One of the smiths knelt to inspect the object: three immense steel links, twisted together. "A mighty chain."

"Mighty, but short," the dwarf replied. "Somewhat like me. I fancy one a good deal longer. Do you have a name?"

"They call me Ironbelly, m'lord." The smith was squat and broad, plainly dressed in wool and leather, but his arms were as thick as a bull's neck.

"I want every forge in King's Landing turned to making these links and joining them. All other work is to be put aside. I want every man who knows the art of working metal set to this task, be he master, journeyman, or apprentice. When I ride up the Street of Steel, I want to hear hammers ringing, night or day. And I want a man, a strong man, to see that all this is done. Are you that man, Goodman Ironbelly?"

"Might be I am, m'lord. But what of the mail and swords the queen was wanting?"

Another smith spoke up. "Her Grace commanded us to make chainmail and armor, swords and daggers and axes, all in great numbers. For arming her new gold cloaks, m'lord."

"That work can wait," Tyrion said. "The chain first."

"M'lord, begging your pardon, Her Grace said those as didn't meet their numbers would have their hands crushed," the anxious smith persisted. "Smashed on their own anvils, she said."

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