GEORGE R.R.
MARTIN

A STORM OF SWORDS

George Martin

A Storm of Swords Complete Edition

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Martin G. R.

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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 STORM OF SWORDS is the third volume in the series.The Seven Kingdoms are divided by revolt and blood feud, and winter approaches like an angry beast. Beyond the Northern borders, wildlings leave their villages to gather in the ice and stone wasteland of the Frostfangs. From there, the renegade Brother Mance Rayder will lead them South towards the Wall.The men of the Night's Watch are ready for the coming of a great cold and the walking corpses that travel with it. But now they face a horde of wildlings twenty-thousand strong – hungry savage people steeped in the dark magic of the haunted wilderness – poised to invade the Kingdom of the North where Robb Stark wears his new-forged crown.But Robb's defences are ranged against attack from the South, the land of House Stark's enemies the Lannisters. His sisters are trapped there, dead or likely yet to die, at the whim of the Lannister boy-king Joffrey or his depraved mother Cersei, regent of the Iron Throne. Cersei's ambition is unfettered while the dwarf Tyrion Lannister fights for his life, a victim of treachery.And on the other side of the ocean, the last of the Targaryens rears the dragons she hatched from her husband's funeral pyre. Daenerys Stormborn will return to the land of her birth to avenge the murder of her father, the last Dragon King on the Iron Throne.

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A STORM OF SWORDS

BOOK THREE OF
A Song of Ice and Fire

GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

Copyright

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Praise for *A Song of Ice and Fire:*

‘This is one of those rare and effortless reads.’
ROBIN HOBB
‘George R.R. Martin is one of our very best writers, and this is one of his very best books.’
RAYMOND E. FEIST
‘Such a splendid tale. I read my eyes out – I couldn’t stop till I’d finished and it was dawn.’
ANNE MCCAFFREY
‘George R.R. Martin is assuredly a new master craftsman in the guild of heroic fantasy.’
KATHARINE KERR
‘Few created worlds are as imaginative and diverse.’
JANNY WURTS
For Phyllis
who made me put the dragons in

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A NOTE ON CHRONOLOGY

A Song of Ice and Fire is told through the eyes of characters who are sometimes hundreds or even thousands of miles apart from one another. Some chapters cover a day, some only an hour; others might span a fortnight, a month, half a year. With such a structure, the narrative cannot be strictly sequential; sometimes important things are happening simultaneously, a thousand leagues apart.

In the case of the volume now in hand, the reader should realize that the opening chapters of *A Storm of Swords* do not follow the closing chapters of *A Clash of Kings* so much as overlap them. I open with a look at some of the things that were happening on the Fist of the First Men, at Riverrun, Harrenhal, and on the Trident while the Battle of the Blackwater was being fought at King's Landing, and during its aftermath …

George R.R. Martin

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THE HAUNTED FOREST
THE WALL
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Shadow Tower
Castle Black
Queenscrown
BAY of ICE
BAY of SEALS
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Longbow Hall
Heart's Home
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Runestone
THE TRIDENT
Fairmarket
BLUE LEAR
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Town of the Kneeling Man
Lord Harroway's Town
Saltpans
BAY of CRABS
CRABCLAW POINT
Maidenpool
TUMBLESTONE
Riverrun
The Crag
High Heart
Harrenhal
Acorn Hall
Ashemark
Pinkmaiden
GOSSE EYE
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Lannisport
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Silverhill
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BLUE BYRON
Longtable
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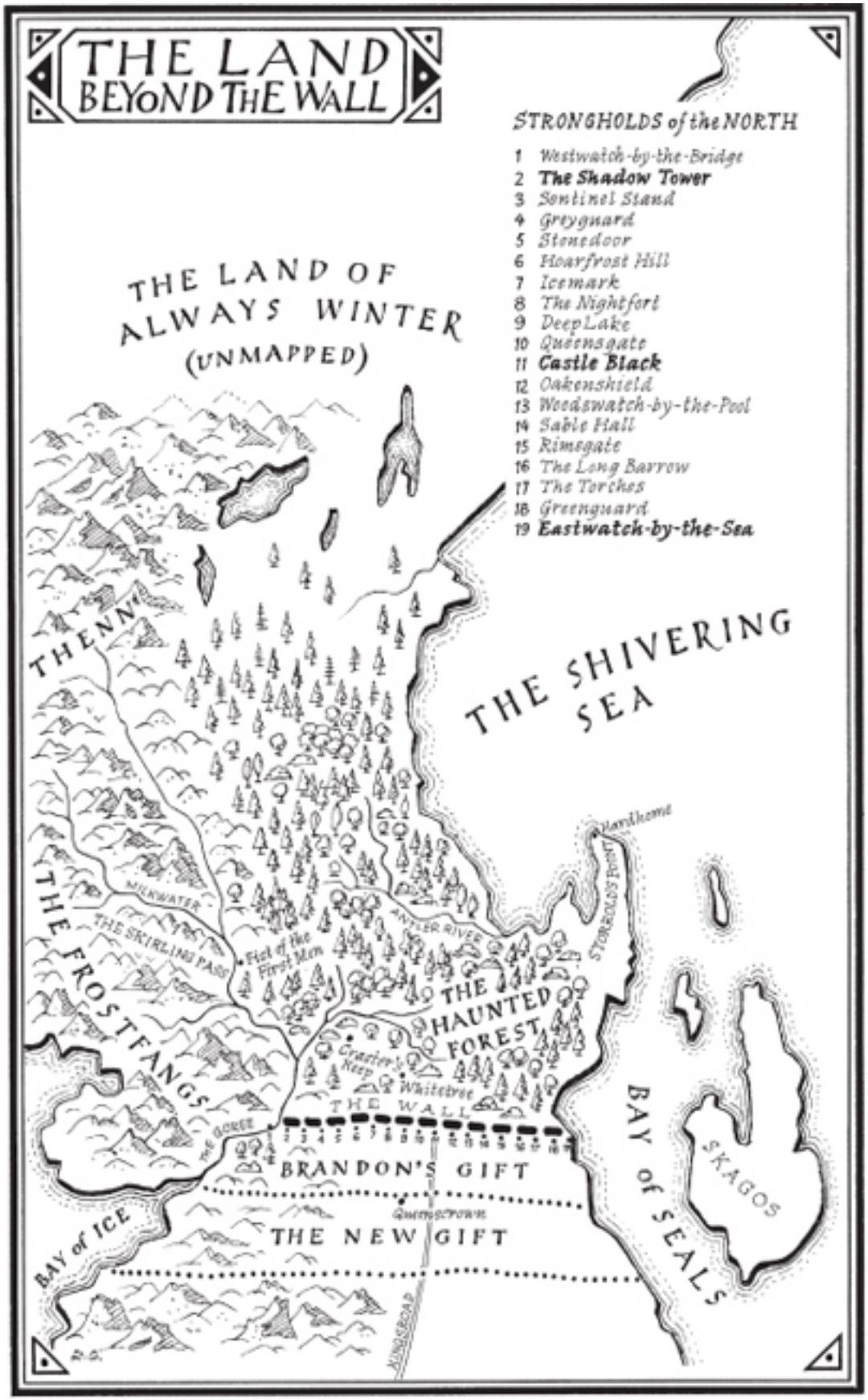
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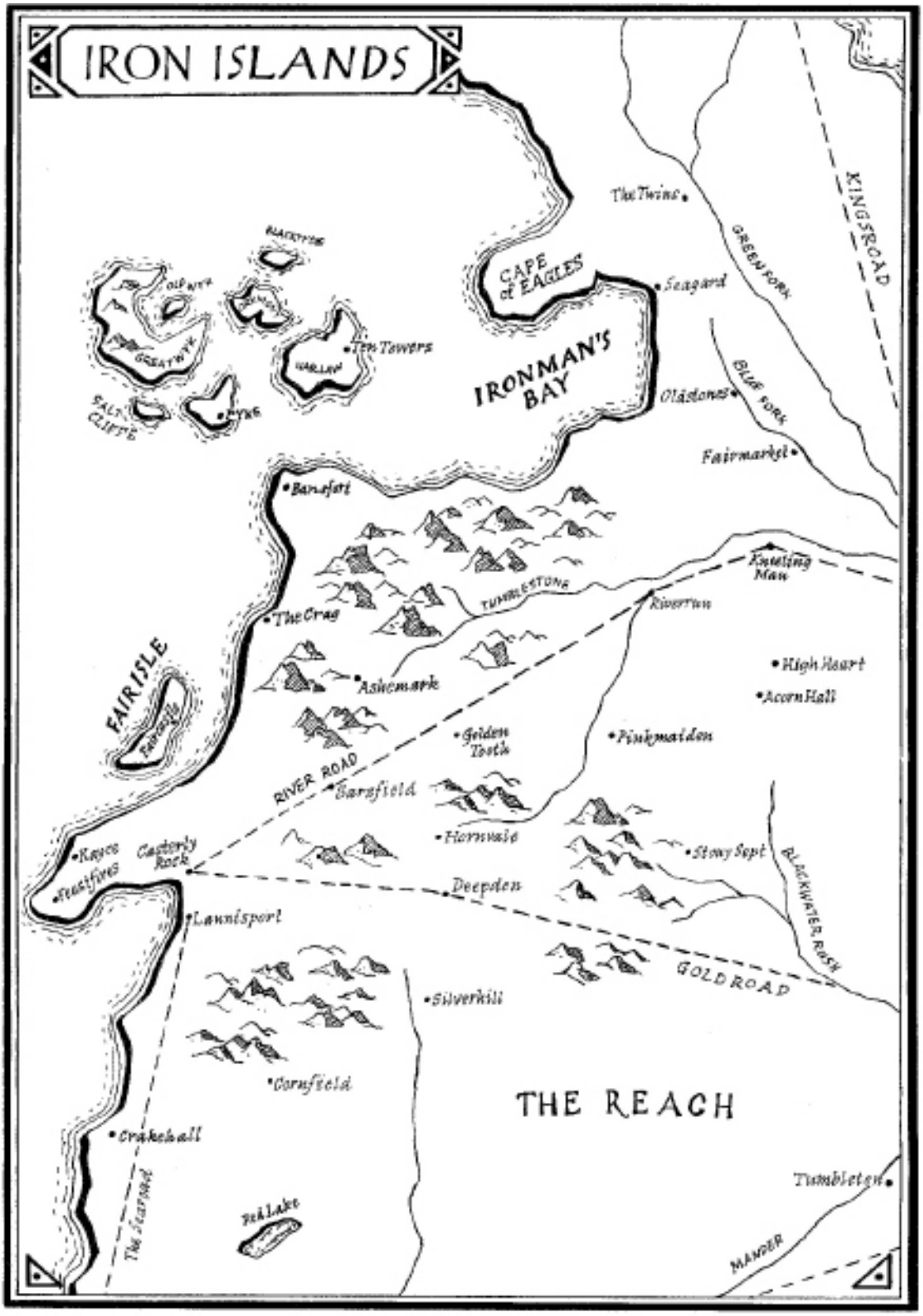
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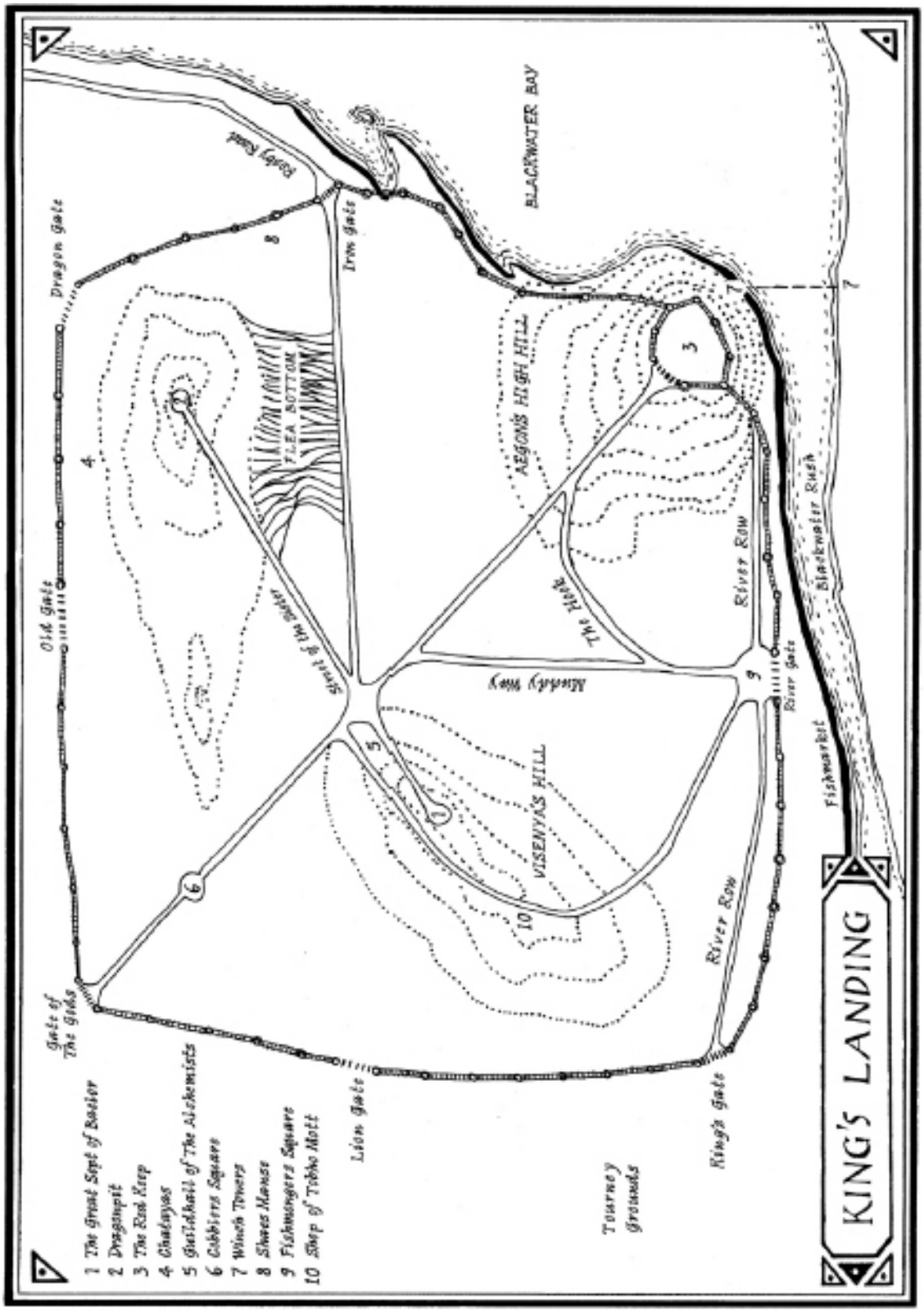
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VISENYAS HILL
Dragon Gate
Iron Gate
Old Gate
Gate of The Gods
Lion Gate
Kings Gate
River Gate
River Row
Fishmarket
Blackwater Rush
Tourney grounds
The Hook
Alleyway
Street of Smiles

PROLOGUE

The day was grey and bitter cold, and the dogs would not take the scent. The big black bitch had taken one sniff at the bear tracks, backed off, and skulked back to the pack with her tail between her legs. The dogs huddled together miserably on the riverbank as the wind snapped at them. Chett felt it too, biting through his layers of black wool and boiled leather. It was too bloody cold for man or beast, but here they were. His mouth twisted, and he could almost feel the boils that covered his cheeks and neck growing red and angry. *I should be safe back at the Wall, tending the bloody ravens and making fires for old Maester Aemon.* It was the bastard Jon Snow who had taken that from him, him and his fat friend Sam Tarly. It was their fault he was here, freezing his bloody balls off with a pack of hounds deep in the haunted forest.

"Seven hells." He gave the leashes a hard yank to get the dogs' attention. "*Track*, you bastards. That's a bear print. You want some meat or no? *Find!*" But the hounds only huddled closer, whining. Chett snapped his short lash above their heads, and the black bitch snarled at him. "Dog meat would taste as good as bear," he warned her, his breath frosting with every word.

Lark the Sisterman stood with his arms crossed over his chest and his hands tucked up into his armpits. He wore black wool gloves, but he was always complaining how his fingers were frozen. "It's too bloody cold to hunt," he said. "Bugger this bear, he's not worth freezing over."

"We can't go back emptyhand, Lark," rumbled Small Paul through the brown whiskers that covered most of his face. "The Lord Commander wouldn't like that." There was ice under the big man's squashed pug nose, where his snot had frozen. A huge hand in a thick fur glove clenched tight around the shaft of a spear.

"Bugger that Old Bear too," said the Sisterman, a thin man with sharp features and nervous eyes. "Mormont will be dead before daybreak, remember? Who cares what he likes?"

Small Paul blinked his black little eyes. Maybe he *had* forgotten, Chett thought; he was stupid enough to forget most anything. "Why do we have to kill the Old Bear? Why don't we just go off and let him be?"

"You think he'll let *us* be?" said Lark. "He'll hunt us down. You want to be hunted, you great muttonhead?"

"No," said Small Paul. "I don't want that. I don't."

"So you'll kill him?" said Lark.

"Yes." The huge man stamped the butt of his spear on the frozen riverbank. "I will. He shouldn't hunt us."

The Sisterman took his hands from his armpits and turned to Chett. "We need to kill *all* the officers, I say."

Chett was sick of hearing it. "We been over this. The Old Bear dies, and Blane from the Shadow Tower. Grubbs and Aethan as well, their ill luck for drawing the watch, Dywen and Bannen for their tracking, and Ser Piggy for the ravens. That's *all*. We kill them quiet, while they sleep. One scream and we're wormfood, every one of us." His boils were red with rage. "Just do your bit and see that your cousins do theirs. And Paul, try and remember, it's *third* watch, not second."

"Third watch," the big man said, through hair and frozen snot. "Me and Softfoot. I remember, Chett."

The moon would be black tonight, and they had jiggered the watches so as to have eight of their own standing sentry, with two more guarding the horses. It wasn't going to get much riper than that. Besides, the wildlings could be upon them any day now. Chett meant to be well away from here before that happened. He meant to live.

Three hundred sworn brothers of the Night's Watch had ridden north, two hundred from Castle Black and another hundred from the Shadow Tower. It was the biggest ranging in living memory,

near a third of the Watch's strength. They meant to find Ben Stark, Ser Waymar Royce, and the other rangers who'd gone missing, and discover why the wildlings were leaving their villages. Well, they were no closer to Stark and Royce than when they'd left the Wall, but they'd learned where all the wildlings had gone—up into the icy heights of the godsforsaken Frostfangs. They could squat up there till the end of time and it wouldn't prick Chett's boils none.

But no. They were coming down. Down the Milkwater.

Chett raised his eyes and there it was. The river's stony banks were bearded by ice, its pale milky waters flowing endlessly down out of the Frostfangs. And now Mance Rayder and his wildlings were flowing down the same way. Thoren Smallwood had returned in a lather three days past. While he was telling the Old Bear what his scouts had seen, his man Kedge Whiteye told the rest of them. "They're still well up the foothills, but they're coming," Kedge said, warming his hands over the fire. "Harma the Dogshead has the van, the poxy bitch. Goady crept up on her camp and saw her plain by the fire. That fool Tumberjon wanted to pick her off with an arrow, but Smallwood had better sense."

Chett spat. "How many were there, could you tell?"

"Many and more. Twenty, thirty thousand, we didn't stay to count. Harma had five hundred in the van, every one ahorse."

The men around the fire exchanged uneasy looks. It was a rare thing to find even a dozen mounted wildlings, and *five hundred* …

"Smallwood sent Bannen and me wide around the van to catch a peek at the main body," Kedge went on. "There was no end of them. They're moving slow as a frozen river, four, five miles a day, but they don't look like they mean to go back to their villages neither. More'n half were women and children, and they were driving their animals before them, goats, sheep, even aurochs dragging sledges. They'd loaded up with bales of fur and sides of meat, cages of chickens, butter churns and spinning wheels, every damn thing they own. The mules and garrons was so heavy laden you'd think their backs would break. The women as well."

"And they follow the Milkwater?" Lark the Sisterman asked.

"I said so, didn't I?"

The Milkwater would take them past the Fist of the First Men, the ancient ringfort where the Night's Watch had made its camp. Any man with a thimble of sense could see that it was time to pull up stakes and fall back on the Wall. The Old Bear had strengthened the Fist with spikes and pits and caltrops, but against such a host all that was pointless. If they stayed here, they would be engulfed and overwhelmed.

And Thoren Smallwood wanted to *attack*. Sweet Donnel Hill was squire to Ser Mallador Locke, and the night before last Smallwood had come to Locke's tent. Ser Mallador had been of the same mind as old Ser Ottyn Wythers, urging a retreat on the Wall, but Smallwood wanted to convince him otherwise. "This King-beyond-the-Wall will never look for us so far north," Sweet Donnel reported him saying. "And this great host of his is a shambling horde, full of useless mouths who won't know what end of a sword to hold. One blow will take all the fight out of them and send them howling back to their hovels for another fifty years."

Three hundred against thirty thousand. Chett called that rank madness, and what was madder still was that Ser Mallador had been persuaded, and the two of them together were on the point of persuading the Old Bear. "If we wait too long, this chance may be lost, never to come again," Smallwood was saying to anyone who would listen. Against that, Ser Ottyn Wythers said, "We are the shield that guards the realms of men. You do not throw away your shield for no good purpose," but to that Thoren Smallwood said, "In a swordfight, a man's surest defense is the swift stroke that slays his foe, not cringing behind a shield."

Neither Smallwood nor Wythers had the command, though. Lord Mormont did, and Mormont was waiting for his other scouts, for Jarman Buckwell and the men who'd climbed the Giant's Stair, and for Qhorin Halfhand and Jon Snow, who'd gone to probe the Skirling Pass. Buckwell and the

Halfhand were late in returning, though. *Dead, most like.* Chett pictured Jon Snow lying blue and frozen on some bleak mountaintop with a wildling spear up his bastard's arse. The thought made him smile. *I hope they killed his bloody wolf as well.*

"There's no bear here," he decided abruptly. "Just an old print, that's all. Back to the Fist." The dogs almost yanked him off his feet, as eager to get back as he was. Maybe they thought they were going to get fed. Chett had to laugh. He hadn't fed them for three days now, to turn them mean and hungry. Tonight, before slipping off into the dark, he'd turn them loose among the horse lines, after Sweet Donnel Hill and Clubfoot Karl cut the tethers. *They'll have snarling hounds and panicked horses all over the Fist, running through fires, jumping the ringwall, and trampling down tents.* With all the confusion, it might be hours before anyone noticed that fourteen brothers were missing.

Lark had wanted to bring in twice that number, but what could you expect from some stupid fish breath Sisterman? Whisper a word in the wrong ear and before you knew it you'd be short a head. No, fourteen was a good number, enough to do what needed doing but not so many that they couldn't keep the secret. Chett had recruited most of them himself. Small Paul was one of his; the strongest man on the Wall, even if he was slower than a dead snail. He'd once broken a wildling's back with a hug. They had Dirk as well, named for his favorite weapon, and the little grey man the brothers called Softfoot, who'd raped a hundred women in his youth, and liked to boast how none had never seen nor heard him until he shoved it up inside them.

The plan was Chett's. He was the clever one; he'd been steward to old Maester Aemon for four good years before that bastard Jon Snow had done him out so his job could be handed to his fat pig of a friend. When he killed Sam Tarly tonight, he planned to whisper, "Give my love to Lord Snow," right in his ear before he sliced Ser Piggy's throat open to let the blood come bubbling out through all those layers of suet. Chett knew the ravens, so he wouldn't have no trouble there, no more than he would with Tarly. One touch of the knife and that craven would piss his pants and start blubbering for his life. *Let him beg, it won't do him no good.* After he opened his throat, he'd open the cages and shoo the birds away, so no messages reached the Wall. Softfoot and Small Paul would kill the Old Bear, Dirk would do Blane, and Lark and his cousins would silence Bannen and old Dywen, to keep them from sniffing after their trail. They'd been caching food for a fortnight, and Sweet Donnel and Clubfoot Karl would have the horses ready. With Mormont dead, command would pass to Ser Ottyn Wythers, an old done man, and failing. *He'll be running for the Wall before sundown, and he won't waste no men sending them after us neither.*

The dogs pulled at him as they made their way through the trees. Chett could see the Fist punching its way up through the green. The day was so dark that the Old Bear had the torches lit, a great circle of them burning all along the ringwall that crowned the top of the steep stony hill. The three of them waded across a brook. The water was icy cold, and patches of ice were spreading across its surface. "I'm going to make for the coast," Lark the Sisterman confided. "Me and my cousins. We'll build us a boat, sail back home to the Sisters."

And at home they'll know you for deserters and lop off your fool heads, thought Chett. There was no leaving the Night's Watch, once you said your words. Anywhere in the Seven Kingdoms, they'd take you and kill you.

Ollo Lophand now, he was talking about sailing back to Tyrosh, where he claimed men didn't lose their hands for a bit of honest thievery, nor get sent off to freeze their life away for being found in bed with some knight's wife. Chett had weighed going with him, but he didn't speak their wet girly tongue. And what could he do in Tyrosh? He had no trade to speak of, growing up in Hag's Mire. His father had spent his life grubbing in other men's fields and collecting leeches. He'd strip down bare but for a thick leather clout, and go wading in the murky waters. When he climbed out he'd be covered from nipple to ankle. Sometimes he made Chett help pull the leeches off. One had attached itself to his palm once, and he'd smashed it against a wall in revulsion. His father beat him bloody for that. The maesters bought the leeches at twelve-for-apenny.

Lark could go home if he liked, and the damn Tyroshi too, but not Chett. If he never saw Hag's Mire again, it would be too bloody soon. He had liked the look of Craster's Keep, himself. Craster lived high as a lord there, so why shouldn't he do the same? That would be a laugh. Chett the leechman's son, a lord with a keep. His banner could be a dozen leeches on a field of pink. But why stop at lord? Maybe he should be a king. *Mance Rayder started out a crow. I could be a king same as him, and have me some wives.* Craster had nineteen, not even counting the young ones, the daughters he hadn't gotten around to bedding yet. Half them wives were as old and ugly as Craster, but that didn't matter. The old ones Chett could put to work cooking and cleaning for him, pulling carrots and slopping pigs, while the young ones warmed his bed and bore his children. Craster wouldn't object, not once Small Paul gave him a hug.

The only women Chett had ever known were the whores he'd bought in Mole's Town. When he'd been younger, the village girls took one look at his face, with its boils and its wen, and turned away sickened. The worst was that slattern Bessa. She'd spread her legs for every boy in Hag's Mire so he'd figured why not him too? He even spent a morning picking wildflowers when he heard she liked them, but she'd just laughed in his face and told him she'd crawl in a bed with his father's leeches before she'd crawl in one with him. She stopped laughing when he put his knife in her. That was sweet, the look on her face, so he pulled the knife out and put it in her again. When they caught him down near Sevenstreams, old Lord Walder Frey hadn't even bothered to come himself to do the judging. He'd sent one of his *bastards*, that Walder Rivers, and the next thing Chett had known he was walking to the Wall with that foul-smelling black devil Yoren. To pay for his one sweet moment, they took his whole life.

But now he meant to take it back, and Craster's women too. *That twisted old wildling has the right of it. If you want a woman to wife you take her, and none of this giving her flowers so that maybe she don't notice your bloody boils.* Chett didn't mean to make *that* mistake again.

It would work, he promised himself for the hundredth time. *So long as we get away clean.* Ser Ottyn would strike south for the Shadow Tower, the shortest way to the Wall. *He won't bother with us, not Wythers, all he'll want is to get back whole.* Thoren Smallwood now, he'd want to press on with the attack, but Ser Ottyn's caution ran too deep, and he was senior. *It won't matter anyhow. Once we're gone, Smallwood can attack anyone he likes. What do we care? If none of them ever returns to the Wall, no one will ever come looking for us, they'll think we died with the rest.* That was a new thought, and for a moment it tempted him. But they would need to kill Ser Ottyn and Ser Mallador Locke as well to give Smallwood the command, and both of them were well-attended day and night … no, the risk was too great.

"Chett," said Small Paul as they trudged along a stony game trail through sentinels and soldier pines, "what about the bird?"

"What bloody bird?" The last thing he needed now was some mutton-head going on about a bird.

"The Old Bear's raven," Small Paul said. "If we kill him, who's going to feed his bird?"

"Who bloody well cares? Kill the bird too if you like."

"I don't want to hurt no bird," the big man said. "But that's a talking bird. What if it tells what we did?"

Lark the Sisterman laughed. "Small Paul, thick as a castle wall," he mocked.

"You shut up with that," said Small Paul dangerously.

"Paul," said Chett, before the big man got too angry, "when they find the old man lying in a pool of blood with his throat slit, they won't need no bird to tell them someone killed him."

Small Paul chewed on that a moment. "That's true," he allowed. "Can I keep the bird, then? I like that bird."

"He's yours," said Chett, just to shut him up.

"We can always eat him if we get hungry," offered Lark.

Small Paul clouded up again. “Best not try and eat *my* bird, Lark. Best not.”

Chett could hear voices drifting through the trees. “Close your bloody mouths, both of you. We’re almost to the Fist.”

They emerged near the west face of the hill, and walked around south where the slope was gentler. Near the edge of the forest a dozen men were taking archery practice. They had carved outlines on the trunks of trees, and were loosing shafts at them. “Look,” said Lark. “A pig with a bow.”

Sure enough, the nearest bowman was Ser Piggy himself, the fat boy who had stolen his place with Maester Aemon. Just the sight of Samwell Tarly filled him with anger. Stewarding for Maester Aemon had been as good a life as he’d ever known. The old blind man was undemanding, and Clydas had taken care of most of his wants anyway. Chett’s duties were easy: cleaning the rookery, a few fires to build, a few meals to fetch … and Aemon never once hit him. *Thinks he can just walk in and shove me out, on account of being highborn and knowing how to read. Might be I’ll ask him to read my knife before I open his throat with it.* “You go on,” he told the others, “I want to watch this.” The dogs were pulling, anxious to go with them, to the food they thought would be waiting at the top. Chett kicked the bitch with the toe of his boot, and that settled them down some.

He watched from the trees as the fat boy wrestled with a longbow as tall as he was, his red moon face screwed up with concentration. Three arrows stood in the ground before him. Tarly nocked and drew, held the draw a long moment as he tried to aim, and let fly. The shaft vanished into the greenery. Chett laughed loudly, a snort of sweet disgust.

“We’ll never find that one, and I’ll be blamed,” announced Edd Tollett, the dour grey-haired squire everyone called Dolorous Edd. “Nothing ever goes missing that they don’t look at me, ever since that time I lost my horse. As if that could be helped. He was white and it was snowing, what did they expect?”

“The wind took that one,” said Grenn, another friend of Lord Snow’s. “Try to hold the bow steady, Sam.”

“It’s heavy,” the fat boy complained, but he pulled the second arrow all the same. This one went high, sailing through the branches ten feet above the target.

“I believe you knocked a leaf off that tree,” said Dolorous Edd. “Fall is falling fast enough, there’s no need to help it.” He sighed. “And we all know what follows fall. Gods, but I am cold. Shoot the last arrow, Samwell, I believe my tongue is freezing to the roof of my mouth.”

Ser Piggy lowered the bow, and Chett thought he was going to start bawling. “It’s too hard.”

“Notch, draw, and loose,” said Grenn. “Go on.”

Dutifully, the fat boy plucked his final arrow from the earth, notched it to his longbow, drew, and released. He did it quickly, without squinting along the shaft painstakingly as he had the first two times. The arrow struck the charcoal outline low in the chest and hung quivering. “I *hit* him.” Ser Piggy sounded shocked. “Grenn, did you see? Edd, look, I hit him!”

“Put it between his ribs, I’d say,” said Grenn.

“Did I kill him?” the fat boy wanted to know.

Tollett shrugged. “Might have punctured a lung, if he had a lung. Most trees don’t, as a rule.” He took the bow from Sam’s hand. “I’ve seen worse shots, though. Aye, and made a few.”

Ser Piggy was beaming. To look at him you’d think he’d actually *done* something. But when he saw Chett and the dogs, his smile curled up and died squeaking.

“You hit a tree,” Chett said. “Let’s see how you shoot when it’s Mance Rayder’s lads. They won’t stand there with their arms out and their leaves rustling, oh no. They’ll come right at you, screaming in your face, and I bet you’ll piss those breeches. One o’ them will plant his axe right between those little pig eyes. The last thing you’ll hear will be the *thunk* it makes when it bites into your skull.”

The fat boy was shaking. Dolorous Edd put a hand on his shoulder. “Brother,” he said solemnly, “just because it happened that way for you doesn’t mean Samwell will suffer the same.”

“What are you talking about, Tollett?”

"The axe that split your skull. Is it true that half your wits leaked out on the ground and your dogs ate them?"

The big lout Grenn laughed, and even Samwell Tarly managed a weak little smile. Chett kicked the nearest dog, yanked on their leashes, and started up the hill. *Smile all you want, Ser Piggy. We'll see who laughs tonight.* He only wished he had time to kill Tollett as well. *Gloomy horsefaced fool, that's what he is.*

The climb was steep, even on this side of the Fist, which had the gentlest slope. Partway up the dogs started barking and pulling at him, figuring that they'd get fed soon. He gave them a taste of his boot instead, and a crack of the whip for the big ugly one that snapped at him. Once they were tied up, he went to report. "The prints were there like Giant said, but the dogs wouldn't track," he told Mormont in front of his big black tent. "Down by the river like that, could be old prints."

"A pity." Lord Commander Mormont had a bald head and a great shaggy grey beard, and sounded as tired as he looked. "We might all have been better for a bit of fresh meat." The raven on his shoulder bobbed its head and echoed, "*Meat. Meat. Meat.*"

We could cook the bloody dogs, Chett thought, but he kept his mouth shut until the Old Bear sent him on his way. *And that's the last time I'll need to bow my head to that one*, he thought to himself with satisfaction. It seemed to him that it was growing even colder, which he would have sworn wasn't possible. The dogs huddled together miserably in the hard frozen mud, and Chett was half tempted to crawl in with them. Instead, he wrapped a black wool scarf round the lower part of his face, leaving a slit for his mouth between the winds. It was warmer if he kept moving, he found, so he made a slow circuit of the perimeter with a wad of sourleaf, sharing a chew or two with the black brothers on guard and hearing what they had to say. None of the men on the day watch were part of his scheme; even so, he figured it was good to have some sense of what they were thinking.

Mostly what they were thinking was that it was bloody cold.

The wind was rising as the shadows lengthened. It made a high thin sound as it shivered through the stones of the ringwall. "I hate that sound," little Giant said. "It sounds like a babe in the brush, wailing away for milk."

When he finished the circuit and returned to the dogs, he found Lark waiting for him. "The officers are in the Old Bear's tent again, talking something fierce."

"That's what they do," said Chett. "They're highborn, all but Blane, they get drunk on words instead of wine."

Lark sidled closer. "Cheese-for-wits keeps going on about the bird," he warned, glancing about to make certain no one was close. "Now he's asking if we cached any seed for the damn thing."

"It's a raven," said Chett. "It eats corpses."

Lark grinned. "His, might be?"

Or yours. It seemed to Chett that they needed the big man more than they needed Lark. "Stop fretting about Small Paul. You do your part, he'll do his."

Twilight was creeping through the woods by the time he rid himself of the Sisterman and sat down to edge his sword. It was bloody hard work with his gloves on, but he wasn't about to take them off. Cold as it was, any fool that touched steel with a bare hand was going to lose a patch of skin.

The dogs whimpered when the sun went down. He gave them water and curses. "Half a night more, and you can find your own feast." By then he could smell supper.

Dywen was holding forth at the cookfire as Chett got his heel of hardbread and a bowl of bean and bacon soup from Hake the cook. "The wood's too silent," the old forester was saying. "No frogs near that river, no owls in the dark. I never heard no deader wood than this."

"Them teeth of yours sound pretty dead," said Hake.

Dywen clacked his wooden teeth. "No wolves neither. There was, before, but no more. Where'd they go, you figure?"

"Someplace warm," said Chett.

Of the dozen odd brothers who sat by the fire, four were his. He gave each one a hard squinty look as he ate, to see if any showed signs of breaking. Dirk seemed calm enough, sitting silent and sharpening his blade, the way he did every night. And Sweet Donnel Hill was all easy japes. He had white teeth and fat red lips and yellow locks that he wore in an artful tumble about his shoulders, and he claimed to be the bastard of some Lannister. Maybe he was at that. Chett had no use for pretty boys, nor for bastards neither, but Sweet Donnel seemed like to hold his own.

He was less certain about the forester the brothers called Sawwood, more for his snoring than for anything to do with trees. Just now he looked so restless he might never snore again. And Maslyn was worse. Chett could see sweat trickling down his face, despite the frigid wind. The beads of moisture sparkled in the firelight, like so many little wet jewels. Maslyn wasn't eating neither, only staring at his soup as if the smell of it was about to make him sick. *I'll need to watch that one*, Chett thought.

"Assemble!" The shout came suddenly, from a dozen throats, and quickly spread to every part of the hilltop camp. "Men of the Night's Watch! Assemble at the central fire!"

Frowning, Chett finished his soup and followed the rest.

The Old Bear stood before the fire with Smallwood, Locke, Wythers, and Blane ranged behind him in a row. Mormont wore a cloak of thick black fur, and his raven perched upon his shoulder, preening its black feathers. *This can't be good.* Chett squeezed between Brown Bernarr and some Shadow Tower men. When everyone was gathered, save for the watchers in the woods and the guards on the ringwall, Mormont cleared his throat and spat. The spittle was frozen before it hit the ground.

"Brothers," he said, "men of the Night's Watch."

"*Men!*" his raven screamed. "*Men! Men!*"

"The wildlings are on the march, following the course of the Milkwater down out of the mountains. Thoren believes their van will be upon us ten days hence. Their most seasoned raiders will be with Harma Dogshead in that van. The rest will likely form a rearguard, or ride in close company with Mance Rayder himself. Elsewhere, their fighters will be spread thin along the line of march. They have oxen, mules, horses … but few enough. Most will be afoot, and ill-armed and untrained. Such weapons as they carry are more like to be stone and bone than steel. They are burdened with women, children, herds of sheep and goats, and all their worldly goods besides. In short, though they are numerous, they are vulnerable … and *they do not know that we are here.* Or so we must pray."

They know, thought Chett. *You bloody old pus bag, they know, certain as sunrise. Qhorin Halfhand hasn't come back, has he? Nor Jarman Buckwell. If any of them got caught, you know damned well the wildlings will have wrung a song or two out of them by now.*

Smallwood stepped forward. "Mance Rayder means to break the Wall and bring red war to the Seven Kingdoms. Well, that's a game two can play. On the morrow we'll bring the war to him."

"We ride at dawn with all our strength," the Old Bear said as a murmur went through the assembly. "We will ride north, and loop around to the west. Harma's van will be well past the Fist by the time we turn. The foothills of the Frostfangs are full of narrow winding valleys made for ambush. Their line of march will stretch for many miles. We shall fall on them in several places at once, and make them swear we were three thousand, not three hundred."

"We'll hit hard and be away before their horsemen can form up to face us," Thoren Smallwood said. "If they pursue, we'll lead them a merry chase, then wheel and hit again farther down the column. We'll burn their wagons, scatter their herds, and slay as many as we can. Mance Rayder himself, if we find him. If they break and return to their hovels, we've won. If not, we'll harry them all the way to the Wall, and see to it that they leave a trail of corpses to mark their progress."

"*There are thousands*," someone called from behind Chett.

"*We'll die*." That was Maslyn's voice, green with fear.

"*Die*," screamed Mormont's raven, flapping its black wings. "*Die, die, die.*"

"Many of us," the Old Bear said. "Mayhaps even all of us. But as another Lord Commander said a thousand years ago, that is why they dress us in black. Remember your words, brothers. For we are the swords in the darkness, the watchers on the walls …"

"The fire that burns against the cold." Ser Mallador Locke drew his longsword.

"The light that brings the dawn," others answered, and more swords were pulled from scabbards.

Then all of them were drawing, and it was near three hundred upraised swords and as many voices crying, "*The horn that wakes the sleepers! The shield that guards the realms of men!*" Chett had no choice but to join his voice to the others. The air was misty with their breath, and firelight glinted off the steel. He was pleased to see Lark and Softfoot and Sweet Donnel Hill joining in, as if they were as big fools as the rest. That was good. No sense to draw attention, when their hour was so close.

When the shouting died away, once more he heard the sound of the wind picking at the ringwall. The flames swirled and shivered, as if they too were cold, and in the sudden quiet the Old Bear's raven cawed loudly and once again said, "*Die.*"

Clever bird, thought Chett as the officers dismissed them, warning everyone to get a good meal and a long rest tonight. Chett crawled under his furs near the dogs, his head full of things that could go wrong. What if that bloody oath gave one of his a change of heart? Or Small Paul forgot and tried to kill Mormont during the second watch in place of the third? Or Maslyn lost his courage, or someone turned informer, or …

He found himself listening to the night. The wind did sound like a wailing child, and from time to time he could hear men's voices, a horse's whinny, a log spitting in the fire. But nothing else. *So quiet.*

He could see Bessa's face floating before him. *It wasn't the knife I wanted to put in you*, he wanted to tell her. *I picked you flowers, wild roses and tansy and goldencups, it took me all morning*. His heart was thumping like a drum, so loud he feared it might wake the camp. Ice caked his beard all around his mouth. *Where did that come from, with Bessa?* Whenever he'd thought of her before, it had only been to remember the way she'd looked, dying. What was wrong with him? He could hardly breathe. Had he gone to sleep? He got to his knees, and something wet and cold touched his nose. Chett looked up.

Snow was falling.

He could feel tears freezing to his cheeks. *It isn't fair*, he wanted to scream. Snow would ruin everything he'd worked for, all his careful plans. It was a heavy fall, thick white flakes coming down all about him. How would they find their food caches in the snow, or the game trail they meant to follow east? *They won't need Dywen nor Bannen to hunt us down neither, not if we're tracking through fresh snow.* And snow hid the shape of the ground, especially by night. A horse could stumble over a root, break a leg on a stone. *We're done*, he realized. *Done before we began. We're lost.* There'd be no lord's life for the leechman's son, no keep to call his own, no wives nor crowns. Only a wildling's sword in his belly, and then an unmarked grave. *The snow's taken it all from me … the bloody snow …*

Snow had ruined him once before. Snow and his pet pig.

Chett got to his feet. His legs were stiff, and the falling snowflakes turned the distant torches to vague orange glows. He felt as though he were being attacked by a cloud of pale cold bugs. They settled on his shoulders, on his head, they flew at his nose and his eyes. Cursing, he brushed them off. *Samwell Tarly*, he remembered. *I can still deal with Ser Piggy.* He wrapped his scarf around his face, pulled up his hood, and went striding through the camp to where the coward slept.

The snow was falling so heavily that he got lost among the tents, but finally he spotted the snug little windbreak the fat boy had made for himself between a rock and the raven cages. Tarly was buried beneath a mound of black wool blankets and shaggy furs. The snow was drifting in to cover him. He looked like some kind of soft round mountain. Steel whispered on leather faint as hope as Chett eased his dagger from its sheath. One of the ravens *quork*ed. "Snow," another muttered, peering through

the bars with black eyes. The first added a "Snow" of its own. He edged past them, placing each foot carefully. He would clap his left hand down over the fat boy's mouth to muffle his cries, and then …

Uuuuuuuhooooooooo.

He stopped midstep, swallowing his curse as the sound of the horn shuddered through the camp, faint and far, yet unmistakable. *Not now. Gods be damned, not NOW!* The Old Bear had hidden far-eyes in a ring of trees around the Fist, to give warning of any approach. *Jarman Buckwell's back from the Giant's Stair,* Chett figured, *or Qhorin Halfhand from the Skirling Pass.* A single blast of the horn meant brothers returning. If it was the Halfhand, Jon Snow might be with him, alive.

Sam Tarly sat up puffy-eyed and stared at the snow in confusion. The ravens were cawing noisily, and Chett could hear his dogs baying. *Half the bloody camp's awake.* His gloved fingers clenched around the dagger's hilt as he waited for the sound to die away. But no sooner had it gone than it came again, louder and longer.

Uuuuuuuuuuuuhooooooooooooooo.

"Gods," he heard Sam Tarly whimper. The fat boy lurched to his knees, his feet tangled in his cloak and blankets. He kicked them away and reached for a chainmail hauberk he'd hung on the rock nearby. As he slipped the huge tent of a garment down over his head and wriggled into it, he spied Chett standing there. "Was it two?" he asked. "I dreamed I heard two blasts …"

"No dream," said Chett. "Two blasts to call the Watch to arms. Two blasts for foes approaching. There's an axe out there with *Piggy* writ on it, fat boy. Two blasts means *wildlings.*" The fear on that big moon face made him want to laugh. "Bugger them all to seven hells. Bloody Harma. Bloody Mance Rayder. Bloody Smallwood, he said they wouldn't be on us for another—"

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuhooooooooooooooooooooooo.

The sound went on and on and on, until it seemed it would never die. The ravens were flapping and screaming, flying about their cages and banging off the bars, and all about the camp the brothers of the Night's Watch were rising, donning their armor, buckling on swordbelts, reaching for battleaxes and bows. Samwell Tarly stood shaking, his face the same color as the snow that swirled down all around them. "Three," he squeaked to Chett, "that was three, I heard three. They never blow three. Not for hundreds and thousands of years. Three means—"

"—*Others.*" Chett made a sound that was half a laugh and half a sob, and suddenly his smallclothes were wet, and he could feel the piss running down his leg, see steam rising off the front of his breeches.

JAIME

An east wind blew through his tangled hair, as soft and fragrant as Cersei's fingers. He could hear birds singing, and feel the river moving beneath the boat as the sweep of the oars sent them toward the pale pink dawn. After so long in darkness, the world was so sweet that Jaime Lannister felt dizzy. *I am alive, and drunk on sunlight.* A laugh burst from his lips, sudden as a quail flushed from cover.

"Quiet," the wench grumbled, scowling. Scowls suited her broad homely face better than a smile. Not that Jaime had ever seen her smiling. He amused himself by picturing her in one of Cersei's silken gowns in place of her studded leather jerkin. *As well dress a cow in silk as this one.*

But the cow could row. Beneath her roughspun brown breeches were calves like cords of wood, and the long muscles of her arms stretched and tightened with each stroke of the oars. Even after rowing half the night, she showed no signs of tiring, which was more than could be said for his cousin Ser Cleos, laboring on the other oar. *A big strong peasant wench to look at her, yet she speaks like one highborn and wears longsword and dagger. Ah, but can she use them?* Jaime meant to find out, as soon as he rid himself of these fetters.

He wore iron manacles on his wrists and a matching pair about his ankles, joined by a length of heavy chain no more than a foot long. "You'd think my word as a Lannister was not good enough," he'd japed as they bound him. He'd been very drunk by then, thanks to Catelyn Stark. Of their escape from Riverrun, he recalled only bits and pieces. There had been some trouble with the gaoler, but the big wench had overcome him.

After that they had climbed an endless stair, around and around. His legs were weak as grass, and he'd stumbled twice or thrice, until the wench lent him an arm to lean on. At some point, he was bundled into a traveler's cloak and shoved into the bottom of a skiff. He remembered listening to Lady Catelyn command someone to raise the portcullis on the Water Gate. She was sending Ser Cleos Frey back to King's Landing with new terms for the queen, she'd declared in a tone that brooked no argument.

He must have drifted off then. The wine had made him sleepy, and it felt good to stretch, a luxury his chains had not permitted him in the cell. Jaime had long ago learned to snatch sleep in the saddle during a march. This was no harder. *Tyrion is going to laugh himself sick when he hears how I slept through my own escape.* He was awake now, though, and the fetters were irksome. "My lady," he called out, "if you'll strike off these chains, I'll spell you at those oars."

She scowled again, her face all horse teeth and glowering suspicion. "You'll wear your chains, Kingslayer."

"You figure to row all the way to King's Landing, wench?"

"You will call me Brienne. Not *wench*."

"My name is Ser Jaime. Not Kingslayer."

"Do you deny that you slew a king?"

"No. Do you deny your sex? If so, unlace those breeches and show me." He gave her an innocent smile. "I'd ask you to open your bodice, but from the look of you that wouldn't prove much."

Ser Cleos fretted. "Cousin, remember your courtesies."

The Lannister blood runs thin in this one. Cleos was his Aunt Genna's son by that dullard Emmon Frey, who had lived in terror of Lord Tywin Lannister since the day he wed his sister. When Lord Walder Frey had brought the Twins into the war on the side of Riverrun, Ser Emmon had chosen his wife's allegiance over his father's. *Casterly Rock got the worst of that bargain*, Jaime reflected. Ser Cleos looked like a weasel, fought like a goose, and had the courage of an especially brave ewe. Lady Stark had promised him release if he delivered her message to Tyrion, and Ser Cleos had solemnly vowed to do so.

They'd all done a deal of vowing back in that cell, Jaime most of all. That was Lady Catelyn's price for loosing him. She had laid the point of the big wench's sword against his heart and said, "Swear that you will never again take up arms against Stark nor Tully. Swear that you will compel your brother to honor his pledge to return my daughters safe and unharmed. Swear on your honor as a knight, on your honor as a Lannister, on your honor as a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard. Swear it by your sister's life, and your father's, and your son's, by the old gods and the new, and I'll send you back to your sister. Refuse, and I will have your blood." He remembered the prick of the steel through his rags as she twisted the point of the sword.

I wonder what the High Septon would have to say about the sanctity of oaths sworn while dead drunk, chained to a wall, with a sword pressed to your chest? Not that Jaime was truly concerned about that fat fraud, or the gods he claimed to serve. He remembered the pail Lady Catelyn had kicked over in his cell. A strange woman, to trust her girls to a man with shit for honor. Though she was trusting him as little as she dared. *She is putting her hope in Tyrion, not in me.* "Perhaps she is not so stupid after all," he said aloud.

His captor took it wrong. "I am not stupid. Nor deaf."

He was gentle with her; mocking this one would be so easy there would be no sport to it. "I was speaking to myself, and not of you. It's an easy habit to slip into in a cell."

She frowned at him, pushing the oars forward, pulling them back, pushing them forward, saying nothing.

As glib of tongue as she is fair of face. "By your speech, I'd judge you nobly born."

"My father is Selwyn of Tarth, by the grace of the gods Lord of Evenfall." Even that was given grudgingly.

"Tarth," Jaime said. "A ghastly large rock in the narrow sea, as I recall. And Evenfall is sworn to Storm's End. How is it that you serve Robb of Winterfell?"

"It is Lady Catelyn I serve. And she commanded me to deliver you safe to your brother Tyrion at King's Landing, not to bandy words with you. Be silent."

"I've had a bellyful of silence, woman."

"Talk with Ser Cleos then. I have no words for monsters."

Jaime hooted. "Are there monsters hereabouts? Hiding beneath the water, perhaps? In that thick of willows? And me without my sword!"

"A man who would violate his own sister, murder his king, and fling an innocent child to his death deserves no other name."

Innocent? The wretched boy was spying on us. All Jaime had wanted was an hour alone with Cersei. Their journey north had been one long torment; seeing her every day, unable to touch her, knowing that Robert stumbled drunkenly into her bed every night in that great creaking wheelhouse. Tyrion had done his best to keep him in a good humor, but it had not been enough. "You will be courteous as concerns Cersei, wench," he warned her.

"My name is Brienne, not *wench*."

"What do you care what a monster calls you?"

"My name is Brienne," she repeated, dogged as a hound.

"Lady Brienne?" She looked so uncomfortable that Jaime sensed a weakness. "Or would *Ser* Brienne be more to your taste?" He laughed. "No, I fear not. You can trick out a milk cow in crupper, crinet, and chamfron, and bard her all in silk, but that doesn't mean you can ride her into battle."

"Cousin Jaime, please, you ought not speak so roughly." Under his cloak, Ser Cleos wore a surcoat quartered with the twin towers of House Frey and the golden lion of Lannister. "We have far to go, we should not quarrel amongst ourselves."

"When I quarrel I do it with a sword, coz. I was speaking to the lady. Tell me, wench, are all the women on Tarth as homely as you? I pity the men, if so. Perhaps they do not know what real women look like, living on a dreary mountain in the sea."

"Tarth is beautiful," the wench grunted between strokes. "The Sapphire Isle, it's called. Be quiet, monster, unless you mean to make me gag you."

"She's rude as well, isn't she, coz?" Jaime asked Ser Cleos. "Though she has steel in her spine, I'll grant you. Not many men dare name me monster to my face." *Though behind my back they speak freely enough, I have no doubt.*

Ser Cleos coughed nervously. "Lady Brienne had those lies from Catelyn Stark, no doubt. The Starks cannot hope to defeat you with swords, ser, so now they make war with poisoned words."

They did defeat me with swords, you chinless cretin. Jaime smiled knowingly. Men will read all sorts of things into a knowing smile, if you let them. *Has cousin Cleos truly swallowed this kettle of dung, or is he striving to ingratiate himself? What do we have here, an honest muttonhead or a lickspittle?*

Ser Cleos prattled blithely on. "Any man who'd believe that a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard would harm a child does not know the meaning of honor."

Lickspittle. If truth be told, Jaime had come to rue heaving Brandon Stark out that window. Cersei had given him no end of grief afterward, when the boy refused to die. "He was *seven*, Jaime," she'd berated him. "Even if he understood what he saw, we should have been able to frighten him into silence."

"I didn't think you'd want—"

"You *never* think. If the boy should wake and tell his father what he saw—"

"If if if." He had pulled her into his lap. "If he wakes we'll say he was dreaming, we'll call him a liar, and should worse come to worst I'll kill Ned Stark."

"And then what do you imagine *Robert* will do?"

"Let Robert do as he pleases. I'll go to war with him if I must. The War for Cersei's Cunt, the singers will call it."

"Jaime, let go of me!" she raged, struggling to rise.

Instead he had kissed her. For a moment she resisted, but then her mouth opened under his. He remembered the taste of wine and cloves on her tongue. She gave a shudder. His hand went to her bodice and yanked, tearing the silk so her breasts spilled free, and for a time the Stark boy had been forgotten.

Had Cersei remembered him afterward and hired this man Lady Catelyn spoke of, to make sure the boy never woke? *If she wanted him dead she would have sent me. And it is not like her to chose a catspaw who would make such a royal botch of the killing.*

Downriver, the rising sun shimmered against the wind-whipped surface of the river. The south shore was red clay, smooth as any road. Smaller streams fed into the greater, and the rotting trunks of drowned trees clung to the banks. The north shore was wilder. High rocky bluffs rose twenty feet above them, crowned by stands of beech, oak, and chestnut. Jaime spied a watchtower on the heights ahead, growing taller with every stroke of the oars. Long before they were upon it, he knew that it stood abandoned, its weathered stones overgrown with climbing roses.

When the wind shifted, Ser Cleos helped the big wench run up the sail, a stiff triangle of striped-red-and-blue canvas. Tully colors, sure to cause them grief if they encountered any Lannister forces on the river, but it was the only sail they had. Brienne took the rudder. Jaime threw out the leeboard, his chains rattling as he moved. After that, they made better speed, with wind and current both favoring their flight. "We could save a deal of traveling if you delivered me to my father instead of my brother," he pointed out.

"Lady Catelyn's daughters are in King's Landing. I will return with the girls or not at all."

Jaime turned to Ser Cleos. "Cousin, lend me your knife."

"No." The woman tensed. "I will not have you armed." Her voice was as unyielding as stone.

She fears me, even in irons. "Cleos, it seems I must ask you to shave me. Leave the beard, but take the hair off my head."

"You'd be shaved bald?" asked Cleos Frey.

"The realm knows Jaime Lannister as a beardless knight with long golden hair. A bald man with a filthy yellow beard may pass unnoticed. I'd sooner not be recognized while I'm in irons."

The dagger was not as sharp as it might have been. Cleos hacked away manfully, sawing and ripping his way through the mats and tossing the hair over the side. The golden curls floated on the surface of the water, gradually falling astern. As the tangles vanished, a louse went crawling down his neck. Jaime caught it and crushed it against his thumbnail. Ser Cleos picked others from his scalp and flicked them into the water. Jaime doused his head and made Ser Cleos whet the blade before he let him scrape away the last inch of yellow stubble. When that was done, they trimmed back his beard as well.

The reflection in the water was a man he did not know. Not only was he bald, but he looked as though he had aged five years in that dungeon; his face was thinner, with hollows under his eyes and lines he did not remember. *I don't look as much like Cersei this way. She'll hate that.*

By midday, Ser Cleos had fallen asleep. His snores sounded like ducks mating. Jaime stretched out to watch the world flow past; after the dark cell, every rock and tree was a wonder.

A few one-room shacks came and went, perched on tall poles that made them look like cranes. Of the folk who lived there they saw no sign. Birds flew overhead, or cried out from the trees along the shore, and Jaime glimpsed silvery fish knifing through the water. *Tully trout, there's a bad omen*, he thought, until he saw a worse—one of the floating logs they passed turned out to be a dead man, bloodless and swollen. His cloak was tangled in the roots of a fallen tree, its color unmistakably Lannister crimson. He wondered if the corpse had been someone he knew.

The forks of the Trident were the easiest way to move goods or men across the riverlands. In times of peace, they would have encountered fisherfolk in their skiffs, grain barges being poled downstream, merchants selling needles and bolts of cloth from floating shops, perhaps even a gaily painted mummer's boat with quilted sails of half a hundred colors, making its way upriver from village to village and castle to castle.

But the war had taken its toll. They sailed past villages, but saw no villagers. An empty net, slashed and torn and hanging from some trees, was the only sign of fisherfolk. A young girl watering her horse rode off as soon as she glimpsed their sail. Later they passed a dozen peasants digging in a field beneath the shell of a burnt towerhouse. The men gazed at them with dull eyes, and went back to their labors once they decided the skiff was no threat.

The Red Fork was wide and slow, a meandering river of loops and bends dotted with tiny wooded islets and frequently choked by sandbars and snags that lurked just below the water's surface. Brienne seemed to have a keen eye for the dangers, though, and always seemed to find the channel. When Jaime complimented her on her knowledge of the river, she looked at him suspiciously and said, "I do not know the river. Tarth is an island. I learned to manage oars and sail before I ever sat a horse."

Ser Cleos sat up and rubbed at his eyes. "Gods, my arms are sore. I hope the wind lasts." He sniffed at it. "I smell rain."

Jaime would welcome a good rain. The dungeons of Riverrun were not the cleanest place in the Seven Kingdoms. By now he must smell like an overripe cheese.

Cleos squinted downriver. "Smoke."

A thin grey finger crooked them on. It was rising from the south bank several miles on, twisting and curling. Below, Jaime made out the smouldering remains of a large building, and a live oak full of dead women.

The crows had scarcely started on their corpses. The thin ropes cut deeply into the soft flesh of their throats, and when the wind blew they twisted and swayed. "This was not chivalrously done," said Brienne when they were close enough to see it clearly. "No true knight would condone such wanton butchery."

"True knights see worse every time they ride to war, wench," said Jaime. "And *do* worse, yes."

Brienne turned the rudder toward the shore. "I'll leave no innocents to be food for crows."

"A heartless wench. Crows need to eat as well. Stay to the river and leave the dead alone, woman."

They landed upstream of where the great oak leaned out over the water. As Brienne lowered the sail, Jaime climbed out, clumsy in his chains. The Red Fork filled his boots and soaked through the ragged breeches. Laughing, he dropped to his knees, plunged his head under the water, and came up drenched and dripping. His hands were caked with dirt, and when he rubbed them clean in the current they seemed thinner and paler than he remembered. His legs were stiff as well, and unsteady when he put his weight upon them. *I was too bloody long in Hoster Tully's dungeon.*

Brienne and Cleos dragged the skiff onto the bank. The corpses hung above their heads, ripening in death like foul fruit. "One of us will need to cut them down," the wench said.

"I'll climb." Jaime waded ashore, clanking. "Just get these chains off."

The wench was staring up at one of the dead women. Jaime shuffled closer with small stutter steps, the only kind the foot-long chain permitted. When he saw the crude sign hung about the neck of the highest corpse, he smiled. "*They Lay With Lions*," he read. "Oh, yes, woman, this was most *unchivalrously* done … but by your side, not mine. I wonder who they were, these women?"

"Tavern wenches," said Ser Cleos Frey. "This was an inn, I remember it now. Some men of my escort spent the night here when we last returned to Riverrun." Nothing remained of the building but the stone foundation and a tangle of collapsed beams, charred black. Smoke still rose from the ashes.

Jaime left brothels and whores to his brother Tyrion; Cersei was the only woman he had ever wanted. "The girls pleasured some of my lord father's soldiers, it would seem. Perhaps served them food and drink. That's how they earned their traitors' collars, with a kiss and a cup of ale." He glanced up and down the river, to make certain they were quite alone. "This is Bracken land. Lord Jonos might have ordered them killed. My father burned his castle, I fear he loves us not."

"It might be Marq Piper's work," said Ser Cleos. "Or that wisp o' the wood Beric Dondarrion, though I'd heard he kills only soldiers. Perhaps a band of Roose Bolton's northmen?"

"Bolton was defeated by my father on the Green Fork."

"But not broken," said Ser Cleos. "He came south again when Lord Tywin marched against the fords. The word at Riverrun was that he'd taken Harrenhal from Ser Amory Lorch."

Jaime liked the sound of that not at all. "Brienne," he said, granting her the courtesy of the name in the hopes that she might listen, "if Lord Bolton holds Harrenhal, both the Trident and the kingsroad are likely watched."

He thought he saw a touch of uncertainty in her big blue eyes. "You are under my protection. They'd need to kill me."

"I shouldn't think that would trouble them."

"I am as good a fighter as you," she said defensively. "I was one of King Renly's chosen seven. With his own hands, he cloaked me with the striped silk of the Rainbow Guard."

"The *Rainbow* Guard? You and six other girls, was it? A singer once said that all maids are fair in silk … but he never met you, did he?"

The woman turned red. "We have graves to dig." She went to climb the tree.

The lower limbs of the oak were big enough for her to stand upon once she'd gotten up the trunk. She walked amongst the leaves, dagger in hand, cutting down the corpses. Flies swarmed around the bodies as they fell, and the stench grew worse with each one she dropped. "This is a deal of trouble to take for whores," Ser Cleos complained. "What are we supposed to dig with? We have no spades, and I will not use my sword, I—"

Brienne gave a shout. She jumped down rather than climbing. "To the boat. Be quick. There's a sail."

They made what haste they could, though Jaime could hardly run, and had to be pulled back up into the skiff by his cousin. Brienne shoved off with an oar and raised sail hurriedly. “Ser Cleos, I’ll need you to row as well.”

He did as she bid. The skiff began to cut the water a bit faster; current, wind, and oars all worked for them. Jaime sat chained, peering upriver. Only the top of the other sail was visible. With the way the Red Fork looped, it looked to be across the fields, moving north behind a screen of trees while they moved south, but he knew that was deceptive. He lifted both hands to shade his eyes. “Mud red and watery blue,” he announced.

Brienne’s big mouth worked soundlessly, giving her the look of a cow chewing its cud. “Faster, ser.”

The inn soon vanished behind them, and they lost sight of the top of the sail as well, but that meant nothing. Once the pursuers swung around the loop they would become visible again. “We can hope the noble Tullys will stop to bury the dead whores, I suppose.” The prospect of returning to his cell did not appeal to Jaime. *Tyrion could think of something clever now, but all that occurs to me is to go at them with a sword.*

For the good part of an hour, they played peek-and-seek with the pursuers, sweeping around bends and between small wooded isles. Just when they were starting to hope that somehow they might have left behind the pursuit, the distant sail became visible again. Ser Cleos paused in his stroke. “The Others take them.” He wiped sweat from his brow.

“*Row!*” Brienne said.

“That is a river galley coming after us,” Jaime announced after he’d watched for a while. With every stroke, it seemed to grow a little larger. “Nine oars on each side, which means eighteen men. More, if they crowded on fighters as well as rowers. And larger sails than ours. We cannot outrun her.”

Ser Cleos froze at his oars. “Eighteen, you said?”

“Six for each of us. I’d want eight, but these bracelets hinder me somewhat.” Jaime held up his wrists. “Unless the Lady Brienne would be so kind as to unshackle me?”

She ignored him, putting all her effort into her stroke.

“We had half a night’s start on them,” Jaime said. “They’ve been rowing since dawn, resting two oars at a time. They’ll be exhausted. Just now the sight of our sail has given them a burst of strength, but that will not last. We ought to be able to kill a good many of them.”

Ser Cleos gaped. “But … there are *eighteen*.”

“At the least. More likely twenty or twenty-five.”

His cousin groaned. “We can’t hope to defeat eighteen.”

“Did I say we could? The best we can hope for is to die with swords in our hands.” He was perfectly sincere. Jaime Lannister had never been afraid of death.

Brienne broke off rowing. Sweat had stuck strands of her flax-colored hair to her forehead, and her grimace made her look homelier than ever. “You are under my protection,” she said, her voice so thick with anger that it was almost a growl.

He had to laugh at such fierceness. *She’s the Hound with teats*, he thought. *Or would be, if she had any teats to speak of*. “Then protect me, wench. Or free me to protect myself.”

The galley was skimming downriver, a great wooden dragonfly. The water around her was churned white by the furious action of her oars. She was gaining visibly, the men on her deck crowding forward as she came on. Metal glinted in their hands, and Jaime could see bows as well. *Archers.* He hated archers.

At the prow of the onrushing galley stood a stocky man with a bald head, bushy grey eyebrows, and brawny arms. Over his mail he wore a soiled white surcoat with a weeping willow embroidered in pale green, but his cloak was fastened with a silver trout. *Riverrun’s captain of guards*. In his day, Ser Robin Ryger had been a notably tenacious fighter, but his day was done; he was of an age with Hoster Tully, and had grown old with his lord.

When the boats were fifty yards apart, Jaime cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted back over the water. "*Come to wish me godspeed, Ser Robin?*"

"*Come to take you back, Kingslayer*," Ser Robin Ryger bellowed. "*How is it that you've lost your golden hair?*"

"*I hope to blind my enemies with the sheen off my head. It's worked well enough for you.*"

Ser Robin was unamused. The distance between skiff and galley had shrunk to forty yards. "*Throw your oars and your weapons into the river, and no one need be harmed.*"

Ser Cleos twisted around. "Jaime, tell him we were freed by Lady Catelyn … an exchange of captives, lawful …"

Jaime told him, for all the good it did. "*Catelyn Stark does not rule in Riverrun,*" Ser Robin shouted back. Four archers crowded into position on either side of him, two standing and two kneeling. "*Cast your swords into the water.*"

"*I have no sword*," he returned, "*but if I did, I'd stick it through your belly and hack the balls off those four cravens.*"

A flight of arrows answered him. One thudded into the mast, two pierced the sail, and the fourth missed Jaime by a foot.

Another of the Red Fork's broad loops loomed before them. Brienne angled the skiff across the bend. The yard swung as they turned, their sail cracking as it filled with wind. Ahead, a large island sat in midstream. The main channel flowed right. To the left a cutoff ran between the island and the high bluffs of the north shore. Brienne moved the tiller and the skiff sheared left, sail rippling. Jaime watched her eyes. *Pretty eyes*, he thought, *and calm.* He knew how to read a man's eyes. He knew what fear looked like. *She is determined, not desperate.*

Thirty yards behind, the galley was entering the bend. "Ser Cleos, take the tiller," the wench commanded. "Kingslayer, take an oar and keep us off the rocks."

"As my lady commands." An oar was not a sword, but the blade could break a man's face if well swung, and the shaft could be used to parry.

Ser Cleos shoved the oar into Jaime's hand and scrambled aft. They crossed the head of the island and turned sharply down the cutoff, sending a wash of water against the face of the bluff as the boat tilted. The island was densely wooded, a tangle of willows, oaks, and tall pines that cast deep shadows across the rushing water, hiding snags and the rotted trunks of drowned trees. To their left, the bluff rose sheer and rocky, and at its foot the river foamed whitely around broken boulders and tumbles of rock fallen from the cliff face.

They passed from sunlight into shadow, hidden from the galley's view between the green wall of the trees and the stony grey-brown bluff. *A few moments' respite from the arrows*, Jaime thought, pushing them off a half-submerged boulder.

The skiff rocked. He heard a soft splash, and when he glanced around, Brienne was gone. A moment later, he spied her again, pulling herself from the water at the base of the bluff. She waded through a shallow pool, scrambled over some rocks, and began to climb. Ser Cleos goggled, mouth open. *Fool*, thought Jaime. "Ignore the wench," he snapped at his cousin. "Steer."

They could see the sail moving behind the trees. The river galley came into full view at the top of the cutoff, twenty-five yards behind. Her bow swung hard as she came around, and a half-dozen arrows took flight, but all went well wide. The motion of the two boats was giving the archers difficulty, but Jaime knew they'd soon enough learn to compensate. Brienne was halfway up the cliff face, pulling herself from handhold to handhold. *Ryger's sure to see her, and once he does he'll have those bowmen bring her down.* Jaime decided to see if the old man's pride would make him stupid. "*Ser Robin,*" he shouted, "*hear me for a moment.*"

Ser Robin raised a hand, and his archers lowered their bows. "*Say what you will, Kingslayer, but say it quickly*."

The skiff swung through a litter of broken stones as Jaime called out, "*I know a better way to settle this—single combat. You and I.*"

"*I was not born this morning, Lannister.*"

"*No, but you're like to die this afternoon.*" Jaime raised his hands so the other could see the manacles. "*I'll fight you in chains. What could you fear?"*

"Not you, ser. If the choice were mine, I'd like nothing better, but I am commanded to bring you back alive if possible. Bowmen." He signaled them on. "*Notch. Draw. Loo—"*

The range was less than twenty yards. The archers could scarcely have missed, but as they pulled on their longbows a rain of pebbles cascaded down around them. Small stones rattled on their deck, bounced off their helms, and made splashes on both sides of the bow. Those who had wits enough to understand raised their eyes just as a boulder the size of a cow detached itself from the top of the bluff. Ser Robin shouted in dismay. The stone tumbled through the air, struck the face of the cliff, cracked in two, and smashed down on them. The larger piece snapped the mast, tore through the sail, sent two of the archers flying into the river, and crushed the leg of a rower as he bent over his oar. The rapidity with which the galley began to fill with water suggested that the smaller fragment had punched right through her hull. The oarsman's screams echoed off the bluff while the archers flailed wildly in the current. From the way they were splashing, neither man could swim. Jaime laughed.

By the time they emerged from the cutoff, the galley was foundering amongst pools, eddies, and snags, and Jaime Lannister had decided that the gods were good. Ser Robin and his thrice-damned archers would have a long wet walk back to Riverrun, and he was rid of the big homely wench as well. *I could not have planned it better myself. Once I'm free of these irons …*

Ser Cleos raised a shout. When Jaime looked up, Brienne was lumbering along the clifftop well ahead of them, having cut across a finger of land while they were following the bend in the river. She threw herself off the rock, and looked almost graceful as she folded into a dive. It would have been ungracious to hope that she would smash her head on a stone. Ser Cleos turned the skiff toward her. Thankfully, Jaime still had his oar. *One good swing when she comes paddling up and I'll be free of her.*

Instead, he found himself stretching the oar out over the water. Brienne grabbed hold, and Jaime pulled her in. As he helped her into the skiff, water ran from her hair and dripped from her sodden clothing to pool on the deck. *She's even uglier wet. Who would have thought it possible?* "You're a bloody stupid wench," he told her. "We could have sailed on without you. I suppose you expect me to thank you?"

"I want none of your thanks, Kingslayer. I swore an oath to bring you safe to King's Landing."

"And you actually mean to keep it?" Jaime gave her his brightest smile. "Now there's a wonder."

CATELYN

Ser Desmond Grell had served House Tully all his life. He had been a squire when Catelyn was born, a knight when she learned to walk and ride and swim, master-at-arms by the day that she was wed. He had seen Lord Hoster's little Cat become a young woman, a great lord's lady, mother to a king. *And now he has seen me become a traitor as well.*

Her brother Edmure had named Ser Desmond castellan of Riverrun when he rode off to battle, so it fell to him to deal with her crime. To ease his discomfort he brought her father's steward with him, dour Utherydes Wayn. The two men stood and looked at her; Ser Desmond stout, red-faced, embarrassed, Utherydes grave, gaunt, melancholy. Each waited for the other to speak. *They have given their lives to my father's service, and I have repaid them with disgrace,* Catelyn thought wearily.

"Your sons," Ser Desmond said at last. "Maester Vyman told us. The poor lads. Terrible. Terrible. But …"

"We share your grief, my lady," said Utherydes Wayn. "All Riverrun mourns with you, but …"

"The news must have driven you mad," Ser Desmond broke in, "a madness of grief, a *mother's* madness, men will understand. You did not know …"

"I did," Catelyn said firmly. "I understood what I was doing and knew it was treasonous. If you fail to punish me, men will believe that we connived together to free Jaime Lannister. It was mine own act and mine alone, and I alone must answer for it. Put me in the Kingslayer's empty irons, and I will wear them proudly, if that is how it must be."

"Fetters?" The very word seemed to shock poor Ser Desmond. "For the king's mother, my lord's own daughter? Impossible."

"Mayhaps," said the steward Utherydes Wayn, "my lady would consent to be confined to her chambers until Ser Edmure returns. A time alone, to pray for her murdered sons?"

"Confined, aye," Ser Desmond said. "Confined to a tower cell, that would serve."

"If I am to be confined, let it be in my father's chambers, so I might comfort him in his last days."

Ser Desmond considered a moment. "Very well. You shall lack no comfort nor courtesy, but freedom of the castle is denied you. Visit the sept as you need, but elsewise remain in Lord Hoster's chambers until Lord Edmure returns."

"As you wish." Her brother was no lord while their father lived, but Catelyn did not correct him. "Set a guard on me if you must, but I give you my pledge that I shall attempt no escape."

Ser Desmond nodded, plainly glad to be done with his distasteful task, but sad-eyed Utherydes Wayn lingered a moment after the castellan took his leave. "It was a grave thing you did, my lady, but for naught. Ser Desmond has sent Ser Robin Ryger after them, to bring back the Kingslayer … or failing that, his head."

Catelyn had expected no less. *May the Warrior give strength to your sword arm, Brienne*, she prayed. She had done all she could; nothing remained but to hope.

Her things were moved into her father's bedchamber, dominated by the great canopied bed she had been born in, its pillars carved in the shapes of leaping trout. Her father himself had been moved half a turn down the stair, his sickbed placed to face the triangular balcony that opened off his solar, from whence he could see the rivers that he had always loved so well.

Lord Hoster was sleeping when Catelyn entered. She went out to the balcony and stood with one hand on the rough stone balustrade. Beyond the point of the castle the swift Tumblestone joined the placid Red Fork, and she could see a long way downriver. *If a striped sail comes from the east, it will be Ser Robin returning*. For the moment the surface of the waters was empty. She thanked the gods for that, and went back inside to sit with her father.

Catelyn could not say if Lord Hoster knew that she was there, or if her presence brought him any comfort, but it gave her solace to be with him. *What would you say if you knew my crime, Father?* she wondered. *Would you have done as I did, if it were Lysa and me in the hands of our enemies? Or would you condemn me too, and call it mother's madness?*

There was a smell of death about that room; a heavy smell, sweet and foul, clinging. It reminded her of the sons that she had lost, her sweet Bran and her little Rickon, slain at the hand of Theon Greyjoy, who had been Ned's ward. She still grieved for Ned, she would always grieve for Ned, but to have her babies taken as well … "It is a monstrous cruel thing to lose a child," she whispered softly, more to herself than to her father.

Lord Hoster's eyes opened. "*Tansy*," he husked in a voice thick with pain.

He does not know me. Catelyn had grown accustomed to him taking her for her mother or her sister Lysa, but Tansy was a name strange to her. "It's Catelyn," she said. "It's Cat, Father."

"Forgive me … the blood … oh, please … Tansy …"

Could there have been another woman in her father's life? Some village maiden he had wronged when he was young, perhaps? *Could he have found comfort in some serving wench's arms after Mother died?* It was a queer thought, unsettling. Suddenly she felt as though she had not known her father at all. "Who is Tansy, my lord? Do you want me to send for her, Father? Where would I find the woman? Does she still live?"

Lord Hoster groaned. "*Dead*." His hand groped for hers. "You'll have others … sweet babes, and trueborn."

Others? Catelyn thought. *Has he forgotten that Ned is gone? Is he still talking to Tansy, or is it me now, or Lysa, or Mother?*

When he coughed, the sputum came up bloody. He clutched her fingers. "… be a good wife and the gods will bless you … sons … trueborn sons … *aaahhh*." The sudden spasm of pain made Lord Hoster's hand tighten. His nails dug into her hand, and he gave a muffled scream.

Maester Vyman came quickly, to mix another dose of milk of the poppy and help his lord swallow it down. Soon enough, Lord Hoster Tully had fallen back into a heavy sleep.

"He was asking after a woman," said Cat. "Tansy."

"Tansy?" The maester looked at her blankly.

"You know no one by that name? A serving girl, a woman from some nearby village? Perhaps someone from years past?" Catelyn had been gone from Riverrun for a very long time.

"No, my lady. I can make inquiries, if you like. Utherydes Wayn would surely know if any such person ever served at Riverrun. Tansy, did you say? The smallfolk often name their daughters after flowers and herbs." The maester looked thoughtful. "There was a widow, I recall, she used to come to the castle looking for old shoes in need of new soles. Her name was Tansy, now that I think on it. Or was it Pansy? Some such. But she has not come for many years …"

"Her name was Violet," said Catelyn, who remembered the old woman very well.

"Was it?" The maester looked apologetic. "My pardons, Lady Catelyn, but I may not stay. Ser Desmond has decreed that we are to speak to you only so far as our duties require."

"Then you must do as he commands." Catelyn could not blame Ser Desmond; she had given him small reason to trust her, and no doubt he feared that she might use the loyalty that many of the folk of Riverrun would still feel toward their lord's daughter to work some further mischief. *I am free of the war, at least*, she told herself, *if only for a little while.*

After the maester had gone, she donned a woolen cloak and stepped out onto the balcony once more. Sunlight shimmered on the rivers, gilding the surface of the waters as they rolled past the castle. Catelyn shaded her eyes against the glare, searching for a distant sail, dreading the sight of one. But there was nothing, and nothing meant that her hopes were still alive.

All that day she watched, and well into the night, until her legs ached from the standing. A raven came to the castle in late afternoon, flapping down on great black wings to the rookery. *Dark wings, dark words*, she thought, remembering the last bird that had come and the horror it had brought.

Maester Vyman returned at evenfall to minister to Lord Tully and bring Catelyn a modest supper of bread, cheese, and boiled beef with horseradish. "I spoke to Utherydes Wayn, my lady. He is quite certain that no woman by the name of Tansy has ever been at Riverrun during his service."

"There was a raven today, I saw. Has Jaime been taken again?" *Or slain, gods forbid?*

"No, my lady, we've had no word of the Kingslayer."

"Is it another battle, then? Is Edmure in difficulty? Or Robb? Please, be kind, put my fears at rest."

"My lady, I should not …" Vyman glanced about, as if to make certain no one else was in the room. "Lord Tywin has left the riverlands. All's quiet on the fords."

"Whence came the raven, then?"

"From the west," he answered, busying himself with Lord Hoster's bedclothes and avoiding her eyes.

"Was it news of Robb?"

He hesitated. "Yes, my lady."

"Something is wrong." She knew it from his manner. He was hiding something from her. "Tell me. Is it Robb? Is he hurt?" *Not dead, gods be good, please do not tell me that he is dead.*

"His Grace took a wound storming the Crag," Maester Vyman said, still evasive, "but writes that it is no cause for concern, and that he hopes to return soon."

"A wound? What sort of wound? How serious?"

"No cause for concern, he writes."

"All wounds concern me. Is he being cared for?"

"I am certain of it. The maester at the Crag will tend to him, I have no doubt."

"Where was he wounded?"

"My lady, I am commanded not to speak with you. I am sorry." Gathering up his potions, Vyman made a hurried exit, and once again Catelyn was left alone with her father. The milk of the poppy had done its work, and Lord Hoster was sunk in heavy sleep. A thin line of spittle ran down from one corner of his open mouth to dampen his pillow. Catelyn took a square of linen and wiped it away gently. When she touched him, Lord Hoster moaned. "Forgive me," he said, so softly she could scarcely hear the words. "Tansy … blood … the blood … gods be kind …"

His words disturbed her more than she could say, though she could make no sense of them. *Blood*, she thought. *Must it all come back to blood? Father, who was this woman, and what did you do to her that needs so much forgiveness?*

That night, Catelyn slept fitfully, haunted by formless dreams of her children, the lost and the dead. Well before the break of day, she woke with her father's words echoing in her ears. *Sweet babes, and trueborn … why would he say that, unless … could he have fathered a bastard on this woman Tansy?* She could not believe it. Her brother Edmure, yes; it would not have surprised her to learn that Edmure had a dozen natural children. But not her father, not Lord Hoster Tully, never.

Could Tansy be some pet name he called Lysa, the way he called me Cat? Lord Hoster had mistaken her for her sister before. *You'll have others, he said. Sweet babes, and trueborn.* Lysa had miscarried five times, twice in the Eyrie, thrice at King's Landing … but never at Riverrun, where Lord Hoster would have been at hand to comfort her. *Never, unless … unless she was with child, that first time …*

She and her sister had been married on the same day, and left in their father's care when their new husbands had ridden off to rejoin Robert's rebellion. Afterward, when their moon blood did not come at the accustomed time, Lysa had gushed happily of the sons she was certain they carried. "Your

son will be heir to Winterfell and mine to the Eyrie. Oh, they'll be the best of friends, like your Ned and Lord Robert. They'll be more brothers than cousins, truly, I just know it." *She was so happy.*

But Lysa's blood had come not long after, and all the joy had gone out of her. Catelyn had always thought that Lysa had simply been a little late, but if she *had* been with child …

She remembered the first time she gave her sister Robb to hold; small, red-faced, and squalling, but strong even then, full of life. No sooner had Catelyn placed the babe in her sister's arms than Lysa's face dissolved into tears. Hurriedly she had thrust the baby back at Catelyn and fled.

If she had lost a child before, that might explain Father's words, and much else besides … Lysa's match with Lord Arryn had been hastily arranged, and Jon was an old man even then, older than their father. *An old man without an heir.* His first two wives had left him childless, his brother's son had been murdered with Brandon Stark in King's Landing, his gallant cousin had died in the Battle of the Bells. He needed a young wife if House Arryn was to continue … *a young wife known to be fertile.*

Catelyn rose, threw on a robe, and descended the steps to the darkened solar to stand over her father. A sense of helpless dread filled her. "Father," she said, "Father, I know what you did." She was no longer an innocent bride with a head full of dreams. She was a widow, a traitor, a grieving mother, and wise, wise in the ways of the world. "You made him take her," she whispered. "Lysa was the price Jon Arryn had to pay for the swords and spears of House Tully."

Small wonder her sister's marriage had been so loveless. The Arryns were proud, and prickly of their honor. Lord Jon might wed Lysa to bind the Tullys to the cause of the rebellion, and in hopes of a son, but it would have been hard for him to love a woman who came to his bed soiled and unwilling. He would have been kind, no doubt; dutiful, yes; but Lysa needed warmth.

The next day, as she broke her fast, Catelyn asked for quill and paper and began a letter to her sister in the Vale of Arryn. She told Lysa of Bran and Rickon, struggling with the words, but mostly she wrote of their father. *His thoughts are all of the wrong he did you, now that his time grows short. Maester Vyman says he dare not make the milk of the poppy any stronger. It is time for Father to lay down his sword and shield. It is time for him to rest. Yet he fights on grimly, will not yield. It is for your sake, I think. He needs your forgiveness. The war has made the road from the Eyrie to Riverrun dangerous to travel, I know, but surely a strong force of knights could see you safely through the Mountains of the Moon? A hundred men, or a thousand? And if you cannot come, will you not write him at least? A few words of love, so he might die in peace? Write what you will, and I shall read it to him, and ease his way.*

Even as she set the quill aside and asked for sealing wax, Catelyn sensed that the letter was like to be too little and too late. Maester Vyman did not believe Lord Hoster would linger long enough for a raven to reach the Eyrie and return. *Though he has said much the same before …* Tully men did not surrender easily, no matter the odds. After she entrusted the parchment to the maester's care, Catelyn went to the sept and lit a candle to the Father Above for her own father's sake, a second to the Crone, who had let the first raven into the world when she peered through the door of death, and a third to the Mother, for Lysa and all the children they had both lost.

Later that day, as she sat at Lord Hoster's bedside with a book, reading the same passage over and over, she heard the sound of loud voices and a trumpet's blare. *Ser Robin*, she thought at once, flinching. She went to the balcony, but there was nothing to be seen out on the rivers, but she could hear the voices more clearly from outside, the sound of many horses, the clink of armor, and here and there a cheer. Catelyn made her way up the winding stairs to the roof of the keep. *Ser Desmond did not forbid me the roof*, she told herself as she climbed.

The sounds were coming from the far side of the castle, by the main gate. A knot of men stood before the portcullis as it rose in jerks and starts, and in the fields beyond, outside the castle, were several hundred riders. When the wind blew, it lifted their banners, and she trembled in relief at the sight of the leaping trout of Riverrun. *Edmure.*

It was two hours before he saw fit to come to her. By then the castle rang to the sound of noisy reunions as men embraced the women and children they had left behind. Three ravens had risen from the rookery, black wings beating at the air as they took flight. Catelyn watched them from her father's balcony. She had washed her hair, changed her clothing, and prepared herself for her brother's reproaches … but even so, the waiting was hard.

When at last she heard sounds outside her door, she sat and folded her hands in her lap. Dried red mud spattered Edmure's boots, greaves, and surcoat. To look at him, you would never know he had won his battle. He was thin and drawn, with pale cheeks, unkempt beard, and too-bright eyes.

"Edmure," Catelyn said, worried, "you look unwell. Has something happened? Have the Lannisters crossed the river?"

"I threw them back. Lord Tywin, Gregor Clegane, Addam Marbrand, I turned them away. Stannis, though …" He grimaced.

"Stannis? What of Stannis?"

"He lost the battle at King's Landing," Edmure said unhappily. "His fleet was burned, his army routed."

A Lannister victory was ill tidings, but Catelyn could not share her brother's obvious dismay. She still had nightmares about the shadow she had seen slide across Renly's tent and the way the blood had come flowing out through the steel of his gorget. "Stannis was no more a friend than Lord Tywin."

"You do not understand. Highgarden has declared for Joffrey. Dorne as well. All the south." His mouth tightened. "And *you* see fit to loose the Kingslayer. You had no right."

"I had a mother's right." Her voice was calm, though the news about Highgarden was a savage blow to Robb's hopes. She could not think about that now, though.

"No right," Edmure repeated. "He was Robb's captive, your *king*'s captive, and Robb charged me to keep him safe."

"Brienne will keep him safe. She swore it on her sword."

"That *woman*?"

"She will deliver Jaime to King's Landing, and bring Arya and Sansa back to us safely."

"Cersei will never give them up."

"Not Cersei. Tyrion. He swore it, in open court. And the Kingslayer swore it as well."

"Jaime's word is worthless. As for the Imp, it's said he took an axe in the head during the battle. He'll be dead before your Brienne reaches King's Landing, if she ever does."

"Dead?" *Could the gods truly be so merciless?* She had made Jaime swear a hundred oaths, but it was his brother's promise she had pinned her hopes on.

Edmure was blind to her distress. "Jaime was *my* charge, and I mean to have him back. I've sent ravens—"

"Ravens to whom? How many?"

"Three," he said, "so the message will be certain to reach Lord Bolton. By river or road, the way from Riverrun to King's Landing must needs take them close by Harrenhal."

"Harrenhal." The very word seemed to darken the room. Horror thickened her voice as she said, "Edmure, do you know what you have done?"

"Have no fear, I left your part out. I wrote that Jaime had escaped, and offered a thousand dragons for his recapture."

Worse and worse, Catelyn thought in despair. *My brother is a fool*. Unbidden, unwanted, tears filled her eyes. "If this was an escape," she said softly, "and not an exchange of hostages, why should the Lannisters give my daughters to Brienne?"

"It will never come to that. The Kingslayer will be returned to us, I have made certain of it."

"All you have made certain is that I shall never see my daughters again. Brienne might have gotten him to King's Landing safely … *so long as no one was hunting for them.* But now …" Catelyn could not go on. "Leave me, Edmure." She had no right to command him, here in the castle that

would soon be his, yet her tone would brook no argument. “Leave me to Father and my grief, I have no more to say to you. Go. *Go*.” All she wanted was to lie down, to close her eyes and sleep, and pray no dreams would come.

ARYA

The sky was as black as the walls of Harrenhal behind them, and the rain fell soft and steady, muffling the sound of their horses' hooves and running down their faces.

They rode north, away from the lake, following a rutted farm road across the torn fields and into the woods and streams. Arya took the lead, kicking her stolen horse to a brisk heedless trot until the trees closed in around her. Hot Pie and Gendry followed as best they could. Wolves howled off in the distance, and she could hear Hot Pie's heavy breathing. No one spoke. From time to time Arya glanced over her shoulder, to make sure the two boys had not fallen too far behind, and to see if they were being pursued.

They would be, she knew. She had stolen three horses from the stables and a map and a dagger from Roose Bolton's own solar, and killed a guard on the postern gate, slitting his throat when he knelt to pick up the worn iron coin that Jaqen H'ghar had given her. Someone would find him lying dead in his own blood, and then the hue and cry would go up. They would wake Lord Bolton and search Harrenhal from crenel to cellar, and when they did they would find the map and the dagger missing, along with some swords from the armory, bread and cheese from the kitchens, a baker boy, a 'prentice smith, and a cupbearer called Nan … or Weasel, or Arry, depending on who you asked.

The Lord of the Dreadfort would not come after them himself. Roose Bolton would stay abed, his pasty flesh dotted with leeches, giving commands in his whispery soft voice. His man Walton might lead the hunt, the one they called Steelshanks for the greaves he always wore on his long legs. Or perhaps it would be slobbery Vargo Hoat and his sellswords, who named themselves the Brave Companions. Others called them Bloody Mummers (though never to their faces), and sometimes the Footmen, for Lord Vargo's habit of cutting off the hands and feet of men who displeased him.

If they catch us, he'll cut off our hands and feet, Arya thought, *and then Roose Bolton will peel the skin off us.* She was still dressed in her page's garb, and on the breast over her heart was sewn Lord Bolton's sigil, the flayed man of the Dreadfort.

Every time she looked back, she half expected to see a blaze of torches pouring out the distant gates of Harrenhal or rushing along the tops of its huge high walls, but there was nothing. Harrenhal slept on, until it was lost in darkness and hidden behind the trees.

When they crossed the first stream, Arya turned her horse aside and led them off the road, following the twisting course of the water for a quarter-mile before finally scrambling out and up a stony bank. If the hunters brought dogs, that might throw them off the scent, she hoped. They could not stay on the road. *There is death on the road,* she told herself, *death on all the roads.*

Gendry and Hot Pie did not question her choice. She had the map, after all, and Hot Pie seemed almost as terrified of her as of the men who might be coming after them. He had seen the guard she'd killed. *It's better if he's scared of me*, she told herself. *That way he'll do like I say, instead of something stupid.*

She should be more frightened herself, she knew. She was only ten, a skinny girl on a stolen horse with a dark forest ahead of her and men behind who would gladly cut off her feet. Yet somehow she felt calmer than she ever had in Harrenhal. The rain had washed the guard's blood off her fingers, she wore a sword across her back, wolves were prowling through the dark like lean grey shadows, and Arya Stark was unafraid. *Fear cuts deeper than swords*, she whispered under her breath, the words that Syrio Forel had taught her, and Jaqen's words too, *valar morghulis.*

The rain stopped and started again and stopped once more and started, but they had good cloaks to keep the water off. Arya kept them moving at a slow steady pace. It was too black beneath the trees to ride any faster; the boys were no horsemen, neither one, and the soft broken ground was treacherous with half-buried roots and hidden stones. They crossed another road, its deep ruts filled with runoff, but Arya shunned it. Up and down the rolling hills she took them, through brambles and

briars and tangles of underbrush, along the bottoms of narrow gullies where branches heavy with wet leaves slapped at their faces as they passed.

Gendry's mare lost her footing in the mud once, going down hard on her hindquarters and spilling him from the saddle, but neither horse nor rider was hurt, and Gendry got that stubborn look on his face and mounted right up again. Not long after, they came upon three wolves devouring the corpse of a fawn. When Hot Pie's horse caught the scent, he shied and bolted. Two of the wolves fled as well, but the third raised his head and bared his teeth, prepared to defend his kill. "Back off," Arya told Gendry. "Slow, so you don't spook him." They edged their mounts away, until the wolf and his feast were no longer in sight. Only then did she swing about to ride after Hot Pie, who was clinging desperately to the saddle as he crashed through the trees.

Later, they passed through a burned village, threading their way carefully between the shells of blackened hovels and past the bones of a dozen dead men hanging from a row of apple trees. When Hot Pie saw them he began to pray, a thin whispered plea for the Mother's mercy, repeated over and over. Arya looked up at the fleshless dead in their wet rotting clothes and said her own prayer. *Ser Gregor,* it went, *Dunsen, Polliver, Raff the Sweetling. The Tickler and the Hound. Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, King Joffrey, Queen Cersei.* She ended it with *valar morghulis*, touched Jaqen's coin where it nestled under her belt, and then reached up and plucked an apple from among the dead men as she rode beneath them. It was mushy and overripe, but she ate it worms and all.

That was the day without a dawn. Slowly the sky lightened around them, but they never saw the sun. Black turned to grey, and colors crept timidly back into the world. The soldier pines were dressed in somber greens, the broadleafs in russets and faded golds already beginning to brown. They stopped long enough to water the horses and eat a cold, quick breakfast, ripping apart a loaf of the bread that Hot Pie had stolen from the kitchens and passing chunks of hard yellow cheese from hand to hand.

"Do you know where we're going?" Gendry asked her.

"North," said Arya.

Hot Pie peered around uncertainly. "Which way is north?"

She used her cheese to point. "That way."

"But there's no sun. How do you know?"

"From the moss. See how it grows mostly on one side of the trees? That's south."

"What do we want with the north?" Gendry wanted to know.

"The Trident." Arya unrolled the stolen map to show them. "See? Once we reach the Trident, all we need to do is follow it upstream till we come to Riverrun, here." Her finger traced the path. "It's a long way, but we can't get lost so long as we keep to the river."

Hot Pie blinked at the map. "Which one is Riverrun?"

Riverrun was painted as a castle tower, in the fork between the flowing blue lines of two rivers, the Tumblestone and the Red Fork. "There." She touched it. "*Riverrun*, it reads."

"You can read writing?" he said to her, wonderingly, as if she'd said she could walk on water.

She nodded. "We'll be safe once we reach Riverrun."

"We will? Why?"

Because Riverrun is my grandfather's castle, and my brother Robb will be there, she wanted to say. She bit her lip and rolled up the map. "We just will. But only if we get there." She was the first one back in the saddle. It made her feel bad to hide the truth from Hot Pie, but she did not trust him with her secret. Gendry knew, but that was different. Gendry had his own secret, though even he didn't seem to know what it was.

That day, Arya quickened their pace, keeping the horses to a trot as long as she dared, and sometimes spurring to a gallop when she spied a flat stretch of field before them. That was seldom enough, though; the ground was growing hillier as they went. The hills were not high, nor especially steep, but there seemed to be no end of them, and they soon grew tired of climbing up one and down

the other, and found themselves following the lay of the land, along streambeds and through a maze of shallow wooded valleys where the trees made a solid canopy overhead.

From time to time, she sent Hot Pie and Gendry on while she doubled back to try to confuse their trail, listening all the while for the first sign of pursuit. *Too slow,* she thought to herself, chewing her lip, *we're going too slow, they'll catch us for certain*. Once, from the crest of a ridge, she spied dark shapes crossing a stream in the valley behind them, and for half a heartbeat she feared that Roose Bolton's riders were on them, but when she looked again she realized they were only a pack of wolves. She cupped her hands around her mouth and howled down at them, "*Ahooooooooo, ahooooooooo*." When the largest of the wolves lifted its head and howled back, the sound made Arya shiver.

By midday, Hot Pie had begun to complain. His arse was sore, he told them, and the saddle was rubbing him raw inside his legs, and besides he had to get some sleep. "I'm so tired I'm going to fall off the horse."

Arya looked at Gendry. "If he falls off, who do you think will find him first, the wolves or the Mummers?"

"The wolves," said Gendry. "Better noses."

Hot Pie opened his mouth and closed it. He did not fall off his horse. The rain began again a short time later. They still had not seen so much as a glimpse of the sun. It was growing colder, and pale white mists were threading between the pines and blowing across the bare burned fields.

Gendry was having almost as bad a time of it as Hot Pie, though he was too stubborn to complain. He sat awkwardly in the saddle, a determined look on his face beneath his shaggy black hair, but Arya could tell he was no horseman. *I should have remembered*, she thought to herself. She had been riding as long as she could remember, ponies when she was little and later horses, but Gendry and Hot Pie were city-born, and in the city smallfolk walked. Yoren had given them mounts when he took them from King's Landing, but sitting on a donkey and plodding up the kingsroad behind a wagon was one thing. Guiding a hunting horse through wild woods and burned fields was something else.

She would make much better time on her own, Arya knew, but she could not leave them. They were her pack, her friends, the only living friends that remained to her, and if not for her they would still be safe at Harrenhal, Gendry sweating at his forge and Hot Pie in the kitchens. *If the Mummers catch us, I'll tell them that I'm Ned Stark's daughter and sister to the King in the North. I'll command them to take me to my brother, and to do no harm to Hot Pie and Gendry.* They might not believe her, though, and even if they did … Lord Bolton was her brother's bannerman, but he frightened her all the same. *I won't let them take us*, she vowed silently, reaching back over her shoulder to touch the hilt of the sword that Gendry had stolen for her. *I won't.*

Late that afternoon, they emerged from beneath the trees and found themselves on the banks of a river. Hot Pie gave a whoop of delight. "The *Trident*! Now all we have to do is go upstream, like you said. We're almost there!"

Arya chewed her lip. "I don't think this is the Trident." The river was swollen by the rain, but even so it couldn't be much more than thirty feet across. She remembered the Trident as being much wider. "It's too little to be the Trident," she told them, "and we didn't come far enough."

"Yes, we did," Hot Pie insisted. "We rode all day, and hardly stopped at all. We must have come a long way."

"Let's have a look at that map again," said Gendry.

Arya dismounted, took out the map, unrolled it. The rain pattered against the sheepskin and ran off in rivulets. "We're someplace here, I think," she said, pointing, as the boys peered over her shoulders.

"But," said Hot Pie, "that's hardly any ways at all. See, Harrenhal's there by your finger, you're almost *touching* it. And we rode all day!"

"There's miles and miles before we reach the Trident," she said. "We won't be there for *days*. This must be some different river, one of these, see." She showed him some of the thinner blue lines the mapmaker had painted in, each with a name painted in fine script beneath it. "The Darry, the Greenapple, the Maiden … here, this one, the Little Willow, it might be that."

Hot Pie looked from the line to the river. "It doesn't look so little to me."

Gendry was frowning as well. "The one you're pointing at runs into that other one, see."

"The Big Willow," she read.

"The Big Willow, then. See, and the Big Willow runs into the Trident, so we could follow the one to the other, but we'd need to go downstream, not up. Only if this river *isn't* the Little Willow, if it's this other one here …"

"Rippledown Rill," Arya read.

"See, it loops around and flows down toward the lake, back to Harrenhal." He traced the line with a finger.

Hot Pie's eyes grew wide. "*No!* They'll kill us for sure."

"We have to know which river this is," declared Gendry, in his stubbornest voice. "We have to know."

"Well, we *don't*." The map might have names written beside the blue lines, but no one had written a name on the riverbank. "We won't go up *or* downstream," she decided, rolling up the map. "We'll cross and keep going north, like we were."

"Can horses swim?" asked Hot Pie. "It looks *deep*, Arry. What if there are snakes?"

"Are you sure we're going north?" asked Gendry. "All these hills … if we got turned around …"

"The moss on the trees—"

He pointed to a nearby tree. "That tree's got moss on three sides, and that next one has no moss at all. We could be lost, just riding around in a circle."

"We could be," said Arya, "but I'm going to cross the river anyway. You can come or you can stay here." She climbed back into the saddle, ignoring the both of them. If they didn't want to follow, they could find Riverrun on their own, though more likely the Mummers would just find them.

She had to ride a good half-mile along the bank before she finally found a place where it looked as though it might be safe to cross, and even then her mare was reluctant to enter the water. The river, whatever its name, was running brown and fast, and the deep part in the middle came up past the horse's belly. Water filled her boots, but she pressed in her heels all the same and climbed out on the far bank. From behind she heard splashing, and a mare's nervous whinny. *They followed, then. Good.* She turned to watch as the boys struggled across and emerged dripping beside her. "It wasn't the Trident," she told them. "It *wasn't*."

The next river was shallower and easier to ford. That one wasn't the Trident either, and no one argued with her when she told them they would cross it.

Dusk was settling as they stopped to rest the horses once more and share another meal of bread and cheese. "I'm cold and wet," Hot Pie complained. "We're a long way from Harrenhal now, for sure. We could have us a fire—"

"*NO!*" Arya and Gendry both said, at the exact same instant. Hot Pie quailed a little. Arya gave Gendry a sideways look. *He said it with me, like Jon used to do, back in Winterfell.* She missed Jon Snow the most of all her brothers.

"Could we sleep at least?" Hot Pie asked. "I'm so tired, Arry, and my arse is sore. I think I've got blisters."

"You'll have more than that if you're caught," she said. "We've got to keep going. We've *got* to."

"But it's almost dark, and you can't even see the moon."

"Get back on your horse."

Plodding along at a slow walking pace as the light faded around them, Arya found her own exhaustion weighing heavy on her. She needed sleep as much as Hot Pie, but they dare not. If they

slept, they might open their eyes to find Vargo Hoat standing over them with Shagwell the Fool and Faithful Urswyck and Rorge and Biter and Septon Utt and all his other monsters.

Yet after a while the motion of her horse became as soothing as the rocking of a cradle, and Arya found her eyes growing heavy. She let them close, just for an instant, then snapped them wide again. *I can't go to sleep,* she screamed at herself silently, *I can't, I can't.* She knuckled at her eye and rubbed it hard to keep it open, clutching the reins tightly and kicking her mount to a canter. But neither she nor the horse could sustain the pace, and it was only a few moments before they fell back to a walk again, and a few more until her eyes closed a second time. This time they did not open quite so quickly.

When they did, she found that her horse had come to a stop and was nibbling at a tuft of grass, while Gendry was shaking her arm. "You fell asleep," he told her.

"I was just resting my eyes."

"You were resting them a long while, then. Your horse was wandering in a circle, but it wasn't till she stopped that I realized you were sleeping. Hot Pie's just as bad, he rode into a tree limb and got knocked off, you should have heard him yell. Even *that* didn't wake you up. You need to stop and sleep."

"I can keep going as long as you can." She yawned.

"Liar," he said. "You keep going if you want to be stupid, but I'm stopping. I'll take the first watch. You sleep."

"What about Hot Pie?"

Gendry pointed. Hot Pie was already on the ground, curled up beneath his cloak on a bed of damp leaves and snoring softly. He had a big wedge of cheese in one fist, but it looked as though he had fallen asleep between bites.

It was no good arguing, Arya realized; Gendry had the right of it. *The Mummers will need to sleep too*, she told herself, hoping it was true. She was so weary it was a struggle even to get down from the saddle, but she remembered to hobble her horse before finding a place beneath a beech tree. The ground was hard and damp. She wondered how long it would be before she slept in a bed again, with hot food and a fire to warm her. The last thing she did before closing her eyes was unsheathe her sword and lay it down beside her. "Ser Gregor," she whispered, yawning. "Dunsen, Polliver, Raff the Sweetling. The Tickler and … the Tickler … the Hound …"

Her dreams were red and savage. The Mummers were in them, four at least, a pale Lyseni and a dark brutal axeman from Ib, the scarred Dothraki horse lord called Iggo and a Dornishman whose name she never knew. On and on they came, riding through the rain in rusting mail and wet leather, swords and axe clanking against their saddles. They thought they were hunting her, she knew with all the strange sharp certainty of dreams, but they were wrong. She was hunting them.

She was no little girl in the dream; she was a wolf, huge and powerful, and when she emerged from beneath the trees in front of them and bared her teeth in a low rumbling growl, she could smell the rank stench of fear from horse and man alike. The Lyseni's mount reared and screamed in terror, and the others shouted at one another in mantalk, but before they could act the other wolves came hurtling from the darkness and the rain, a great pack of them, gaunt and wet and silent.

The fight was short but bloody. The hairy man went down as he unslung his axe, the dark one died stringing an arrow, and the pale man from Lys tried to bolt. Her brothers and sisters ran him down, turning him again and again, coming at him from all sides, snapping at the legs of his horse and tearing the throat from the rider when he came crashing to the earth.

Only the belled man stood his ground. His horse kicked in the head of one of her sisters, and he cut another almost in half with his curved silvery claw as his hair tinkled softly.

Filled with rage, she leapt onto his back, knocking him head-first from his saddle. Her jaws locked on his arm as they fell, her teeth sinking through the leather and wool and soft flesh. When they

landed she gave a savage jerk with her head and ripped the limb loose from his shoulder. Exulting, she shook it back and forth in her mouth, scattering the warm red droplets amidst the cold black rain.

TYRION

He woke to the creak of old iron hinges. “Who?” he croaked. At least he had his voice back, raw and hoarse though it was. The fever was still on him, and Tyrion had no notion of the hour. How long had he slept this time? He was so weak, so damnably weak. “Who?” he called again, more loudly. Torchlight spilled through the open door, but within the chamber the only light came from the stub of a candle beside his bed.

When he saw a shape moving toward him, Tyrion shivered. Here in Maegor’s Holdfast, every servant was in the queen’s pay, so any visitor might be another of Cersei’s catspaws, sent to finish the work Ser Mandon had begun.

Then the man stepped into the candlelight, got a good look at the dwarf’s pale face, and chortled. “Cut yourself shaving, did you?”

Tyrion’s fingers went to the great gash that ran from above one eye down to his jaw, across what remained of his nose. The proud flesh was still raw and warm to the touch. “With a fearful big razor, yes.”

Bronn’s coal-black hair was freshly washed and brushed straight back from the hard lines of his face, and he was dressed in high boots of soft, tooled leather, a wide belt studded with nuggets of silver, and a cloak of pale green silk. Across the dark grey wool of his doublet, a burning chain was embroidered diagonally in bright green thread.

“Where have you been?” Tyrion demanded of him. “I sent for you … it must have been a fortnight ago.”

“Four days ago, more like,” the sellsword said, “and I’ve been here twice, and found you dead to the world.”

“Not dead. Though my sweet sister did try.” Perhaps he should not have said that aloud, but Tyrion was past caring. Cersei was behind Ser Mandon’s attempt to kill him, he knew that in his gut. “What’s that ugly thing on your chest?”

Bronn grinned. “My knightly sigil. A flaming chain, green, on a smoke-grey field. By your lord father’s command, I’m Ser Bronn of the Blackwater now, Imp. See you don’t forget it.”

Tyrion put his hands on the featherbed and squirmed back a few inches, against the pillows. “I was the one who promised you knighthood, remember?” He had liked that “*by your lord father’s command*” not at all. Lord Tywin had wasted little time. Moving his son from the Tower of the Hand to claim it for himself was a message anyone could read, and this was another. “I lose half my nose and you gain a knighthood. The gods have a deal to answer for.” His voice was sour.”Did my father dub you himself?”

“No. Them of us as survived the fight at the winch towers got ourselves dabbed by the High Septon and dubbed by the Kingsguard. Took half the bloody day, with only three of the White Swords left to do the honors.”

“I knew Ser Mandon died in the battle.” *Shoved into the river by Pod, half a heartbeat before the treacherous bastard could drive his sword through my heart.* “Who else was lost?”

“The Hound,” said Bronn. “Not dead, only gone. The gold cloaks say he turned craven and you led a sortie in his place.”

Not one of my better notions. Tyrion could feel the scar tissue pull tight when he frowned. He waved Bronn toward a chair. “My sister has mistaken me for a mushroom. She keeps me in the dark and feeds me shit. Pod’s a good lad, but the knot in his tongue is the size of Casterly Rock, and I don’t trust half of what he tells me. I sent him to bring Ser Jacelyn and he came back and told me he’s dead.”

“Him, and thousands more.” Bronn sat.

“How?” Tyrion demanded, feeling that much sicker.

"During the battle. Your sister sent the Kettleblacks to fetch the king back to the Red Keep, the way I hear it. When the gold cloaks saw him leaving, half of them decided they'd leave with him. Ironhand put himself in their path and tried to order them back to the walls. They say Bywater was blistering them good and almost had 'em ready to turn when someone put an arrow through his neck. He didn't seem so fearsome then, so they dragged him off his horse and killed him."

Another debt to lay at Cersei's door. "My nephew," he said, "Joffrey. Was he in any danger?"

"No more'n some, and less than most."

"Had he suffered any harm? Taken a wound? Mussed his hair, stubbed his toe, cracked a nail?"

"Not as I heard."

"I warned Cersei what would happen. Who commands the gold cloaks now?"

"Your lord father's given them to one of his westermen, some knight named Addam Marbrand."

In most cases, the gold cloaks would have resented having an outsider placed over them, but Ser Addam Marbrand was a shrewd choice. Like Jaime, he was the sort of man other men liked to follow. *I have lost the City Watch.* "I sent Pod looking for Shagga, but he's had no luck."

"The Stone Crows are still in the kingswood. Shagga seems to have taken a fancy to the place. Timett led the Burned Men home, with all the plunder they took from Stannis's camp after the fighting. Chella turned up with a dozen Black Ears at the River Gate one morning, but your father's red cloaks chased them off while the Kingslanders threw dung and cheered."

Ingrates. The Black Ears died for them. Whilst Tyrion lay drugged and dreaming, his own blood had pulled his claws out, one by one. "I want you to go to my sister. Her precious son made it through the battle unscathed, so Cersei has no more need of a hostage. She swore to free Alayaya once—"

"She did. Eight, nine days ago, after the whipping."

Tyrion shoved himself up higher, ignoring the sudden stab of pain through his shoulder. "*Whipping?*"

"They tied her to a post in the yard and scourged her, then shoved her out the gate naked and bloody."

She was learning to read, Tyrion thought, absurdly. Across his face the scar stretched tight, and for a moment it felt as though his head would burst with rage. Alayaya was a whore, true enough, but a sweeter, braver, more innocent girl he had seldom met. Tyrion had never touched her; she had been no more than a veil, to hide Shae. In his carelessness, he had never thought what the role might cost her. "I promised my sister I would treat Tommen as she treated Alayaya," he remembered aloud. He felt as though he might retch. "How can I scourge an eight-year-old boy?" *But if I don't, Cersei wins.*

"You don't have Tommen," Bronn said bluntly. "Once she learned that Ironhand was dead, the queen sent the Kettleblacks after him, and no one at Rosby had the balls to say them nay."

Another blow; yet a relief as well, he must admit it. He was fond of Tommen. "The Kettleblacks were supposed to be ours," he reminded Bronn with more than a touch of irritation.

"They were, so long as I could give them two of your pennies for every one they had from the queen, but now she's raised the stakes. Osney and Osfryd were made knights after the battle, same as me. Gods know what for, no one saw them do any fighting."

My hirelings betray me, my friends are scourged and shamed, and I lie here rotting, Tyrion thought. *I thought I won the bloody battle. Is this what triumph tastes like?* "Is it true that Stannis was put to rout by Renly's ghost?"

Bronn smiled thinly. "From the winch towers, all we saw was banners in the mud and men throwing down their spears to run, but there's hundreds in the pot shops and brothels who'll tell you how they saw Lord Renly kill this one or that one. Most of Stannis's host had been Renly's to start, and they went right back over at the sight of him in that shiny green armor."

After all his planning, after the sortie and the bridge of ships, after getting his face slashed in two, Tyrion had been eclipsed by a dead man. *If indeed Renly is dead*. Something else he would need to look into. "How did Stannis escape?"

"His Lyseni kept their galleys out in the bay, beyond your chain. When the battle turned bad, they put in along the bay shore and took off as many as they could. Men were killing each other to get aboard, toward the end."

"What of Robb Stark, what has he been doing?"

"There's some of his wolves burning their way down toward Duskendale. Your father's sending this Lord Tarly to sort them out. I'd half a mind to join him. It's said he's a good soldier, and openhanded with the plunder."

The thought of losing Bronn was the final straw. "No. Your place is here. You're the captain of the Hand's guard."

"You're not the Hand," Bronn reminded him sharply. "Your father is, and he's got his own bloody guard."

"What happened to all the men you hired for me?"

"Some died at the winch towers. That uncle of yours, Ser Kevan, he paid the rest of us and tossed us out."

"How good of him," Tyrion said acidly. "Does that mean you've lost your taste for gold?"

"Not bloody likely."

"Good," said Tyrion, "because as it happens, I still have need of you. What do you know of Ser Mandon Moore?"

Bronn laughed. "I know he's bloody well drowned."

"I owe him a great debt, but how to pay it?" He touched his face, feeling the scar. "I know precious little of the man, if truth be told."

"He had eyes like a fish and he wore a white cloak. What else do you need to know?"

"Everything," said Tyrion, "for a start." What he wanted was proof that Ser Mandon had been Cersei's, but he dare not say so aloud. In the Red Keep a man did best to hold his tongue. There were rats in the walls, and little birds who talked too much, and spiders. "Help me up," he said, struggling with the bedclothes. "It's time I paid a call on my father, and past time I let myself be seen again."

"Such a pretty sight," mocked Bronn.

"What's half a nose, on a face like mine? But speaking of pretty, is Margaery Tyrell in King's Landing yet?"

"No. She's coming, though, and the city's mad with love for her. The Tyrells have been carting food up from Highgarden and giving it away in her name. Hundreds of wayns each day. There's thousands of Tyrell men swaggering about with little golden roses sewn on their doublets, and not a one is buying his own wine. Wife, widow, or whore, the women are all giving up their virtue to every peach-fuzz boy with a gold rose on his teat."

They spit on me, and buy drinks for the Tyrells. Tyrion slid from the bed to the floor. His legs turned wobbly beneath him, the room spun, and he had to grasp Bronn's arm to keep from pitching headlong into the rushes. "*Pod!*" he shouted. "Podrick Payne! Where in the seven hells are you?" Pain gnawed at him like a toothless dog. Tyrion hated weakness, especially his own. It shamed him, and shame made him angry. "Pod, *get in here*!"

The boy came running. When he saw Tyrion standing and clutching Bronn's arm, he gaped at them. "My lord. You stood. Is that … do you … do you need wine? Dreamwine? Should I get the maester? He said you must stay. Abed, I mean."

"I have stayed abed too long. Bring me some clean garb."

"Garb?"

How the boy could be so clearheaded and resourceful in battle and so confused at all other times Tyrion could never comprehend. "Clothing," he repeated. "Tunic, doublet, breeches, hose. For me. To dress in. So I can leave this bloody cell."

It took all three of them to clothe him. Hideous though his face might be, the worst of his wounds was the one at the juncture of shoulder and arm, where his own mail had been driven back

into his armpit by an arrow. Pus and blood still seeped from the discolored flesh whenever Maester Frenken changed his dressing, and any movement sent a stab of agony through him.

In the end, Tyrion settled for a pair of breeches and an oversized bed robe that hung loosely about his shoulders. Bronn yanked his boots onto his feet while Pod went in search of a stick for him to lean on. He drank a cup of dreamwine to fortify himself. The wine was sweetened with honey, with just enough of the poppy to make his wounds bearable for a time.

Even so, he was dizzy by the time he turned the latch, and the descent down the twisting stone steps made his legs tremble. He walked with the stick in one hand and the other on Pod's shoulder. A serving girl was coming up as they were going down. She stared at them with wide white eyes, as if she were looking at a ghost. *The dwarf has risen from the dead*, Tyrion thought. *And look, he's uglier than ever, run tell your friends.*

Maegor's Holdfast was the strongest place in the Red Keep, a castle within the castle, surrounded by a deep dry moat lined with spikes. The drawbridge was up for the night when they reached the door. Ser Meryn Trant stood before it in his pale armor and white cloak. "Lower the bridge," Tyrion commanded him.

"The queen's orders are to raise the bridge at night." Ser Meryn had always been Cersei's creature.

"The queen's asleep, and I have business with my father."

There was magic in the name of Lord Tywin Lannister. Grumbling, Ser Meryn Trant gave the command, and the drawbridge was lowered. A second Kingsguard knight stood sentry across the moat. Ser Osmund Kettleblack managed a smile when he saw Tyrion waddling toward him. "Feeling stronger, m'lord?"

"Much. When's the next battle? I can scarcely wait."

When Pod and he reached the serpentine steps, however, Tyrion could only gape at them in dismay. *I will never climb those by myself*, he confessed to himself. Swallowing his dignity, he asked Bronn to carry him, hoping against hope that at this hour there would be no one to see and smile, no one to tell the tale of the dwarf being carried up the steps like a babe in arms.

The outer ward was crowded with tents and pavilions, dozens of them. "Tyrell men," Podrick Payne explained as they threaded their way through a maze of silk and canvas. "Lord Rowan's too, and Lord Redwyne's. There wasn't room enough for all. In the castle, I mean. Some took rooms. Rooms in the city. In inns and all. They're here for the wedding. The king's wedding, King Joffrey's. Will you be strong enough to attend, my lord?"

"Ravening weasels could not keep me away." There was this to be said for weddings over battles, at least; it was less likely that someone would cut off your nose.

Lights still burned dimly behind shuttered windows in the Tower of the Hand. The men on the door wore the crimson cloaks and lion-crested helms of his father's household guard. Tyrion knew them both, and they admitted him on sight … though neither could bear to look long at his face, he noted.

Within, they came upon Ser Addam Marbrand, descending the turnpike stair in the ornate black breastplate and cloth-of-gold cloak of an officer in the City Watch. "My lord," he said, "how good to see you on your feet. I'd heard—"

"—rumors of a small grave being dug? Me too. Under the circumstances it seemed best to get up. I hear you're commander of the City Watch. Shall I offer congratulations or condolences?"

"Both, I fear." Ser Addam smiled. "Death and desertion have left me with some forty-four hundred. Only the gods and Littlefinger know how we are to go on paying wages for so many, but your sister forbids me to dismiss any."

Still anxious, Cersei? The battle's done, the gold cloaks won't help you now. "Do you come from my father?" he asked.

"Aye. I fear I did not leave him in the best of moods. Lord Tywin feels forty-four hundred guardsmen more than sufficient to find one lost squire, but your cousin Tyrek remains missing."

Tyrek was the son of his late Uncle Tygett, a boy of thirteen. He had vanished in the riot, not long after wedding the Lady Ermesande, a suckling babe who happened to be the last surviving heir of House Hayford. *And likely the first bride in the history of the Seven Kingdoms to be widowed before she was weaned.* "I couldn't find him either," confessed Tyrion.

"He's feeding worms," said Bronn with his usual tact. "Ironhand looked for him, and the eunuch rattled a nice fat purse. They had no more luck than we did. Give it up, ser."

Ser Addam gazed at the sellsword with distaste. "Lord Tywin is stubborn where his blood is concerned. He will have the lad, alive or dead, and I mean to oblige him." He looked back to Tyrion. "You will find your father in his solar."

My solar, thought Tyrion. "I believe I know the way."

The way was up more steps, but this time he climbed under his own power, with one hand on Pod's shoulder. Bronn opened the door for him. Lord Tywin Lannister was seated beneath the window, writing by the glow of an oil lamp. He raised his eyes at the sound of the latch. "Tyrion." Calmly, he laid his quill aside.

"I'm pleased you remember me, my lord." Tyrion released his grip on Pod, leaned his weight on the stick, and waddled closer. *Something is wrong*, he knew at once.

"Ser Bronn," Lord Tywin said, "Podrick. Perhaps you had best wait without until we are done."

The look Bronn gave the Hand was little less than insolent; nonetheless, he bowed and withdrew, with Pod on his heels. The heavy door swung shut behind them, and Tyrion Lannister was alone with his father. Even with the windows of the solar shuttered against the night, the chill in the room was palpable. *What sort of lies has Cersei been telling him?*

The Lord of Casterly Rock was as lean as a man twenty years younger, even handsome in his austere way. Stiff blond whiskers covered his cheeks, framing a stern face, a bald head, a hard mouth. About his throat he wore a chain of golden hands, the fingers of each clasping the wrist of the next. "That's a handsome chain," Tyrion said. *Though it looked better on me.*

Lord Tywin ignored the sally. "You had best be seated. Is it wise for you to be out of your sickbed?"

"I am sick of my sickbed." Tyrion knew how much his father despised weakness. He claimed the nearest chair. "Such pleasant chambers you have. Would you believe it, while I was dying, someone moved me to a dark little cell in Maegor's?"

"The Red Keep is overcrowded with wedding guests. Once they depart, we will find you more suitable accommodations."

"I rather liked *these* accommodations. Have you set a date for this great wedding?"

"Joffrey and Margaery shall marry on the first day of the new year, which as it happens is also the first day of the new century. The ceremony will herald the dawn of a new era."

A new Lannister era, thought Tyrion. "Oh, bother, I fear I've made other plans for that day."

"Did you come here just to complain of your bedchamber and make your lame japes? I have important letters to finish."

"*Important* letters. To be sure."

"Some battles are won with swords and spears, others with quills and ravens. Spare me these coy reproaches, Tyrion. I visited your sickbed as often as Maester Ballabar would allow it, when you seemed like to die." He steepled his fingers under his chin. "Why did you dismiss Ballabar?"

Tyrion shrugged. "Maester Frenken is not so determined to keep me insensate."

"Ballabar came to the city in Lord Redwyne's retinue. A gifted healer, it's said. It was kind of Cersei to ask him to look after you. She feared for your life."

Feared that I might keep it, you mean. "Doubtless that's why she's never once left my bedside."

"Don't be impertinent. Cersei has a royal wedding to plan, I am waging a war, and you have been out of danger for at least a fortnight." Lord Tywin studied his son's disfigured face, his pale green eyes unflinching. "Though the wound is ghastly enough, I'll grant you. What madness possessed you?"

"The foe was at the gates with a battering ram. If Jaime had led the sortie, you'd call it valor."

"Jaime would never be so foolish as to remove his helm in battle. I trust you killed the man who cut you?"

"Oh, the wretch is dead enough." Though it had been Podrick Payne who'd killed Ser Mandon, shoving him into the river to drown beneath the weight of his armor. "A dead enemy is a joy forever," Tyrion said blithely, though Ser Mandon was not his true enemy. The man had no reason to want him dead. *He was only a catspaw, and I believe I know the cat. She told him to make certain I did not survive the battle.* But without proof Lord Tywin would never listen to such a charge. "Why are you here in the city, Father?" he asked. "Shouldn't you be off fighting Lord Stannis or Robb Stark or someone?" *And the sooner the better*.

"Until Lord Redwyne brings his fleet up, we lack the ships to assail Dragonstone. It makes no matter. Stannis Baratheon's sun set on the Blackwater. As for Stark, the boy is still in the west, but a large force of northmen under Helman Tallhart and Robett Glover are descending toward Duskendale. I've sent Lord Tarly to meet them, while Ser Gregor drives up the kingsroad to cut off their retreat. Tallhart and Glover will be caught between them, with a third of Stark's strength."

"Duskendale?" There was nothing at Duskendale worth such a risk. Had the Young Wolf finally blundered?

"It's nothing you need trouble yourself with. Your face is pale as death, and there's blood seeping through your dressings. Say what you want and take yourself back to bed."

"What I want …" His throat felt raw and tight. What *did* he want? *More than you can ever give me, Father*. "Pod tells me that Littlefinger's been made Lord of Harrenhal."

"An empty title, so long as Roose Bolton holds the castle for Robb Stark, yet Lord Baelish was desirous of the honor. He did us good service in the matter of the Tyrell marriage. A Lannister pays his debts."

The Tyrell marriage had been Tyrion's notion, in point of fact, but it would seem churlish to try to claim that now. "That title may not be as empty as you think," he warned. "Littlefinger does nothing without good reason. But be that as it may. You said something about paying debts, I believe?"

"And you want your own reward, is that it? Very well. What is it you would have of me? Lands, castle, some office?"

"A little bloody gratitude would make a nice start."

Lord Tywin stared at him, unblinking. "Mummers and monkeys require applause. So did Aerys, for that matter. You did as you were commanded, and I am sure it was to the best of your ability. No one denies the part you played."

"The *part* I played?" What nostrils Tyrion had left must surely have flared. "I saved your bloody city, it seems to me."

"Most people seem to feel that it was my attack on Lord Stannis's flank that turned the tide of battle. Lords Tyrell, Rowan, Redwyne, and Tarly fought nobly as well, and I'm told it was your sister Cersei who set the pyromancers to making the wildfire that destroyed the Baratheon fleet."

"While all I did was get my nosehairs trimmed, is that it?" Tyrion could not keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Your chain was a clever stroke, and crucial to our victory. Is that what you wanted to hear? I am told we have you to thank for our Dornish alliance as well. You may be pleased to learn that Myrcella has arrived safely at Sunspear. Ser Arys Oakheart writes that she has taken a great liking to Princess Arianne, and that Prince Trystane is enchanted with her. I mislike giving House Martell a hostage, but I suppose that could not be helped."

"We'll have our own hostage," Tyrion said. "A council seat was also part of the bargain. Unless Prince Doran brings an army when he comes to claim it, he'll be putting himself in our power."

"Would that a council seat were all Martell came to claim," Lord Tywin said. "You promised him vengeance as well."

"I promised him justice."

"Call it what you will. It still comes down to blood."

"Not an item in short supply, surely? I splashed through lakes of it during the battle." Tyrion saw no reason not to cut to the heart of the matter. "Or have you grown so fond of Gregor Clegane that you cannot bear to part with him?"

"Ser Gregor has his uses, as did his brother. Every lord has need of a beast from time to time … a lesson you seem to have learned, judging from Ser Bronn and those clansmen of yours."

Tyrion thought of Timett's burned eye, Shagga with his axe, Chella in her necklace of dried ears. And Bronn. Bronn most of all. "The woods are full of beasts," he reminded his father. "The alleyways as well."

"True. Perhaps other dogs would hunt as well. I shall think on it. If there is nothing else …"

"You have important letters, yes." Tyrion rose on unsteady legs, closed his eyes for an instant as a wave of dizziness washed over him, and took a shaky step toward the door. Later, he would reflect that he should have taken a second, and then a third. Instead he turned. "What do I want, you ask? I'll tell you what I want. I want what is mine by rights. I want Casterly Rock."

His father's mouth grew hard. "Your brother's birthright?"

"The knights of the Kingsguard are forbidden to marry, to father children, and to hold land, you know that as well as I. The day Jaime put on that white cloak, he gave up his claim to Casterly Rock, but never once have you acknowledged it. It's past time. I want you to stand up before the realm and proclaim that I am your son and your lawful heir."

Lord Tywin's eyes were a pale green flecked with gold, as luminous as they were merciless. "Casterly Rock," he declared in a flat cold dead tone. And then, "Never."

The word hung between them, huge, sharp, poisoned.

I knew the answer before I asked, Tyrion said. *Eighteen years since Jaime joined the Kingsguard, and I never once raised the issue. I must have known. I must always have known.* "Why?" he made himself ask, though he knew he would rue the question.

"You ask that? You, who killed your mother to come into the world? You are an ill-made, devious, disobedient, spiteful little creature full of envy, lust, and low cunning. Men's laws give you the right to bear my name and display my colors, since I cannot prove that you are not mine. To teach me humility, the gods have condemned me to watch you waddle about wearing that proud lion that was my father's sigil and his father's before him. But neither gods nor men shall ever compel me to let you turn Casterly Rock into your whorehouse."

"My *whorehouse*?" The dawn broke; Tyrion understood all at once where this bile had come from. He ground his teeth together and said, "Cersei told you about Alayaya."

"Is that her name? I confess, I cannot remember the names of all your whores. Who was the one you married as a boy?"

"Tysha." He spat out the answer, defiant.

"And that camp follower on the Green Fork?"

"Why do you care?" he asked, unwilling even to speak Shae's name in his presence.

"I don't. No more than I care if they live or die."

"It was *you* who had Yaya whipped." It was not a question.

"Your sister told me of your threats against my grandsons." Lord Tywin's voice was colder than ice. "Did she lie?"

Tyrion would not deny it. "I made threats, yes. To keep Alayaya safe. So the Kettleblacks would not misuse her."

"To save a whore's virtue, you threatened your own House, your own kin? Is that the way of it?"

"You were the one who taught me that a good threat is often more telling than a blow. Not that Joffrey hasn't tempted me sore a few hundred times. If you're so anxious to whip people, start with him. But Tommen … why would I harm Tommen? He's a good lad, and mine own blood."

"As was your mother." Lord Tywin rose abruptly, to tower over his dwarf son. "Go back to your bed, Tyrion, and speak to me no more of *your rights* to Casterly Rock. You shall have your reward, but it shall be one I deem appropriate to your service and station. And make no mistake—this was the last time I will suffer you to bring shame onto House Lannister. You are *done* with whores. The next one I find in your bed, I'll hang."

DAVOS

He watched the sail grow for a long time, trying to decide whether he would sooner live or die. Dying would be easier, he knew. All he had to do was crawl inside his cave and let the ship pass by, and death would find him. For days now the fever had been burning through him, turning his bowels to brown water and making him shiver in his restless sleep. Each morning found him weaker. *It will not be much longer*, he had taken to telling himself.

If the fever did not kill him, thirst surely would. He had no fresh water here, but for the occasional rainfall that pooled in hollows on the rock. Only three days past (or had it been four? On his rock, it was hard to tell the days apart) his pools had been dry as old bone, and the sight of the bay rippling green and grey all around him had been almost more than he could bear. Once he began to drink seawater the end would come swiftly, he knew, but all the same he had almost taken that first swallow, so parched was his throat. A sudden squall had saved him. He had grown so feeble by then that it was all he could do to lie in the rain with his eyes closed and his mouth open, and let the water splash down on his cracked lips and swollen tongue. But afterward he felt a little stronger, and the island's pools and cracks and crevices once more had brimmed with life.

But that had been three days ago (or maybe four), and most of the water was gone now. Some had evaporated, and he had sucked up the rest. By the morrow, he would be tasting the mud again, and licking the damp cold stones at the bottom of the depressions.

And if not thirst or fever, starvation would kill him. His island was no more than a barren spire jutting up out of the immensity of Blackwater Bay. When the tide was low, he could sometimes find tiny crabs along the stony strand where he had washed ashore after the battle. They nipped his fingers painfully before he smashed them apart on the rocks to suck the meat from their claws and the guts from their shells.

But the strand vanished whenever the tide came rushing in, and Davos had to scramble up the rock to keep from being swept out into the bay once more. The point of the spire was fifteen feet above the water at high tide, but when the bay grew rough the spray went even higher, so there was no way to keep dry, even in his cave (which was really no more than a hollow in the rock beneath an overhang). Nothing grew on the rock but lichen, and even the seabirds shunned the place. Now and again some gulls would land atop the spire and Davos would try to catch one, but they were too quick for him to get close. He took to flinging stones at them, but he was too weak to throw with much force, so even when his stones hit the gulls would only scream at him in annoyance and then take to the air.

There were other rocks visible from his refuge, distant stony spires taller than his own. The nearest stood a good forty feet above the water, he guessed, though it was hard to be sure at this distance. A cloud of gulls swirled about it constantly, and often Davos thought of crossing over to raid their nests. But the water was cold here, the currents strong and treacherous, and he knew he did not have the strength for such a swim. That would kill him as sure as drinking seawater.

Autumn in the narrow sea could often be wet and rainy, he remembered from years past. The days were not bad so long as the sun was shining, but the nights were growing colder and sometimes the wind would come gusting across the bay, driving a line of whitecaps before it, and before long Davos would be soaked and shivering. Fever and chills assaulted him in turn, and of late he had developed a persistent racking cough.

His cave was all the shelter he had, and that was little enough. Driftwood and bits of charred debris would wash up on the strand during low tide, but he had no way to strike a spark or start a fire. Once, in desperation, he had tried rubbing two pieces of driftwood against each other, but the wood was rotted, and his efforts earned him only blisters. His clothes were sodden as well, and he had lost one of his boots somewhere in the bay before he washed up here.

Thirst; hunger; exposure. They were his companions, with him every hour of every day, and in time he had come to think of them as his friends. Soon enough, one or the other of his friends would take pity on him and free him from this endless misery. Or perhaps he would simply walk into the water one day, and strike out for the shore that he knew lay somewhere to the north, beyond his sight. It was too far to swim, as weak as he was, but that did not matter. Davos had always been a sailor; he was meant to die at sea. *The gods beneath the waters have been waiting for me*, he told himself. *It's past time I went to them*.

But now there was a sail; only a speck on the horizon, but growing larger. *A ship where no ship should be.* He knew where his rock lay, more or less; it was one of a series of sea monts that rose from the floor of Blackwater Bay. The tallest of them jutted a hundred feet above the tide, and a dozen lesser monts stood thirty to sixty feet high. Sailors called them *spears of the merling king*, and knew that for every one that broke the surface, a dozen lurked treacherously just below it. Any captain with sense kept his course well away from them.

Davos watched the sail swell through pale red-rimmed eyes, and tried to hear the sound of the wind caught in the canvas. *She is coming this way*. Unless she changed course soon, she would pass within hailing distance of his meager refuge. It might mean life. If he wanted it. He was not sure he did.

Why should I live? he thought as tears blurred his vision. *Gods be good, why? My sons are dead, Dale and Allard, Maric and Matthos, perhaps Devan as well. How can a father outlive so many strong young sons? How would I go on? I am a hollow shell, the crab's died, there's nothing left inside. Don't they know that?*

They had sailed up the Blackwater Rush flying the fiery heart of the Lord of Light. Davos and *Black Betha* had been in the second line of battle, between Dale's *Wraith* and Allard on *Lady Marya*. Maric his third-born was oarmaster on *Fury*, at the center of the first line, while Matthos served as his father's second. Beneath the walls of the Red Keep Stannis Baratheon's galleys had joined in battle with the boy king Joffrey's smaller fleet, and for a few moments the river had rung to the thrum of bowstrings and the crash of iron rams shattering oars and hulls alike.

And then some vast beast had let out a roar, and green flames were all around them: wildfire, pyromancer's piss, the jade demon. Matthos had been standing at his elbow on the deck of *Black Betha* when the ship seemed to lift from the water. Davos found himself in the river, flailing as the current took him and spun him around and around. Upstream, the flames had ripped at the sky, fifty feet high. He had seen *Black Betha* afire, and *Fury*, and a dozen other ships, had seen burning men leaping into the water to drown. *Wraith* and *Lady Marya* were gone, sunk or shattered or vanished behind a veil of wildfire, and there was no time to look for them, because the mouth of the river was almost upon him, and across the mouth of the river the Lannisters had raised a great iron chain. From bank to bank there was nothing but burning ships and wildfire. The sight of it seemed to stop his heart for a moment, and he could still remember the sound of it, the crackle of flames, the hiss of steam, the shrieks of dying men, and the beat of that terrible heat against his face as the current swept him down toward hell.

All he needed to do was nothing. A few moments more, and he would be with his sons now, resting in the cool green mud on the bottom of the bay, with fish nibbling at his face.

Instead, he sucked in a great gulp of air and dove, kicking for the bottom of the river. His only hope was to pass under the chain and the burning ships and the wildfire that floated on the surface of the water, to swim hard for the safety of the bay beyond. Davos had always been a strong swimmer, and he'd worn no steel that day, but for the helm he'd lost when he'd lost *Black Betha*. As he knifed through the green murk, he saw other men struggling beneath the water, pulled down to drown beneath the weight of plate and mail. Davos swam past them, kicking with all the strength left in his legs, giving himself up to the current, the water filling his eyes. Deeper he went, and deeper, and deeper still. With every stroke it grew harder to hold his breath. He remembered seeing the bottom,

soft and dim, as a stream of bubbles burst from his lips. Something touched his leg … a snag or a fish or a drowning man, he could not tell.

He needed air by then, but he was afraid. Was he past the chain yet, was he out in the bay? If he came up under a ship he would drown, and if he surfaced amidst the floating patches of wildfire his first breath would sear his lungs to ash. He twisted in the water to look up, but there was nothing to see but green darkness and then he spun too far and suddenly he could no longer tell up from down. Panic took hold of him. His hands flailed against the bottom of the river and sent up a cloud of mud that blinded him. His chest was growing tighter by the instant. He clawed at the water, kicking, pushing himself, turning, his lungs screaming for air, kicking, kicking, lost now in the river murk, kicking, kicking, kicking until he could kick no longer. When he opened his mouth to scream, the water came rushing in, tasting of salt, and Davos Seaworth knew that he was drowning.

The next he knew the sun was up, and he lay upon a stony strand beneath a spire of naked stone, with the empty bay all around and a broken mast, a burned sail, and a swollen corpse beside him. The mast, the sail, and the dead man vanished with the next high tide, leaving Davos alone on his rock amidst the spears of the merling king.

His long years as a smuggler had made the waters around King's Landing more familiar to him than any home he'd ever had, and he knew his refuge was no more than a speck on the charts, in a place that honest sailors steered away from, not toward … though Davos himself had come by it once or twice in his smuggling days, the better to stay unseen. *When they find me dead here, if ever they do, perhaps they will name the rock for me*, he thought. *Onion Rock, they'll call it; it will be my tombstone and my legacy.* He deserved no more. *The Father protects his children*, the septons taught, but Davos had led his boys into the fire. Dale would never give his wife the child they had prayed for, and Allard, with his girl in Oldtown and his girl in King's Landing and his girl in Braavos, they would all be weeping soon. Matthos would never captain his own ship, as he'd dreamed. Maric would never have his knighthood.

How can I live when they are dead? So many brave knights and mighty lords have died, better men than me, and highborn. Crawl inside your cave, Davos. Crawl inside and shrink up small and the ship will go away, and no one will trouble you ever again. Sleep on your stone pillow, and let the gulls peck out your eyes while the crabs feast on your flesh. You've feasted on enough of them, you owe them. Hide, smuggler. Hide, and be quiet, and die.

The sail was almost on him. A few moments more, and the ship would be safely past, and he could die in peace.

His hand reached for his throat, fumbling for the small leather pouch he always wore about his neck. Inside he kept the bones of the four fingers his king had shortened for him, on the day he made Davos a knight. *My luck*. His shortened fingers patted at his chest, groping, finding nothing. The pouch was gone, and the fingerbones with them. Stannis could never understand why he'd kept the bones. "To remind me of my king's justice," he whispered through cracked lips. But now they were gone. *The fire took my luck as well as my sons.* In his dreams the river was still aflame and demons danced upon the waters with fiery whips in their hands, while men blackened and burned beneath the lash. "Mother, have mercy," Davos prayed. "Save me, gentle Mother, save us all. My luck is gone, and my sons." He was weeping freely now, salt tears streaming down his cheeks. "The fire took it all … the fire …"

Perhaps it was only wind blowing against the rock, or the sound of the sea on the shore, but for an instant Davos Seaworth heard her answer. "You called the fire," she whispered, her voice as faint as the sound of waves in a seashell, sad and soft. "You burned us … burned us … burrrrned usssssss."

"It was *her*!" Davos cried. "Mother, don't forsake us. It was her who burned you, the red woman, Melisandre, *her*!" He could see her; the heart-shaped face, the red eyes, the long coppery hair, her red gowns moving like flames as she walked, a swirl of silk and satin. She had come from Asshai in the east, she had come to Dragonstone and won Selsye and her queen's men for her alien god,

and then the king, Stannis Baratheon himself. He had gone so far as to put the fiery heart on his banners, the fiery heart of R'hllor, Lord of Light and God of Flame and Shadow. At Melisandre's urging, he had dragged the Seven from their sept at Dragonstone and burned them before the castle gates, and later he had burned the godswood at Storm's End as well, even the heart tree, a huge white weirwood with a solemn face.

"It was her work," Davos said again, more weakly. *Her work, and yours, onion knight. You rowed her into Storm's End in the black of night, so she might loose her shadow child. You are not guiltless, no. You rode beneath her banner and flew it from your mast. You watched the Seven burn at Dragonstone, and did nothing. She gave the Father's justice to the fire, and the Mother's mercy, and the wisdom of the Crone. Smith and Stranger, Maid and Warrior, she burnt them all to the glory of her cruel god, and you stood and held your tongue. Even when she killed old Maester Cressen, even then, you did nothing.*

The sail was a hundred yards away and moving fast across the bay. In a few more moments it would be past him, and dwindling.

Ser Davos Seaworth began to climb his rock.

He pulled himself up with trembling hands, his head swimming with fever. Twice his maimed fingers slipped on the damp stone and he almost fell, but somehow he managed to cling to his perch. If he fell he was dead, and he had to live. For a little while more, at least. There was something he had to do.

The top of the rock was too small to stand on safely, as weak as he was, so he crouched and waved his fleshless arms. "*Ship*," he screamed into the wind. "Ship, here, *here*!" From up here, he could see her more clearly; the lean striped hull, the bronze figurehead, the billowing sail. There was a name painted on her hull, but Davos had never learned to read. "*Ship,*" he called again, "*help me. HELP ME!*"

A crewman on her forecastle saw him and pointed. He watched as other sailors moved to the gunwale to gape at him. A short while later the galley's sail came down, her oars slid out, and she swept around toward his refuge. She was too big to approach the rock closely, but thirty yards away she launched a small boat. Davos clung to his rock and watched it creep toward him. Four men were rowing, while a fifth sat in the prow. "You," the fifth man called out when they were only a few feet from his island, "you up on the rock. Who are you?"

A smuggler who rose above himself, thought Davos, *a fool who loved his king too much, and forgot his gods.* "I …" His throat was parched, and he had forgotten how to talk. The words felt strange on his tongue and sounded stranger in his ears. "I was in the battle. I was … a captain, a … a knight, I was a knight."

"Aye, ser," the man said, "and serving which king?" The galley might be Joffrey's, he realized suddenly. If he spoke the wrong name now, she would abandon him to his fate. But no, her hull was striped. She was Lysene, she was Salladhor Saan's. The Mother sent her here, the Mother in her mercy. She had a task for him. *Stannis lives,* he knew then. *I have a king still. And sons, I have other sons, and a wife loyal and loving.* How could he have forgotten? The Mother was merciful indeed.

"Stannis," he shouted back at the Lyseni. "Gods be good, I serve King Stannis."

"Aye," said the man in the boat, "and so do we."

SANSA

The invitation seemed innocent enough, but every time Sansa read it her tummy tightened into a knot. *She's to be queen now, she's beautiful and rich and everyone loves her, why would she want to sup with a traitor's daughter?* It could be curiosity, she supposed; perhaps Margaery Tyrell wanted to get the measure of the rival she'd displaced. *Does she resent me, I wonder? Does she think I bear her ill will …*

Sansa had watched from the castle walls as Margaery Tyrell and her escort made their way up Aegon's High Hill. Joffrey had met his new bride-to-be at the King's Gate to welcome her to the city, and they rode side by side through cheering crowds, Joff glittering in gilded armor and the Tyrell girl splendid in green with a cloak of autumn flowers blowing from her shoulders. She was sixteen, brown-haired and brown-eyed, slender and beautiful. The people called out her name as she passed, held up their children for her blessing, and scattered flowers under the hooves of her horse. Her mother and grandmother followed close behind, riding in a tall wheelhouse whose sides were carved into the shape of a hundred twining roses, every one gilded and shining. The smallfolk cheered them as well.

The same smallfolk who pulled me from my horse and would have killed me, if not for the Hound. Sansa had done nothing to make the commons hate her, no more than Margaery Tyrell had done to win their love. *Does she want me to love her too?* She studied the invitation, which looked to be written in Margaery's own hand. *Does she want my blessing?* Sansa wondered if Joffrey knew of this supper. For all she knew, it might be his doing. That thought made her fearful. If Joff was behind the invitation, he would have some cruel jape planned to shame her in the older girl's eyes. Would he command his Kingsguard to strip her naked once again? The last time he had done that his uncle Tyrion had stopped him, but the Imp could not save her now.

No one can save me but my Florian. Ser Dontos had promised he would help her escape, but not until the night of Joffrey's wedding. The plans had been well laid, her dear devoted knight-turned-fool assured her; there was nothing to do until then but endure, and count the days.

And sup with my replacement …

Perhaps she was doing Margaery Tyrell an injustice. Perhaps the invitation was no more than a simple kindness, an act of courtesy. *It might be just a supper*. But this was the Red Keep, this was King's Landing, this was the court of King Joffrey Baratheon, the First of His Name, and if there was one thing that Sansa Stark had learned here, it was mistrust.

Even so, she must accept. She was nothing now, the discarded daughter of a traitor and disgraced sister of a rebel lord. She could scarcely refuse Joffrey's queen-to-be.

I wish the Hound were here. The night of the battle, Sandor Clegane had come to her chambers to take her from the city, but Sansa had refused. Sometimes, she lay awake at night, wondering if she'd been wise. She had his stained white cloak hidden in a cedar chest beneath her summer silks. She could not say why she'd kept it. The Hound had turned craven, she heard it said; at the height of the battle, he got so drunk the Imp had to take his men. But Sansa understood. She knew the secret of his burned face. *It was only the fire he feared*. That night, the wildfire had set the river itself ablaze, and filled the very air with green flame. Even in the castle, Sansa had been afraid. Outside … she could scarcely imagine it.

Sighing, she got out quill and ink, and wrote Margaery Tyrell a gracious note of acceptance.

When the appointed night arrived, another of the Kingsguard came for her, a man as different from Sandor Clegane as … *well, as a flower from a dog*. The sight of Ser Loras Tyrell standing on her threshold made Sansa's heart beat a little faster. This was the first time she had been so close to him since he had returned to King's Landing, leading the vanguard of his father's host. For a moment she did not know what to say. "Ser Loras," she finally managed, "you … you look so lovely."

He gave her a puzzled smile. “My lady is too kind. And beautiful besides. My sister awaits you eagerly.”

“I have so looked forward to our supper.”

“As has Margaery, and my lady grandmother as well.” He took her arm and led her toward the steps.

“Your grandmother?” Sansa was finding it hard to walk and talk and think all at the same time, with Ser Loras touching her arm. She could feel the warmth of his hand through the silk.

“Lady Olenna. She is to sup with you as well.”

“Oh,” said Sansa. *I am talking to him, and he’s touching me, he’s holding my arm and touching me*. “The Queen of Thorns, she’s called. Isn’t that right?”

“It is.” Ser Loras laughed. *He has the warmest laugh*, she thought as he went on, “You’d best not use that name in her presence, though, or you’re like to get pricked.”

Sansa reddened. Any fool would have realized that no woman would be happy about being called “the Queen of Thorns.” *Maybe I truly am as stupid as Cersei Lannister says*. Desperately, she tried to think of something clever and charming to say to him, but her wits had deserted her. She almost told him how beautiful he was, until she remembered that she’d already done that.

He *was* beautiful, though. He seemed taller than he’d been when she’d first met him, but still so lithe and graceful, and Sansa had never seen another boy with such wonderful eyes. *He’s no boy, though, he’s a man grown, a knight of the Kingsguard*. She thought he looked even finer in white than in the greens and golds of House Tyrell. The only spot of color on him now was the brooch that clasped his cloak; the rose of Highgarden wrought in soft yellow gold, nestled in a bed of delicate green jade leaves.

Ser Balon Swann held the door of Maegor’s for them to pass. He was all in white as well, though he did not wear it half so well as Ser Loras. Beyond the spiked moat, two dozen men were taking their practice with sword and shield. With the castle so crowded, the outer ward had been given over to guests to raise their tents and pavilions, leaving only the smaller inner yards for training. One of the Redwyne twins was being driven backward by Ser Tallad, with the eyes on his shield. Chunky Ser Kennos of Kayce, who chuffed and puffed every time he raised his longsword, seemed to be holding his own against Osney Kettleblack, but Osney’s brother Ser Osfryd was savagely punishing the frog-faced squire Morros Slynt. Blunted swords or no, Slynt would have a rich crop of bruises by the morrow. It made Sansa wince just to watch. *They have scarcely finished burying the dead from the last battle, and already they are practicing for the next one.*

On the edge of the yard, a lone knight with a pair of golden roses on his shield was holding off three foes. Even as they watched, he caught one of them alongside the head, knocking him senseless. “Is that your brother?” Sansa asked.

“It is, my lady,” said Ser Loras. “Garlan often trains against three men, or even four. In battle it is seldom one against one, he says, so he likes to be prepared.”

“He must be very brave.”

“He is a great knight,” Ser Loras replied. “A better sword than me, in truth, though I’m the better lance.”

“I remember,” said Sansa. “You ride wonderfully, ser.”

“My lady is gracious to say so. When has she seen me ride?”

“At the Hand’s tourney, don’t you remember? You rode a white courser, and your armor was a hundred different kinds of flowers. You gave me a rose. A *red* rose. You threw white roses to the other girls that day.” It made her flush to speak of it. “You said no victory was half as beautiful as me.”

Ser Loras gave her a modest smile. “I spoke only a simple truth, that any man with eyes could see.”

He doesn't remember, Sansa realized, startled. *He is only being kind to me, he doesn't remember me or the rose or any of it*. She had been so certain that it meant something, that it meant *everything*. A *red* rose, not a white. "It was after you unhorsed Ser Robar Royce," she said, desperately.

He took his hand from her arm. "I slew Robar at Storm's End, my lady." It was not a boast; he sounded sad.

Him, and another of King Renly's Rainbow Guard as well, yes. Sansa had heard the women talking of it round the well, but for a moment she'd forgotten. "That was when Lord Renly was killed, wasn't it? How terrible for your poor sister."

"For Margaery?" His voice was tight. "To be sure. She was at Bitterbridge, though. She did not see."

"Even so, when she heard …"

Ser Loras brushed the hilt of his sword lightly with his hand. Its grip was white leather, its pommel a rose in alabaster. "Renly is dead. Robar as well. What use to speak of them?"

The sharpness in his tone took her aback. "I … my lord, I … I did not mean to give offense, ser."

"Nor could you, Lady Sansa," Ser Loras replied, but all the warmth had gone from his voice. Nor did he take her arm again.

They ascended the serpentine steps in a deepening silence.

Oh, why did I have to mention Ser Robar? Sansa thought. *I've ruined everything. He is angry with me now*. She tried to think of something she might say to make amends, but all the words that came to her were lame and weak. *Be quiet, or you will only make it worse*, she told herself.

Lord Mace Tyrell and his entourage had been housed behind the royal sept, in the long slate-roofed keep that had been called the Maidenvault since King Baelor the Blessed had confined his sisters therein, so the sight of them might not tempt him into carnal thoughts. Outside its tall carved doors stood two guards in gilded halfhelms and green cloaks edged in gold satin, the golden rose of Highgarden sewn on their breasts. Both were seven-footers, wide of shoulder and narrow of waist, magnificently muscled. When Sansa got close enough to see their faces, she could not tell one from the other. They had the same strong jaws, the same deep blue eyes, the same thick red mustaches. "Who are they?" she asked Ser Loras, her discomfit forgotten for a moment.

"My grandmother's personal guard," he told her. "Their mother named them Erryk and Arryk, but Grandmother can't tell them apart, so she calls them Left and Right."

Left and Right opened the doors, and Margaery Tyrell herself emerged and swept down the short flight of steps to greet them. "Lady Sansa," she called, "I'm so pleased you came. Be welcome."

Sansa knelt at the feet of her future queen. "You do me great honor, Your Grace."

"Won't you call me Margaery? Please, rise. Loras, help the Lady Sansa to her feet. Might I call you Sansa?"

"If it please you." Ser Loras helped her up.

Margaery dismissed him with a sisterly kiss, and took Sansa by the hand. "Come, my grandmother awaits, and she is not the most patient of ladies."

A fire was crackling in the hearth, and sweet-swelling rushes had been scattered on the floor. Around the long trestle table a dozen women were seated.

Sansa recognized only Lord Tyrell's tall, dignified wife, Lady Alerie, whose long silvery braid was bound with jeweled rings. Margaery performed the other introductions. There were three Tyrell cousins, Megga and Alla and Elinor, all close to Sansa's age. Buxom Lady Janna was Lord Tyrell's sister, and wed to one of the green-apple Fossoways; dainty, bright-eyed Lady Leonette was a Fossoway as well, and wed to Ser Garlan. Septa Nysterica had a homely pox-scarred face but seemed jolly. Pale, elegant Lady Graceford was with child, and Lady Bulwer *was* a child, no more than eight. And "Merry" was what she was to call boisterous plump Meredyth Crane, but most definitely *not* Lady Merryweather, a sultry black-eyed Myrish beauty.

Last of all, Margaery brought her before the wizened white-haired doll of a woman at the head of the table. “I am honored to present my grandmother the Lady Olenna, widow to the late Luthor Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden, whose memory is a comfort to us all.”

The old woman smelled of rosewater. *Why, she’s just the littlest bit of a thing.* There was nothing the least bit thorny about her. “Kiss me, child,” Lady Olenna said, tugging at Sansa’s wrist with a soft spotted hand. “It is so kind of you to sup with me and my foolish flock of hens.”

Dutifully, Sansa kissed the old woman on the cheek. “It is kind of you to have me, my lady.”

“I knew your grandfather, Lord Rickard, though not well.”

“He died before I was born.”

“I am aware of that, child. It’s said that your Tully grandfather is dying too. Lord Hoster, surely they told you? An old man, though not so old as me. Still, night falls for all of us in the end, and too soon for some. You would know that more than most, poor child. You’ve had your share of grief, I know. We are sorry for your losses.”

Sansa glanced at Margaery. “I was saddened when I heard of Lord Renly’s death, Your Grace. He was very gallant.”

“You are kind to say so,” answered Margaery.

Her grandmother snorted. “Gallant, yes, and charming, and very clean. He knew how to dress and he knew how to smile and he knew how to bathe, and somehow he got the notion that this made him fit to be king. The Baratheons have always had some queer notions, to be sure. It comes from their Targaryen blood, I should think.” She sniffed. “They tried to marry me to a Targaryen once, but I soon put an end to that.”

“Renly was brave and gentle, Grandmother,” said Margaery. “Father liked him as well, and so did Loras.”

“Loras is young,” Lady Olenna said crisply, “and very good at knocking men off horses with a stick. That does not make him wise. As to your father, would that I’d been born a peasant woman with a big wooden spoon, I might have been able to beat some sense into his fat head.”

“*Mother*,” Lady Alerie scolded.

“Hush, Alerie, don’t take that tone with me. And don’t call me Mother. If I’d given birth to you, I’m sure I’d remember. I’m only to blame for your husband, the lord oaf of Highgarden.”

“Grandmother,” Margaery said, “mind your words, or what will Sansa think of us?”

“She might think we have some wits about us. One of us, at any rate.” The old woman turned back to Sansa. “It’s treason, I warned them, Robert has two sons, and Renly has an older brother, how can he *possibly* have any claim to that ugly iron chair? Tut-tut, says my son, don’t you want your sweetling to be queen? You Starks were kings once, the Arryns and the Lannisters as well, and even the Baratheons through the female line, but the Tyrells were no more than stewards until Aegon the Dragon came along and cooked the rightful King of the Reach on the Field of Fire. If truth be told, even our claim to Highgarden is a bit dodgy, just as those dreadful Florents are always whining. ‘What does it matter?’ you ask, and of course it doesn’t, except to oafs like my son. The thought that one day he may see his grandson with his arse on the Iron Throne makes Mace puff up like … now, what do you call it? Margaery, you’re clever, be a dear and tell your poor old half-daft grandmother the name of that queer fish from the Summer Isles that puffs up to ten times its own size when you poke it.”

“They call them puff fish, Grandmother.”

“Of course they do. Summer Islanders have no imagination. My son ought to take the puff fish for his sigil, if truth be told. He could put a crown on it, the way the Baratheons do their stag, mayhap that would make him happy. We should have stayed well out of all this bloody foolishness if you ask me, but once the cow’s been milked there’s no squirting the cream back up her udder. After Lord Puff Fish put that crown on Renly’s head, we were into the pudding up to our knees, so here we are to see things through. And what do you say to that, Sansa?”

Sansa's mouth opened and closed. She felt very like a puff fish herself. "The Tyrells can trace their descent back to Garth Greenhand," was the best she could manage at short notice.

The Queen of Thorns snorted. "So can the Florents, the Rowans, the Oakhearts, and half the other noble houses of the south. Garth liked to plant his seed in fertile ground, they say. I shouldn't wonder that more than his hands were green."

"*Sansa*," Lady Alerie broke in, "you must be very hungry. Shall we have a bite of boar together, and some lemon cakes?"

"Lemon cakes are my favorite," Sansa admitted.

"So we have been told," declared Lady Olenna, who obviously had no intention of being hushed. "That Varys creature seemed to think we should be grateful for the information. I've never been quite sure what the *point* of a eunuch is, if truth be told. It seems to me they're only men with the useful bits cut off. Alerie, will you have them bring the food, or do you mean to starve me to death? Here, Sansa, sit here next to me, I'm much less boring than these others. I hope that you're fond of fools."

Sansa smoothed down her skirts and sat. "I think … fools, my lady? You mean … the sort in motley?"

"Feathers, in this case. What did you imagine I was speaking of? My son? Or these lovely ladies? No, don't blush, with your hair it makes you look like a pomegranate. All men are fools, if truth be told, but the ones in motley are more amusing than ones with crowns. Margaery, child, summon Butterbumps, let us see if we can't make Lady Sansa smile. The rest of you be seated, do I have to tell you everything? Sansa must think that my granddaughter is attended by a flock of sheep."

Butterbumps arrived before the food, dressed in a jester's suit of green and yellow feathers with a floppy coxcomb. An immense round fat man, as big as three Moon Boys, he came cartwheeling into the hall, vaulted onto the table, and laid a gigantic egg right in front of Sansa. "Break it, my lady," he commanded. When she did, a dozen yellow chicks escaped and began running in all directions. "*Catch them!*" Butterbumps exclaimed. Little Lady Bulwer snagged one and handed it to him, whereby he tilted back his head, popped it into his huge rubbery mouth, and seemed to swallow it whole. When he belched, tiny yellow feathers flew out his nose. Lady Bulwer began to wail in distress, but her tears turned into a sudden squeal of delight when the chick came squirming out of the sleeve of her gown and ran down her arm.

As the servants brought out a broth of leeks and mushrooms, Butterbumps began to juggle and Lady Olenna pushed herself forward to rest her elbows on the table. "Do you know my son, Sansa? Lord Puff Fish of Highgarden?"

"A great lord," Sansa answered politely.

"A great oaf," said the Queen of Thorns. "His father was an oaf as well. My husband, the late Lord Luthor. Oh, I loved him well enough, don't mistake me. A kind man, and not unskilled in the bedchamber, but an appalling oaf all the same. He managed to ride off a cliff whilst hawking. They say he was looking up at the sky and paying no mind to where his horse was taking him.

"And now my oaf son is doing the same, only he's riding a lion instead of a palfrey. It is easy to mount a lion and not so easy to get off, I warned him, but he only chuckles. Should you ever have a son, Sansa, beat him frequently so he learns to mind you. I only had the one boy and I hardly beat him at all, so now he pays more heed to Butterbumps than he does to me. A lion is not a lap cat, I told him, and he gives me a 'tut-tut-Mother.' There is entirely too much tut-tutting in this realm, if you ask me. All these kings would do a deal better if they would put down their swords and listen to their mothers."

Sansa realized that her mouth was open again. She filled it with a spoon of broth while Lady Alerie and the other women were giggling at the spectacle of Butterbumps bouncing oranges off his head, his elbows, and his ample rump.

"I want you to tell me the truth about this royal boy," said Lady Olenna abruptly. "This Joffrey."

Sansa's fingers tightened round her spoon. *The truth? I can't. Don't ask it, please, I can't.* "I … I … I …"

"You, yes. Who would know better? The lad seems kingly enough, I'll grant you. A bit full of himself, but that would be his Lannister blood. We have heard some troubling tales, however. Is there any truth to them? Has this boy mistreated you?"

Sansa glanced about nervously. Butterbumps popped a whole orange into his mouth, chewed and swallowed, slapped his cheek, and blew seeds out of his nose. The women giggled and laughed. Servants were coming and going, and the Maidenvault echoed to the clatter of spoons and plates. One of the chicks hopped back onto the table and ran through Lady Graceford's broth. No one seemed to be paying them any mind, but even so, she was frightened.

Lady Olenna was growing impatient. "Why are you gaping at Butterbumps? I asked a question, I expect an answer. Have the Lannisters stolen your tongue, child?"

Ser Dontos had warned her to speak freely only in the godswood. "Joff … King Joffrey, he's … His Grace is very fair and handsome, and … and as brave as a lion."

"Yes, all the Lannisters are lions, and when a Tyrell breaks wind it smells just like a rose," the old woman snapped. "But how *kind* is he? How clever? Has he a good heart, a gentle hand? Is he chivalrous as befits a king? Will he cherish Margaery and treat her tenderly, protect her honor as he would his own?"

"He will," Sansa lied. "He is very … very comely."

"You said that. You know, child, some say that you are as big a fool as Butterbumps here, and I am starting to believe them. *Comely?* I have taught my Margaery what comely is worth, I hope. Somewhat less than a mummer's fart. Aerion Brightfire was comely enough, but a monster all the same. The question is, what is Joffrey?" She reached to snag a passing servant. "I am not fond of leeks. Take this broth away, and bring me some cheese."

"The cheese will be served after the cakes, my lady."

"The cheese will be served when I want it served, and I want it served now." The old woman turned back to Sansa. "Are you frightened, child? No need for that, we're only women here. Tell me the truth, no harm will come to you."

"My father always told the truth." Sansa spoke quietly, but even so, it was hard to get the words out.

"Lord Eddard, yes, he had that reputation, but they named him traitor and took his head off even so." The old woman's eyes bore into her, sharp and bright as the points of swords.

"Joffrey," Sansa said. "Joffrey did that. He promised me he would be merciful, and cut my father's head off. He said *that* was mercy, and he took me up on the walls and made me look at it. The head. He wanted me to weep, but …" She stopped abruptly, and covered her mouth. *I've said too much, oh gods be good, they'll know, they'll hear, someone will tell on me.*

"Go on." It was Margaery who urged. Joffrey's own queen-to-be. Sansa did not know how much she had heard.

"I can't." *What if she tells him, what if she tells? He'll kill me for certain then, or give me to Ser Ilyn.* "I never meant … my father was a traitor, my brother as well, I have the traitor's blood, please, don't make me say more."

"Calm yourself, child," the Queen of Thorns commanded.

"She's terrified, Grandmother, just look at her."

The old woman called to Butterbumps. "*Fool!* Give us a song. A long one, I should think. 'The Bear and the Maiden Fair' will do nicely."

"It will!" the huge jester replied. "It will do nicely indeed! Shall I sing it standing on my head, my lady?"

"Will that make it sound better?"

"No."

"Stand on your feet, then. We wouldn't want your hat to fall off. As I recall, you never wash your hair."

"As my lady commands." Butterbumps bowed low, let loose of an enormous belch, then straightened, threw out his belly, and bellowed. "*A bear there was, a bear, a BEAR! All black and brown, and covered with hair …*"

Lady Olenna squirmed forward. "Even when I was a girl younger than you, it was well known that in the Red Keep the very walls have ears. Well, they will be the better for a song, and meanwhile we girls shall speak freely."

"But," Sansa said, "Varys … he *knows*, he always …"

"*Sing louder!*" the Queen of Thorns shouted at Butterbumps. "These old ears are almost deaf, you know. Are you whispering at me, you fat fool? I don't pay you for whispers. *Sing!*"

"… *THE BEAR!*" thundered Butterbumps, his great deep voice echoing off the rafters. "*OH, COME, THEY SAID, OH COME TO THE FAIR! THE FAIR? SAID HE, BUT I'M A BEAR! ALL BLACK AND BROWN, AND COVERED WITH HAIR!*"

The wrinkled old lady smiled. "At Highgarden, we have many spiders amongst the flowers. So long as they keep to themselves we let them spin their little webs, but if they get underfoot we step on them." She patted Sansa on the back of the hand. "Now, child, the truth. What sort of man is this Joffrey, who calls himself Baratheon but looks so very Lannister?"

"*AND DOWN THE ROAD FROM HERE TO THERE. FROM HERE! TO THERE! THREE BOYS, A GOAT, AND A DANCING BEAR!*"

Sansa felt as though her heart had lodged in her throat. The Queen of Thorns was so close she could smell the old woman's sour breath. Her gaunt thin fingers were pinching her wrist. To her other side, Margaery was listening as well. A shiver went through her. "A monster," she whispered, so tremulously she could scarcely hear her own voice. "Joffrey is a monster. He lied about the butcher's boy and made Father kill my wolf. When I displease him, he has the Kingsguard beat me. He's evil and cruel, my lady, it's so. And the queen as well."

Lady Olenna Tyrell and her granddaughter exchanged a look. "Ah," said the old woman, "that's a pity."

Oh, gods, thought Sansa, horrified. *If Margaery won't marry him, Joff will know that I'm to blame.* "Please," she blurted, "don't stop the wedding …"

"Have no fear, Lord Puff Fish is determined that Margaery shall be queen. And the word of a Tyrell is worth more than all the gold in Casterly Rock. At least it was in my day. Even so, we thank you for the truth, child."

"… *DANCED AND SPUN, ALL THE WAY TO THE FAIR! THE FAIR! THE FAIR!*" Butterbumps hopped and roared and stomped his feet.

"Sansa, would you like to visit Highgarden?" When Margaery Tyrell smiled, she looked very like her brother Loras. "All the autumn flowers are in bloom just now, and there are groves and fountains, shady courtyards, marble colonnades. My lord father always keeps singers at court, sweeter ones than Butters here, and pipers and fiddlers and harpers as well. We have the best horses, and pleasure boats to sail along the Mander. Do you hawk, Sansa?"

"A little," she admitted.

"*OH, SWEET SHE WAS, AND PURE, AND FAIR! THE MAID WITH HONEY IN HER HAIR!*"

"You will love Highgarden as I do, I know it." Margaery brushed back a loose strand of Sansa's hair. "Once you see it, you'll never want to leave. And perhaps you won't have to."

"*HER HAIR! HER HAIR! THE MAID WITH HONEY IN HER HAIR!*"

"Shush, child," the Queen of Thorns said sharply. "Sansa hasn't even told us that she would like to come for a visit."

"Oh, but I would," Sansa said. Highgarden sounded like the place she had always dreamed of, like the beautiful magical court she had once hoped to find at King's Landing.

"*… SMELLED THE SCENT ON THE SUMMER AIR. THE BEAR! THE BEAR! ALL BLACK AND BROWN AND COVERED WITH HAIR.*"

"But the queen," Sansa went on, "she won't let me go …"

"She will. Without Highgarden, the Lannisters have no hope of keeping Joffrey on his throne. If my son the lord oaf asks, she will have no choice but to grant his request."

"Will he?" asked Sansa. "Will he ask?"

Lady Olenna frowned. "I see no need to give him a choice. Of course, he has no hint of our true purpose."

"*HE SMELLED THE SCENT ON THE SUMMER AIR!*"

Sansa wrinkled her brow. "Our true purpose, my lady?"

"*HE SNIFFED AND ROARED AND SMELLED IT THERE! HONEY ON THE SUMMER AIR!*"

"To see you safely wed, child," the old woman said, as Butterbumps bellowed out the old, old song, "to my grandson."

Wed to Ser Loras, oh … Sansa's breath caught in her throat. She remembered Ser Loras in his sparkling sapphire armor, tossing her a rose. Ser Loras in white silk, so pure, innocent, beautiful. The dimples at the corner of his mouth when he smiled. The sweetness of his laugh, the warmth of his hand. She could only imagine what it would be like to pull up his tunic and caress the smooth skin underneath, to stand on her toes and kiss him, to run her fingers through those thick brown curls and drown in his deep brown eyes. A flush crept up her neck.

"*OH, I'M A MAID, AND I'M PURE AND FAIR! I'LL NEVER DANCE WITH A HAIRY BEAR! A BEAR! A BEAR! I'LL NEVER DANCE WITH A HAIRY BEAR!*"

"Would you like that, Sansa?" asked Margaery. "I've never had a sister, only brothers. Oh, please say yes, please say that you will consent to marry my brother."

The words came tumbling out of her. "Yes. I will. I would like that more than anything. To wed Ser Loras, to love him …"

"*Loras?*" Lady Olenna sounded annoyed. "Don't be foolish, child. Kingsguard never wed. Didn't they teach you anything in Winterfell? We were speaking of my grandson Willas. He is a bit old for you, to be sure, but a dear boy for all that. Not the least bit oafish, and heir to Highgarden besides."

Sansa felt dizzy; one instant her head was full of dreams of Loras, and the next they had all been snatched away. *Willas? Willas?* "I," she said stupidly. *Courtesy is a lady's armor. You must not offend them, be careful what you say.* "I do not know Ser Willas. I have never had the pleasure, my lady. Is he … is he as great a knight as his brothers?"

"*… LIFTED HER HIGH INTO THE AIR! THE BEAR! THE BEAR!*"

"No," Margaery said. "He has never taken vows."

Her grandmother frowned. "Tell the girl the truth. The poor lad is crippled, and that's the way of it."

"He was hurt as a squire, riding in his first tourney," Margaery confided. "His horse fell and crushed his leg."

"That snake of a Dornishman was to blame, that Oberyn Martell. And his maester as well."

"*I CALLED FOR A KNIGHT, BUT YOU'RE A BEAR! A BEAR! A BEAR! ALL BLACK AND BROWN AND COVERED WITH HAIR!*"

"Willas has a bad leg but a good heart," said Margaery. "He used to read to me when I was a little girl, and draw me pictures of the stars. You will love him as much as we do, Sansa."

"*SHE KICKED AND WAILED, THE MAID SO FAIR, BUT HE LICKED THE HONEY FROM HER HAIR. HER HAIR! HER HAIR! HE LICKED THE HONEY FROM HER HAIR!*"

"When might I meet him?" asked Sansa, hesitantly.

"Soon," promised Margaery. "When you come to Highgarden, after Joffrey and I are wed. My grandmother will take you."

"I will," said the old woman, patting Sansa's hand and smiling a soft wrinkly smile. "I will indeed."

"*THEN SHE SIGHED AND SQUEALED AND KICKED THE AIR! MY BEAR! SHE SANG. MY BEAR SO FAIR! AND OFF THEY WENT, FROM HERE TO THERE, THE BEAR, THE BEAR, AND THE MAIDEN FAIR.*" Butterbumps roared the last line, leapt into the air, and came down on both feet with a crash that shook the wine cups on the table. The women laughed and clapped.

"I thought that dreadful song would never end," said the Queen of Thorns. "But look, here comes my cheese."

JON

The world was grey darkness, smelling of pine and moss and cold. Pale mists rose from the black earth as the riders threaded their way through the scatter of stones and scraggly trees, down toward the welcoming fires strewn like jewels across the floor of the river valley below. There were more fires than Jon Snow could count, hundreds of fires, thousands, a second river of flickery lights along the banks of the icy white Milkwater. The fingers of his sword hand opened and closed.

They descended the ridge without banners or trumpets, the quiet broken only by the distant murmur of the river, the clop of hooves, and the clacking of Rattleshirt's bone armor. Somewhere above, an eagle soared on great blue-grey wings, while below came men and dogs and horses and one white direwolf.

A stone bounced down the slope, disturbed by a passing hoof, and Jon saw Ghost turn his head at the sudden sound. He had followed the riders at a distance all day, as was his custom, but when the moon rose over the soldier pines he'd come bounding up, red eyes aglow. Rattleshirt's dogs greeted him with a chorus of snarls and growls and wild barking, as ever, but the direwolf paid them no mind. Six days ago, the largest hound had attacked him from behind as the wildlings camped for the night, but Ghost had turned and lunged, sending the dog fleeing with a bloody haunch. The rest of the pack maintained a healthy distance after that.

Jon Snow's garron whickered softly, but a touch and a soft word soon quieted the animal. Would that his own fears could be calmed so easily. He was all in black, the black of the Night's Watch, but the enemy rode before and behind. *Wildlings, and I am with them.* Ygritte wore the cloak of Qhorin Halfhand. Lenyl had his hauberk, the big spearwife Ragwyle his gloves, one of the bowmen his boots. Qhorin's helm had been won by the short homely man called Longspear Ryk, but it fit poorly on his narrow head, so he'd given that to Ygritte as well. And Rattleshirt had Qhorin's bones in his bag, along with the bloody head of Ebben, who set out with Jon to scout the Skirling Pass. *Dead, all dead but me, and I am dead to the world.*

Ygritte rode just behind him. In front was Longspear Ryk. The Lord of Bones had made the two of them his guards. "If the crow flies, I'll boil your bones as well," he warned them when they had set out, smiling through the crooked teeth of the giant's skull he wore for a helm.

Ygritte hooted at him. "*You* want to guard him? If you want us to do it, leave us be and we'll do it."

These are a free folk indeed, Jon saw. Rattleshirt might lead them, but none of them were shy in talking back to him.

The wildling leader fixed him with an unfriendly stare. "Might be you fooled these others, crow, but don't think you'll be fooling Mance. He'll take one look a' you and know you're false. And when he does, I'll make a cloak o' your wolf there, and open your soft boy's belly and sew a weasel up inside."

Jon's sword hand opened and closed, flexing the burned fingers beneath the glove, but Longspear Ryk only laughed. "And where would you find a weasel in the snow?"

That first night, after a long day ahorse, they made camp in a shallow stone bowl atop a nameless mountain, huddling close to the fire while the snow began to fall. Jon watched the flakes melt as they drifted over the flames. Despite his layers of wool and fur and leather, he'd felt cold to the bone. Ygritte sat beside him after she had eaten, her hood pulled up and her hands tucked into her sleeves for warmth. "When Mance hears how you did for Halfhand, he'll take you quick enough," she told him.

"Take me for what?"

The girl laughed scornfully. "For one o' us. D'ya think you're the first crow ever flew down off the Wall? In your hearts you all want to fly free."

"And when I'm free," he said slowly, "will I be free to go?"

"Sure you will." She had a warm smile, despite her crooked teeth. "And we'll be free to kill you. It's *dangerous* being free, but most come to like the taste o' it." She put her gloved hand on his leg, just above the knee. "You'll see."

I will, thought Jon. *I will see, and hear, and learn, and when I have I will carry the word back to the Wall.* The wildlings had taken him for an oathbreaker, but in his heart he was still a man of the Night's Watch, doing the last duty that Qhorin Halfhand had laid on him. *Before I killed him.*

At the bottom of the slope they came upon a little stream flowing down from the foothills to join the Milkwater. It looked all stones and glass, though they could hear the sound of water running beneath the frozen surface. Rattleshirt led them across, shattering the thin crust of ice.

Mance Rayder's outriders closed in as they emerged. Jon took their measure with a glance: eight riders, men and women both, clad in fur and boiled leather, with here and there a helm or bit of mail. They were armed with spears and fire-hardened lances, all but their leader, a fleshy blond man with watery eyes who bore a great curved scythe of sharpened steel. *The Weeper*, he knew at once. The black brothers told tales of this one. Like Rattleshirt and Harma Dogshead and Alfyn Crowkiller, he was a known raider.

"The Lord o' Bones," the Weeper said when he saw them. He eyed Jon and his wolf. "Who's this, then?"

"A crow come over," said Rattleshirt, who preferred to be called the Lord of Bones, for the clattering armor he wore. "He was afraid I'd take his bones as well as Halfhand's." He shook his sack of trophies at the other wildlings.

"He slew Qhorin Halfhand," said Longspear Ryk. "Him and that wolf o' his."

"And did for Orell too," said Rattleshirt.

"The lad's a warg, or close enough," put in Ragwyle, the big spearwife. "His wolf took a piece o' Halfhand's leg."

The Weeper's red rheumy eyes gave Jon another look. "Aye? Well, he has a wolfish cast to him, now as I look close. Bring him to Mance, might be he'll keep him." He wheeled his horse around and galloped off, his riders hard behind him.

The wind was blowing wet and heavy as they crossed the valley of the Milkwater and rode singlefile through the river camp. Ghost kept close to Jon, but the scent of him went before them like a herald, and soon there were wildling dogs all around them, growling and barking. Lenyl screamed at them to be quiet, but they paid him no heed. "They don't much care for that beast o' yours," Longspear Ryk said to Jon.

"They're dogs and he's a wolf," said Jon. "They know he's not their kind." *No more than I am yours.* But he had his duty to be mindful of, the task Qhorin Halfhand had laid upon him as they shared that final fire—to play the part of turncloak, and find whatever it was that the wildlings had been seeking in the bleak cold wilderness of the Frostfangs.

"Some *power*," Qhorin had named it to the Old Bear, but he had died before learning what it was, or whether Mance Rayder had found it with his digging.

There were cookfires all along the river, amongst wayns and carts and sleds. Many of the wildlings had thrown up tents, of hide and skin and felted wool. Others sheltered behind rocks in crude lean-tos, or slept beneath their wagons. At one fire Jon saw a man hardening the points of long wooden spears and tossing them in a pile. Elsewhere two bearded youths in boiled leather were sparring with staffs, leaping at each other over the flames, grunting each time one landed a blow. A dozen women sat nearby in a circle, fletching arrows.

Arrows for my brothers, Jon thought. *Arrows for my father's folk, for the people of Winterfell and Deepwood Motte and the Last Hearth. Arrows for the north.*

But not all he saw was warlike. He saw women dancing as well, and heard a baby crying, and a little boy ran in front of his garron, all bundled up in fur and breathless from play. Sheep and goats

wandered freely, while oxen plodded along the riverbank in search of grass. The smell of roast mutton drifted from one cookfire, and at another he saw a boar turning on a wooden spit.

In an open space surrounded by tall green soldier pines, Rattleshirt dismounted. "We'll make camp here," he told Lenyl and Ragwyle and the others. "Feed the horses, then the dogs, then yourself. Ygritte, Longspear, bring the crow so Mance can have his look. We'll gut him after."

They walked the rest of the way, past more cookfires and more tents, with Ghost following at their heels. Jon had never seen so many wildlings. He wondered if anyone ever had. *The camp goes on forever,* he reflected, *but it's more a hundred camps than one, and each more vulnerable than the last.* Stretched out over long leagues, the wildlings had no defenses to speak of, no pits nor sharpened stakes, only small groups of outriders patrolling their perimeters. Each group or clan or village had simply stopped where they wanted, as soon as they saw others stopping or found a likely spot. *The free folk.* If his brothers were to catch them in such disarray, many of them would pay for that freedom with their life's blood. They had numbers, but the Night's Watch had discipline, and in battle discipline beats numbers nine times of every ten, his father had once told him.

There was no doubting which tent was the king's. It was thrice the size of the next largest he'd seen, and he could hear music drifting from within. Like many of the lesser tents it was made of sewn hides with the fur still on, but Mance Rayder's hides were the shaggy white pelts of snow bears. The peaked roof was crowned with a huge set of antlers from one of the giant elks that had once roamed freely throughout the Seven Kingdoms, in the times of the First Men.

Here at least they found defenders; two guards at the flap of the tent, leaning on tall spears with round leather shields strapped to their arms. When they caught sight of Ghost, one of them lowered his spearpoint and said, "That beast stays here."

"Ghost, stay," Jon commanded. The direwolf sat.

"Longspear, watch the beast." Rattleshirt yanked open the tent and gestured Jon and Ygritte inside.

The tent was hot and smoky. Baskets of burning peat stood in all four corners, filling the air with a dim reddish light. More skins carpeted the ground. Jon felt utterly alone as he stood there in his blacks, awaiting the pleasure of the turncloak who called himself King-beyond-the-Wall. When his eyes had adjusted to the smoky red gloom, he saw six people, none of whom paid him any mind. A dark young man and a pretty blonde woman were sharing a horn of mead. A pregnant woman stood over a brazier cooking a brace of hens, while a grey-haired man in a tattered cloak of black and red sat crosslegged on a pillow, playing a lute and singing:

The Dornishman's wife was as fair as the sun,
and her kisses were warmer than spring.
But the Dornishman's blade was made of black steel,
and its kiss was a terrible thing.

Jon knew the song, though it was strange to hear it here, in a shaggy hide tent beyond the Wall, ten thousand leagues from the red mountains and warm winds of Dorne.

Rattleshirt took off his yellowed helm as he waited for the song to end. Beneath his bone-and-leather armor he was a small man, and the face under the giant's skull was ordinary, with a knobby chin, thin mustache, and sallow, pinched cheeks. His eyes were close-set, one eyebrow creeping all the way across his forehead, dark hair thinning back from a sharp widow's peak.

The Dornishman's wife would sing as she bathed,
in a voice that was sweet as a peach,
But the Dornishman's blade had a song of its own,
and a bite sharp and cold as a leech.

Beside the brazier, a short but immensely broad man sat on a stool, eating a hen off a skewer. Hot grease was running down his chin and into his snow-white beard, but he smiled happily all the same. Thick gold bands graven with runes bound his massive arms, and he wore a heavy shirt of

black ringmail that could only have come from a dead ranger. A few feet away, a taller, leaner man in a leather shirt sewn with bronze scales stood frowning over a map, a two-handed greatsword slung across his back in a leather sheath. He was straight as a spear, all long wiry muscle, clean-shaved, bald, with a strong straight nose and deepset grey eyes. He might even have been comely if he'd had ears, but he had lost both along the way, whether to frostbite or some enemy's knife Jon could not tell. Their lack made the man's head seem narrow and pointed.

Both the white-bearded man and the bald one were warriors, that was plain to Jon at a glance. *These two are more dangerous than Rattleshirt by far*. He wondered which was Mance Rayder.

As he lay on the ground with the darkness around,
and the taste of his blood on his tongue,
His brothers knelt by him and prayed him a prayer,
and he smiled and he laughed and he sung,
"Brothers, oh brothers, my days here are done,
the Dornishman's taken my life,
But what does it matter, for all men must die,
and I've tasted the Dornishman's wife!"

As the last strains of "The Dornishman's Wife" faded, the bald earless man glanced up from his map and scowled ferociously at Rattleshirt and Ygritte, with Jon between them. "What's this?" he said. "A crow?"

"The black bastard what gutted Orell," said Rattleshirt, "and a bloody warg as well."

"You were to kill them all."

"This one come over," explained Ygritte. "He slew Qhorin Halfhand with his own hand."

"This *boy*?" The earless man was angered by the news. "The Halfhand should have been mine. Do you have a name, crow?"

"Jon Snow, Your Grace." He wondered whether he was expected to bend the knee as well.

"Your Grace?" The earless man looked at the big white-bearded one. "You see. He takes me for a king."

The bearded man laughed so hard he sprayed bits of chicken everywhere. He rubbed the grease from his mouth with the back of a huge hand. "A blind boy, must be. Who ever heard of a king without ears? Why, his crown would fall straight down to his neck! Har!" He grinned at Jon, wiping his fingers clean on his breeches. "Close your beak, crow. Spin yourself around, might be you'd find who you're looking for."

Jon turned.

The singer rose to his feet. "I'm Mance Rayder," he said as he put aside the lute. "And you are Ned Stark's bastard, the Snow of Winterfell."

Stunned, Jon stood speechless for a moment, before he recovered enough to say, "How … how could you know …"

"That's a tale for later," said Mance Rayder. "How did you like the song, lad?"

"Well enough. I'd heard it before."

"*But what does it matter, for all men must die,*" the King-beyond-the-Wall said lightly, "*and I've tasted the Dornishman's wife.* Tell me, does my Lord of Bones speak truly? Did you slay my old friend the Halfhand?"

"I did." *Though it was his doing more than mine.*

"The Shadow Tower will never again seem as fearsome," the king said with sadness in his voice. "Qhorin was my enemy. But also my brother, once. So … shall I thank you for killing him, Jon Snow? Or curse you?" He gave Jon a mocking smile.

The King-beyond-the-Wall looked nothing like a king, nor even much a wildling. He was of middling height, slender, sharp-faced, with shrewd brown eyes and long brown hair that had gone mostly to grey. There was no crown on his head, no gold rings on his arms, no jewels at his throat,

not even a gleam of silver. He wore wool and leather, and his only garment of note was his ragged black wool cloak, its long tears patched with faded red silk.

"You ought to thank me for killing your enemy," Jon said finally, "and curse me for killing your friend."

"*Har!*" boomed the white-bearded man. "Well answered!"

"Agreed." Mance Rayder beckoned Jon closer. "If you would join us, you'd best know us. The man you took for me is Styr, Magnar of Thenn. *Magnar* means 'lord' in the Old Tongue." The earless man stared at Jon coldly as Mance turned to the white-bearded one. "Our ferocious chicken-eater here is my loyal Tormund. The woman—"

Tormund rose to his feet. "Hold. You gave Styr his style, give me mine."

Mance Rayder laughed. "As you wish. Jon Snow, before you stands Tormund Giantsbane, Tall-talker, Horn-blower, and Breaker of Ice. And here also Tormund Thunderfist, Husband to Bears, the Mead-king of Ruddy Hall, Speaker to Gods and Father of Hosts."

"That sounds more like me," said Tormund. "Well met, Jon Snow. I am fond o' wargs, as it happens, though not o' Starks."

"The good woman at the brazier," Mance Rayder went on, "is Dalla." The pregnant woman smiled shyly. "Treat her like you would any queen, she is carrying my child." He turned to the last two. "This beauty is her sister Val. Young Jarl beside her is her latest pet."

"I am no man's pet," said Jarl, dark and fierce.

"And Val's no man," white-bearded Tormund snorted. "You ought to have noticed that by now, lad."

"So there you have us, Jon Snow," said Mance Rayder. "The King-beyond-the-Wall and his court, such as it is. And now some words from you, I think. Where did you come from?"

"Winterfell," he said, "by way of Castle Black."

"And what brings you up the Milkwater, so far from the fires of home?" He did not wait for Jon's answer, but looked at once to Rattleshirt. "How many were they?"

"Five. Three's dead and the boy's here. T'other went up a mountainside where no horse could follow."

Rayder's eyes met Jon's again. "Was it only the five of you? Or are more of your brothers skulking about?"

"We were four and the Halfhand. Qhorin was worth twenty common men."

The King-beyond-the-Wall smiled at that. "Some thought so. Still … a boy from Castle Black with rangers from the Shadow Tower? How did that come to be?"

Jon had his lie all ready. "The Lord Commander sent me to the Half-hand for seasoning, so he took me on his ranging."

Styr the Magnar frowned at that. "Ranging, you call it … why would crows come ranging up the Skirling Pass?"

"The villages were deserted," Jon said, truthfully. "It was as if all the free folk had vanished."

"Vanished, aye," said Mance Rayder. "And not just the free folk. Who told you where we were, Jon Snow?"

Tormund snorted. "It were Craster, or I'm a blushing maid. I told you, Mance, that creature needs to be shorter by a head."

The king gave the older man an irritated look. "Tormund, some day try thinking before you speak. I know it was Craster. I asked Jon to see if he would tell it true."

"Har." Tormund spat. "Well, I stepped in that!" He grinned at Jon. "See, lad, that's why he's king and I'm not. I can outdrink, outfight, and outsing him, and my member's thrice the size o' his, but Mance has cunning. He was raised a crow, you know, and the crow's a tricksy bird."

"I would speak with the lad alone, my Lord of Bones," Mance Rayder said to Rattleshirt. "Leave us, all of you."

"What, me as well?" said Tormund.

"No, you especially," said Mance.

"I eat in no hall where I'm not welcome." Tormund got to his feet. "Me and the hens are leaving." He snatched another chicken off the brazier, shoved it into a pocket sewn in the lining of his cloak, said "Har," and left licking his fingers. The others followed him out, all but the woman Dalla.

"Sit, if you like," Rayder said when they were gone. "Are you hungry? Tormund left us two birds at least."

"I would be pleased to eat, Your Grace. And thank you."

"Your Grace?" The king smiled. "That's not a style one often hears from the lips of free folk. I'm Mance to most, *The* Mance to some. Will you take a horn of mead?"

"Gladly," said Jon.

The king poured himself as Dalla cut the well-crisped hens apart and brought them each a half. Jon peeled off his gloves and ate with his fingers, sucking every morsel of meat off the bones.

"Tormund spoke truly," said Mance Rayder as he ripped apart a loaf of bread. "The black crow is a tricksy bird, that's so … but I was a crow when you were no bigger than the babe in Dalla's belly, Jon Snow. So take care not to play tricksy with me."

"As you say, Your—Mance."

The king laughed. "Your Mance! Why not? I promised you a tale before, of how I knew you. Have you puzzled it out yet?"

Jon shook his head. "Did Rattleshirt send word ahead?"

"By wing? We have no trained ravens. No, I knew your face. I've seen it before. Twice."

It made no sense at first, but as Jon turned it over in his mind, dawn broke. "When you were a brother of the Watch …"

"Very good! Yes, that was the first time. You were just a boy, and I was all in black, one of a dozen riding escort to old Lord Commander Qorgyle when he came down to see your father at Winterfell. I was walking the wall around the yard when I came on you and your brother Robb. It had snowed the night before, and the two of you had built a great mountain above the gate and were waiting for someone likely to pass underneath."

"I remember," said Jon with a startled laugh. *A young black brother on the wallwalk, yes …* "You swore not to tell."

"And kept my vow. That one, at least."

"We dumped the snow on Fat Tom. He was Father's slowest guardsman." Tom had chased them around the yard afterward, until all three were red as autumn apples. "But you said you saw me twice. When was the other time?"

"When King Robert came to Winterfell to make your father Hand," the King-beyond-the-Wall said lightly.

Jon's eyes widened in disbelief. "That can't be so."

"It was. When your father learned the king was coming, he sent word to his brother Benjen on the Wall, so he might come down for the feast. There is more commerce between the black brothers and the free folk than you know, and soon enough word came to my ears as well. It was too choice a chance to resist. Your uncle did not know me by sight, so I had no fear from that quarter, and I did not think your father was like to remember a young crow he'd met briefly years before. I wanted to see this Robert with my own eyes, king to king, and get the measure of your uncle Benjen as well. He was First Ranger by then, and the bane of all my people. So I saddled my fleetest horse, and rode."

"But," Jon objected, "the Wall …"

"The Wall can stop an army, but not a man alone. I took a lute and a bag of silver, scaled the ice near Long Barrow, walked a few leagues south of the New Gift, and bought a horse. All in all I made much better time than Robert, who was traveling with a ponderous great wheelhouse to keep his queen in comfort. A day south of Winterfell I came up on him and fell in with his company. Freeriders

and hedge knights are always attaching themselves to royal processions, in hopes of finding service with the king, and my lute gained me easy acceptance." He laughed. "I know every bawdy song that's ever been made, north or south of the Wall. So there you are. The night your father feasted Robert, I sat in the back of his hall on a bench with the other freeriders, listening to Orland of Oldtown play the high harp and sing of dead kings beneath the sea. I betook of your lord father's meat and mead, had a look at Kingslayer and Imp … and made passing note of Lord Eddard's children and the wolf pups that ran at their heels."

"Bael the Bard," said Jon, remembering the tale that Ygritte had told him in the Frostfangs, the night he'd almost killed her.

"Would that I were. I will not deny that Bael's exploit inspired mine own … but I did not steal either of your sisters that I recall. Bael wrote his own songs, and lived them. I only sing the songs that better men have made. More mead?"

"No," said Jon. "If you had been discovered … taken …"

"Your father would have had my head off." The king gave a shrug. "Though once I had eaten at his board I was protected by guest right. The laws of hospitality are as old as the First Men, and sacred as a heart tree." He gestured at the board between them, the broken bread and chicken bones. "Here you are the guest, and safe from harm at my hands … this night, at least. So tell me truly, Jon Snow. Are you a craven who turned your cloak from fear, or is there another reason that brings you to my tent?"

Guest right or no, Jon Snow knew he walked on rotten ice here. One false step and he might plunge through, into water cold enough to stop his heart. *Weigh every word before you speak it*, he told himself. He took a long draught of mead to buy time for his answer. When he set the horn aside he said, "Tell me why you turned your cloak, and I'll tell you why I turned mine."

Mance Rayder smiled, as Jon had hoped he would. The king was plainly a man who liked the sound of his own voice. "You will have heard stories of my desertion, I have no doubt."

"Some say it was for a crown. Some say for a woman. Others that you had the wildling blood."

"The wildling blood is the blood of the First Men, the same blood that flows in the veins of the Starks. As to a crown, do you see one?"

"I see a woman." He glanced at Dalla.

Mance took her by the hand and pulled her close. "My lady is blameless. I met her on my return from your father's castle. The Halfhand was carved of old oak, but I am made of flesh, and I have a great fondness for the charms of women … which makes me no different from three-quarters of the Watch. There are men still wearing black who have had ten times as many women as this poor king. You must guess again, Jon Snow."

Jon considered a moment. "The Halfhand said you had a passion for wildling music."

"I did. I do. That's closer to the mark, yes. But not a hit." Mance Rayder rose, unfastened the clasp that held his cloak, and swept it over the bench. "It was for this."

"A cloak?"

"The black wool cloak of a Sworn Brother of the Night's Watch," said the King-beyond-the-Wall. "One day on a ranging we brought down a fine big elk. We were skinning it when the smell of blood drew a shadowcat out of its lair. I drove it off, but not before it shredded my cloak to ribbons. Do you see? Here, here, and here?" He chuckled. "It shredded my arm and back as well, and I bled worse than the elk. My brothers feared I might die before they got me back to Maester Mullin at the Shadow Tower, so they carried me to a wildling village where we knew an old wisewoman did some healing. She was dead, as it happened, but her daughter saw to me. Cleaned my wounds, sewed me up, and fed me porridge and potions until I was strong enough to ride again. And she sewed up the rents in my cloak as well, with some scarlet silk from Asshai that her grandmother had pulled from the wreck of a cog washed up on the Frozen Shore. It was the greatest treasure she had, and her gift to me." He swept the cloak back over his shoulders. "But at the Shadow Tower, I was given a new

wool cloak from stores, black and black, and trimmed with black, to go with my black breeches and black boots, my black doublet and black mail. The new cloak had no frays nor rips nor tears … and most of all, no red. The men of the Night's Watch dressed in *black*, Ser Denys Mallister reminded me sternly, as if I had forgotten. My old cloak was fit for burning now, he said.

"I left the next morning … for a place where a kiss was not a crime, and a man could wear any cloak he chose." He closed the clasp and sat back down again. "And you, Jon Snow?"

Jon took another swallow of mead. *There is only one tale that he might believe*. "You say you were at Winterfell, the night my father feasted King Robert."

"I did say it, for I was."

"Then you saw us all. Prince Joffrey and Prince Tommen, Princess Myrcella, my brothers Robb and Bran and Rickon, my sisters Arya and Sansa. You saw them walk the center aisle with every eye upon them and take their seats at the table just below the dais where the king and queen were seated."

"I remember."

"And did you see where I was seated, Mance?" He leaned forward. "Did you see where they put the bastard?"

Mance Rayder looked at Jon's face for a long moment. "I think we had best find you a new cloak," the king said, holding out his hand.

DAENERYS

Across the still blue water came the slow steady beat of drums and the soft swish of oars from the galleys. The great cog groaned in their wake, the heavy lines stretched taut between. *Balerion*'s sails hung limp, drooping forlorn from the masts. Yet even so, as she stood upon the forecastle watching her dragons chase each other across a cloudless blue sky, Daenerys Targaryen was as happy as she could ever remember being.

Her Dothraki called the sea *the poison water*, distrusting any liquid that their horses could not drink. On the day the three ships had lifted anchor at Qarth, you would have thought they were sailing to hell instead of Pentos. Her brave young bloodriders had stared off at the dwindling coastline with huge white eyes, each of the three determined to show no fear before the other two, while her handmaids Irri and Jhiqui clutched the rail desperately and retched over the side at every little swell. The rest of Dany's tiny *khalasar* remained below decks, preferring the company of their nervous horses to the terrifying landless world about the ships. When a sudden squall had enveloped them six days into the voyage, she heard them through the hatches; the horses kicking and screaming, the riders praying in thin quavery voices each time *Balerion* heaved or swayed.

No squall could frighten Dany, though. *Daenerys Stormborn*, she was called, for she had come howling into the world on distant Dragonstone as the greatest storm in the memory of Westeros howled outside, a storm so fierce that it ripped gargoyles from the castle walls and smashed her father's fleet to kindling.

The narrow sea was often stormy, and Dany had crossed it half a hundred times as a girl, running from one Free City to the next half a step ahead of the Usurper's hired knives. She loved the sea. She liked the sharp salty smell of the air, and the vastness of horizons bounded only by a vault of azure sky above. It made her feel small, but free as well. She liked the dolphins that sometimes swam along beside *Balerion*, slicing through the waves like silvery spears, and the flying fish they glimpsed now and again. She even liked the sailors, with all their songs and stories. Once on a voyage to Braavos, as she'd watched the crew wrestle down a great green sail in a rising gale, she had even thought how fine it would be to be a sailor. But when she told her brother, Viserys had twisted her hair until she cried. "You are blood of the dragon," he had screamed at her. "A *dragon*, not some smelly fish."

He was a fool about that, and so much else, Dany thought. *If he had been wiser and more patient, it would be him sailing west to take the throne that was his by rights.* Viserys had been stupid and vicious, she had come to realize, yet sometimes she missed him all the same. Not the cruel weak man he had become by the end, but the brother who had sometimes let her creep into his bed, the boy who told her tales of the Seven Kingdoms, and talked of how much better their lives would be once he claimed his crown.

The captain appeared at her elbow. "Would that this *Balerion* could soar as her namesake did, Your Grace," he said in bastard Valyrian heavily flavored with accents of Pentos. "Then we should not need to row, nor tow, nor pray for wind."

"Just so, Captain," she answered with a smile, pleased to have won the man over. Captain Groleo was an old Pentoshi like his master, Illyrio Mopatis, and he had been nervous as a maiden about carrying three dragons on his ship. Half a hundred buckets of seawater still hung from the gunwales, in case of fires. At first Groleo had wanted the dragons caged and Dany had consented to put his fears at ease, but their misery was so palpable that she soon changed her mind and insisted they be freed.

Even Captain Groleo was glad of that, now. There had been one small fire, easily extinguished; against that, *Balerion* suddenly seemed to have far fewer rats than she'd had before, when she sailed under the name *Saduleon*. And her crew, once as fearful as they were curious, had begun to take a queer fierce pride in "their" dragons. Every man of them, from captain to cook's boy, loved to watch the three fly … though none so much as Dany.

They are my children, she told herself, *and if the* maegi *spoke truly, they are the only children I am ever like to have.*

Viserion's scales were the color of fresh cream, his horns, wing bones, and spinal crest a dark gold that flashed bright as metal in the sun. Rhaegal was made of the green of summer and the bronze of fall. They soared above the ships in wide circles, higher and higher, each trying to climb above the other.

Dragons always preferred to attack from above, Dany had learned. Should either get between the other and the sun, he would fold his wings and dive screaming, and they would tumble from the sky locked together in a tangled scaly ball, jaws snapping and tails lashing. The first time they had done it, she feared that they meant to kill each other, but it was only sport. No sooner would they splash into the sea than they would break apart and rise again, shrieking and hissing, the salt water steaming off them as their wings clawed at the air. Drogon was aloft as well, though not in sight; he would be miles ahead, or miles behind, hunting.

He was always hungry, her Drogon. *Hungry and growing fast. Another year, or perhaps two, and he may be large enough to ride. Then I shall have no need of ships to cross the great salt sea.*

But that time was not yet come. Rhaegal and Viserion were the size of small dogs, Drogon only a little larger, and any dog would have outweighed them; they were all wings and neck and tail, lighter than they looked. And so Daenerys Targaryen must rely on wood and wind and canvas to bear her home.

The wood and the canvas had served her well enough so far, but the fickle wind had turned traitor. For six days and six nights they had been becalmed, and now a seventh day had come, and still no breath of air to fill their sails. Fortunately, two of the ships that Magister Illyrio had sent after her were trading galleys, with two hundred oars apiece and crews of strong-armed oarsmen to row them. But the great cog *Balerion* was a song of a different key; a ponderous broad-beamed sow of a ship with immense holds and huge sails, but helpless in a calm. *Vhagar* and *Meraxes* had let out lines to tow her, but it made for painfully slow going. All three ships were crowded, and heavily laden.

"I cannot see Drogon," said Ser Jorah Mormont as he joined her on the forecastle. "Is he lost again?"

"We are the ones who are lost, ser. Drogon has no taste for this wet creeping, no more than I do." Bolder than the other two, her black dragon had been the first to try his wings above the water, the first to flutter from ship to ship, the first to lose himself in a passing cloud … and the first to kill. The flying fish no sooner broke the surface of the water than they were enveloped in a lance of flame, snatched up, and swallowed. "How big will he grow?" Dany asked curiously. "Do you know?"

"In the Seven Kingdoms, there are tales of dragons who grew so huge that they could pluck giant krakens from the seas."

Dany laughed. "That would be a wondrous sight to see."

"It is only a tale, *Khaleesi*," said her exile knight. "They talk of wise old dragons living a thousand years as well."

"Well, how long *does* a dragon live?" She looked up as Viserion swooped low over the ship, his wings beating slowly and stirring the limp sails.

Ser Jorah shrugged. "A dragon's natural span of days is many times as long as a man's, or so the songs would have us believe … but the dragons the Seven Kingdoms knew best were those of House Targaryen. They were bred for war, and in war they died. It is no easy thing to slay a dragon, but it can be done."

The squire Whitebeard, standing by the figurehead with one lean hand curled about his tall hardwood staff, turned toward them and said, "Balerion the Black Dread was two hundred years old when he died during the reign of Jaehaerys the Conciliator. He was so large he could swallow an aurochs whole. A dragon never stops growing, Your Grace, so long as he has food and freedom." His name was Arstan, but Strong Belwas had named him Whitebeard for his pale whiskers, and most

everyone called him that now. He was taller than Ser Jorah, though not so muscular; his eyes were a pale blue, his long beard as white as snow and as fine as silk.

"Freedom?" asked Dany, curious. "What do you mean?"

"In King's Landing, your ancestors raised an immense domed castle for their dragons. The Dragonpit, it is called. It still stands atop the Hill of Rhaenys, though all in ruins now. That was where the royal dragons dwelt in days of yore, and a cavernous dwelling it was, with iron doors so wide that thirty knights could ride through them abreast. Yet even so, it was noted that none of the pit dragons ever reached the size of their ancestors. The maesters say it was because of the walls around them, and the great dome above their heads."

"If walls could keep us small, peasants would all be tiny and kings as large as giants," said Ser Jorah. "I've seen huge men born in hovels, and dwarfs who dwelt in castles."

"Men are men," Whitebeard replied. "Dragons are dragons."

Ser Jorah snorted his disdain. "How profound." The exile knight had no love for the old man, he'd made that plain from the first. "What do you know of dragons, anyway?"

"Little enough, that's true. Yet I served for a time in King's Landing in the days when King Aerys sat the Iron Throne, and walked beneath the dragonskulls that looked down from the walls of his throne room."

"Viserys talked of those skulls," said Dany. "The Usurper took them down and hid them away. He could not bear them looking down on him upon his stolen throne." She beckoned Whitebeard closer. "Did you ever meet my royal father?" King Aerys II had died before his daughter was born.

"I had that great honor, Your Grace."

"Did you find him good and gentle?"

Whitebeard did his best to hide his feelings, but they were there, plain on his face. "His Grace was … often pleasant."

"Often?" Dany smiled. "But not always?"

"He could be very harsh to those he thought his enemies."

"A wise man never makes an enemy of a king," said Dany. "Did you know my brother Rhaegar as well?"

"It was said that no man ever knew Prince Rhaegar, truly. I had the privilege of seeing him in tourney, though, and often heard him play his harp with its silver strings."

Ser Jorah snorted. "Along with a thousand others at some harvest feast. Next you'll claim you squired for him."

"I make no such claim, ser. Myles Mooton was Prince Rhaegar's squire, and Richard Lonmouth after him. When they won their spurs, he knighted them himself, and they remained his close companions. Young Lord Connington was dear to the prince as well, but his oldest friend was Arthur Dayne."

"The Sword of the Morning!" said Dany, delighted. "Viserys used to talk about his wondrous white blade. He said Ser Arthur was the only knight in the realm who was our brother's peer."

Whitebeard bowed his head. "It is not my place to question the words of Prince Viserys."

"King," Dany corrected. "He was a king, though he never reigned. Viserys, the Third of His Name. But what do you mean?" His answer had not been one that she'd expected. "Ser Jorah named Rhaegar the last dragon once. He had to have been a peerless warrior to be called that, surely?"

"Your Grace," said Whitebeard, "the Prince of Dragonstone was a most puissant warrior, but …"

"Go on," she urged. "You may speak freely to me."

"As you command." The old man leaned upon his hardwood staff, his brow furrowed. "A warrior without peer … those are fine words, Your Grace, but words win no battles."

"Swords win battles," Ser Jorah said bluntly. "And Prince Rhaegar knew how to use one."

"He did, ser, but … I have seen a hundred tournaments and more wars than I would wish, and however strong or fast or skilled a knight may be, there are others who can match him. A man will win one tourney, and fall quickly in the next. A slick spot in the grass may mean defeat, or what you ate for supper the night before. A change in the wind may bring the gift of victory." He glanced at Ser Jorah. "Or a lady's favor knotted round an arm."

Mormont's face darkened. "Be careful what you say, old man."

Arstan had seen Ser Jorah fight at Lannisport, Dany knew, in the tourney Mormont had won with a lady's favor knotted round his arm. He had won the lady too; Lynesse of House Hightower, his second wife, highborn and beautiful … but she had ruined him, and abandoned him, and the memory of her was bitter to him now. "Be gentle, my knight." She put a hand on Jorah's arm. "Arstan had no wish to give offense, I'm certain."

"As you say, *Khaleesi*." Ser Jorah's voice was grudging.

Dany turned back to the squire. "I know little of Rhaegar. Only the tales Viserys told, and he was a little boy when our brother died. What was he truly like?"

The old man considered a moment. "Able. That above all. Determined, deliberate, dutiful, single-minded. There is a tale told of him … but doubtless Ser Jorah knows it as well."

"I would hear it from you."

"As you wish," said Whitebeard. "As a young boy, the Prince of Dragonstone was bookish to a fault. He was reading so early that men said Queen Rhaella must have swallowed some books and a candle whilst he was in her womb. Rhaegar took no interest in the play of other children. The maesters were awed by his wits, but his father's knights would jest sourly that Baelor the Blessed had been born again. Until one day Prince Rhaegar found something in his scrolls that changed him. No one knows what it might have been, only that the boy suddenly appeared early one morning in the yard as the knights were donning their steel. He walked up to Ser Willem Darry, the master-at-arms, and said, 'I will require sword and armor. It seems I must be a warrior.'"

"And he was!" said Dany, delighted.

"He was indeed." Whitebeard bowed. "My pardons, Your Grace. We speak of warriors, and I see that Strong Belwas has arisen. I must attend him."

Dany glanced aft. The eunuch was climbing through the hold amidships, nimble for all his size. Belwas was squat but broad, a good fifteen stone of fat and muscle, his great brown gut crisscrossed by faded white scars. He wore baggy pants, a yellow silk bellyband, and an absurdly tiny leather vest dotted with iron studs. "Strong Belwas is hungry!" he roared at everyone and no one in particular. "Strong Belwas will eat now!" Turning, he spied Arstan on the forecastle. "Whitebeard! You will bring food for Strong Belwas!"

"You may go," Dany told the squire. He bowed again, and moved off to tend the needs of the man he served.

Ser Jorah watched with a frown on his blunt honest face. Mormont was big and burly, strong of jaw and thick of shoulder. Not a handsome man by any means, but as true a friend as Dany had ever known. "You would be wise to take that old man's words well salted," he told her when Whitebeard was out of earshot.

"A queen must listen to all," she reminded him. "The highborn and the low, the strong and the weak, the noble and the venal. One voice may speak you false, but in many there is always truth to be found." She had read that in a book.

"Hear my voice then, Your Grace," the exile said. "This Arstan Whitebeard is playing you false. He is too old to be a squire, and too well spoken to be serving that oaf of a eunuch."

That does seem queer, Dany had to admit. Strong Belwas was an ex-slave, bred and trained in the fighting pits of Meereen. Magister Illyrio had sent him to guard her, or so Belwas claimed, and it was true that she needed guarding. The Usurper on his Iron Throne had offered land and lordship to any man who killed her. One attempt had been made already, with a cup of poisoned wine. The

closer she came to Westeros, the more likely another attack became. Back in Qarth, the warlock Pyat Pree had sent a Sorrowful Man after her to avenge the Undying she'd burned in their House of Dust. Warlocks never forgot a wrong, it was said, and the Sorrowful Men never failed to kill. Most of the Dothraki would be against her as well. Khal Drogo's *ko*s led *khalasar*s of their own now, and none of them would hesitate to attack her own little band on sight, to slay and slave her people and drag Dany herself back to Vaes Dothrak to take her proper place among the withered crones of the *dosh khaleen*. She *hoped* that Xaro Xhoan Daxos was not an enemy, but the Qartheen merchant had coveted her dragons. And there was Quaithe of the Shadow, that strange woman in the red lacquer mask with all her cryptic counsel. Was she an enemy too, or only a dangerous friend? Dany could not say.

Ser Jorah saved me from the poisoner, and Arstan Whitebeard from the manticore. Perhaps Strong Belwas will save me from the next. He was huge enough, with arms like small trees and a great curved *arakh* so sharp he might have shaved with it, in the unlikely event of hair sprouting on those smooth brown cheeks. Yet he was childlike as well. *As a protector, he leaves much to be desired. Thankfully, I have Ser Jorah and my bloodriders. And my dragons, never forget.* In time, the dragons would be her most formidable guardians, just as they had been for Aegon the Conqueror and his sisters three hundred years ago. Just now, though, they brought her more danger than protection. In all the world there were but three living dragons, and those were hers; they were a wonder, and a terror, and beyond price.

She was pondering her next words when she felt a cool breath on the back of her neck, and a loose strand of her silver-gold hair stirred against her brow. Above, the canvas creaked and moved, and suddenly a great cry went up from all over *Balerion*. "Wind!" the sailors shouted. "The wind returns, the *wind*!"

Dany looked up to where the great cog's sails rippled and belled as the lines thrummed and tightened and sang the sweet song they had missed so for six long days. Captain Groleo rushed aft, shouting commands. The Pentoshi were scrambling up the masts, those that were not cheering. Even Strong Belwas let out a great bellow and did a little dance. "The gods are good!" Dany said. "You see, Jorah? We are on our way once more."

"Yes," he said, "but to what, my queen?"

All day the wind blew, steady from the east at first, and then in wild gusts. The sun set in a blaze of red. *I am still half a world from Westeros*, Dany reminded herself, *but every hour brings me closer.* She tried to imagine what it would feel like, when she first caught sight of the land she was born to rule. *It will be as fair a shore as I have ever seen, I know it. How could it be otherwise?*

But later that night, as *Balerion* plunged onward through the dark and Dany sat crosslegged on her bunk in the captain's cabin, feeding her dragons—"Even upon the sea," Groleo had said, so graciously, "queens take precedence over captains"—a sharp knock came upon the door.

Irri had been sleeping at the foot of her bunk (it was too narrow for three, and tonight was Jhiqui's turn to share the soft featherbed with her *khaleesi*), but the handmaid roused at the knock and went to the door. Dany pulled up a coverlet and tucked it in under her arms. She was naked, and had not expected a caller at this hour. "Come," she said when she saw Ser Jorah standing without, beneath a swaying lantern.

The exile knight ducked his head as he entered. "Your Grace. I am sorry to disturb your sleep."

"I was not sleeping, ser. Come and watch." She took a chunk of salt pork out of the bowl in her lap and held it up for her dragons to see. All three of them eyed it hungrily. Rhaegal spread green wings and stirred the air, and Viserion's neck swayed back and forth like a long pale snake's as he followed the movement of her hand. "Drogon," Dany said softly, "*dracarys*." And she tossed the pork in the air.

Drogon moved quicker than a striking cobra. Flame roared from his mouth, orange and scarlet and black, searing the meat before it began to fall. As his sharp black teeth snapped shut around it,

Rhaegal's head darted close, as if to steal the prize from his brother's jaws, but Drogon swallowed and screamed, and the smaller green dragon could only *hiss* in frustration.

"Stop that, Rhaegal," Dany said in annoyance, giving his head a swat. "You had the last one. I'll have no greedy dragons." She smiled at Ser Jorah. "I won't need to char their meat over a brazier any longer."

"So I see. *Dracarys?*"

All three dragons turned their heads at the sound of that word, and Viserion let loose with a blast of pale gold flame that made Ser Jorah take a hasty step backward. Dany giggled. "Be careful with that word, ser, or they're like to singe your beard off. It means 'dragonfire' in High Valyrian. I wanted to choose a command that no one was like to utter by chance."

Mormont nodded. "Your Grace," he said, "I wonder if I might have a few private words?"

"Of course. Irri, leave us for a bit." She put a hand on Jhiqui's bare shoulder and shook the other handmaid awake. "You as well, sweetling. Ser Jorah needs to talk to me."

"Yes, *Khaleesi.*" Jhiqui tumbled from the bunk, naked and yawning, her thick black hair tumbled about her head. She dressed quickly and left with Irri, closing the door behind them.

Dany gave the dragons the rest of the salt pork to squabble over, and patted the bed beside her. "Sit, good ser, and tell me what is troubling you."

"Three things." Ser Jorah sat. "Strong Belwas. This Arstan Whitebeard. And Illyrio Mopatis, who sent them."

Again? Dany pulled the coverlet higher and tugged one end over her shoulder. "And why is that?"

"The warlocks in Qarth told you that you would be betrayed three times," the exile knight reminded her, as Viserion and Rhaegal began to snap and claw at each other.

"Once for blood and once for gold and once for love." Dany was not like to forget. "Mirri Maz Duur was the first."

"Which means two traitors yet remain … and now these two appear. I find that troubling, yes. Never forget, Robert offered a lordship to the man who slays you."

Dany leaned forward and yanked Viserion's tail, to pull him off his green brother. Her blanket fell away from her chest as she moved. She grabbed it hastily and covered herself again. "The Usurper is dead," she said.

"But his son rules in his place." Ser Jorah lifted his gaze, and his dark eyes met her own. "A dutiful son pays his father's debts. Even blood debts."

"This boy Joffrey might want me dead … if he recalls that I'm alive. What has that to do with Belwas and Arstan Whitebeard? The old man does not even wear a sword. You've seen that."

"Aye. And I have seen how deftly he handles that staff of his. Recall how he killed that manticore in Qarth? It might as easily have been your throat he crushed."

"Might have been, but was not," she pointed out. "It was a stinging manticore meant to slay me. He saved my life."

"*Khaleesi*, has it occurred to you that Whitebeard and Belwas might have been in league with the assassin? It might all have been a ploy to win your trust."

Her sudden laughter made Drogon *hiss*, and sent Viserion flapping to his perch above the porthole. "The ploy worked well."

The exile knight did not return her smile. "These are Illyrio's ships, Illyrio's captains, Illyrio's sailors … and Strong Belwas and Arstan are his men as well, not yours."

"Magister Illyrio has protected me in the past. Strong Belwas says that he wept when he heard my brother was dead."

"Yes," said Mormont, "but did he weep for Viserys, or for the plans he had made with him?"

"His plans need not change. Magister Illyrio is a friend to House Targaryen, and wealthy …"

"He was not born wealthy. In the world as I have seen it, no man grows rich by kindness. The warlocks said the second treason would be for *gold*. What does Illyrio Mopatis love more than gold?"

"His skin." Across the cabin Drogon stirred restlessly, steam rising from his snout. "Mirri Maz Duur betrayed me. I burned her for it."

"Mirri Maz Duur was in your power. In Pentos, you shall be in Illyrio's power. It is not the same. I know the magister as well as you. He is a devious man, and clever—"

"I need clever men about me if I am to win the Iron Throne."

Ser Jorah snorted. "That wineseller who tried to poison you was a clever man as well. Clever men hatch ambitious schemes."

Dany drew her legs up beneath the blanket. "You will protect me. You, and my bloodriders."

"Four men? *Khaleesi*, you believe you know Illyrio Mopatis, very well. Yet you insist on surrounding yourself with men you do *not* know, like this puffed-up eunuch and the world's oldest squire. Take a lesson from Pyat Pree and Xaro Xhoan Daxos."

He means well, Dany reminded herself. *He does all he does for love.* "It seems to me that a queen who trusts no one is as foolish as a queen who trusts everyone. Every man I take into my service is a risk, I understand that, but how am I to win the Seven Kingdoms without such risks? Am I to conquer Westeros with one exile knight and three Dothraki bloodriders?"

His jaw set stubbornly. "Your path is dangerous, I will not deny that. But if you blindly trust in every liar and schemer who crosses it, you will end as your brothers did."

His obstinacy made her angry. *He treats me like some child*. "Strong Belwas could not scheme his way to breakfast. And what lies has Arstan Whitebeard told me?"

"He is not what he pretends to be. He speaks to you more boldly than any squire would dare."

"He spoke frankly at my command. He knew my brother."

"A great many men knew your brother. Your Grace, in Westeros the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard sits on the small council, and serves the king with his wits as well as his steel. If I am the first of your Queensguard, I pray you, hear me out. I have a plan to put to you."

"What plan? Tell me."

"Illyrio Mopatis wants you back in Pentos, under his roof. Very well, go to him … but in your own time, and not alone. Let us see how loyal and obedient these new subjects of yours truly are. Command Groleo to change course for Slaver's Bay."

Dany was not certain she liked the sound of that at all. Everything she'd ever heard of the flesh marts in the great slave cities of Yunkai, Meereen, and Astapor was dire and frightening. "What is there for me in Slaver's Bay?"

"An army," said Ser Jorah. "If Strong Belwas is so much to your liking you can buy hundreds more like him out of the fighting pits of Meereen … but it is Astapor I'd set my sails for. In Astapor, you can buy Unsullied."

"The slaves in the spiked bronze hats?" Dany had seen Unsullied guards in the Free Cities, posted at the gates of magisters, archons, and dynasts. "Why should I want Unsullied? They don't even ride horses, and most of them are fat."

"The Unsullied you may have seen in Pentos and Myr were household guards. That's soft service, and eunuchs tend to plumpness in any case. Food is the only vice allowed them. To judge all Unsullied by a few old household slaves is like judging all squires by Arstan Whitebeard, Your Grace. Do you know the tale of the Three Thousand of Qohor?"

"No." The coverlet slipped off Dany's shoulder, and she tugged it back into place.

"It was four hundred years ago or more, when the Dothraki first rode out of the east, sacking and burning every town and city in their path. The *khal* who led them was named Temmo. His *khalasar* was not so big as Drogo's, but it was big enough. Fifty thousand, at the least. Half of them braided warriors with bells ringing in their hair.

"The Qohorik knew he was coming. They strengthened their walls, doubled the size of their own guard, and hired two free companies besides, the Bright Banners and the Second Sons. And almost as an afterthought, they sent a man to Astapor to buy three thousand Unsullied. It was a long march back to Qohor, however, and as they approached they saw the smoke and dust and heard the distant din of battle.

"By the time the Unsullied reached the city the sun had set. Crows and wolves were feasting beneath the walls on what remained of the Qohorik heavy horse. The Bright Banners and Second Sons had fled, as sellswords are wont to do in the face of hopeless odds. With dark falling, the Dothraki had retired to their own camps to drink and dance and feast, but none doubted that they would return on the morrow to smash the city gates, storm the walls, and rape, loot, and slave as they pleased.

"But when dawn broke and Temmo and his bloodriders led their *khalasar* out of camp, they found three thousand Unsullied drawn up before the gates with the Black Goat standard flying over their heads. So small a force could easily have been flanked, but you know Dothraki. These were men on foot, and men on foot are fit only to be ridden down.

"The Dothraki charged. The Unsullied locked their shields, lowered their spears, and stood firm. Against twenty thousand screamers with bells in their hair, they stood firm.

"Eighteen times the Dothraki charged, and broke themselves on those shields and spears like waves on a rocky shore. Thrice Temmo sent his archers wheeling past and arrows fell like rain upon the Three Thousand, but the Unsullied merely lifted their shields above their heads until the squall had passed. In the end only six hundred of them remained … but more than twelve thousand Dothraki lay dead upon that field, including Khal Temmo, his bloodriders, his *ko*s, and all his sons. On the morning of the fourth day, the new *khal* led the survivors past the city gates in a stately procession. One by one, each man cut off his braid and threw it down before the feet of the Three Thousand.

"Since that day, the city guard of Qohor has been made up solely of Unsullied, every one of whom carries a tall spear from which hangs a braid of human hair.

"*That* is what you will find in Astapor, Your Grace. Put ashore there, and continue on to Pentos overland. It will take longer, yes … but when you break bread with Magister Illyrio, you will have a thousand swords behind you, not just four."

There is wisdom in this, yes, Dany thought, *but* … "How am I to buy a thousand slave soldiers? All I have of value is the crown the Tourmaline Brotherhood gave me."

"Dragons will be as great a wonder in Astapor as they were in Qarth. It may be that the slavers will shower you with gifts, as the Qartheen did. If not … these ships carry more than your Dothraki and their horses. They took on trade goods at Qarth, I've been through the holds and seen for myself. Bolts of silk and bales of tiger skin, amber and jade carvings, saffron, myrrh … slaves are cheap, Your Grace. Tiger skins are costly."

"Those are *Illyrio*'s tiger skins," she objected.

"And Illyrio is a friend to House Targaryen."

"All the more reason not to steal his goods."

"What use are wealthy friends if they will not put their wealth at your disposal, my queen? If Magister Illyrio would deny you, he is only Xaro Xhoan Daxos with four chins. And if he is sincere in his devotion to your cause, he will not begrudge you three shiploads of trade goods. What better use for his tiger skins than to buy you the beginnings of an army?"

That's true. Dany felt a rising excitement. "There will be dangers on such a long march …"

"There are dangers at sea as well. Corsairs and pirates hunt the southern route, and north of Valyria the Smoking Sea is demon-haunted. The next storm could sink or scatter us, a kraken could pull us under … or we might find ourselves becalmed again, and die of thirst as we wait for the wind to rise. A march will have different dangers, my queen, but none greater."

"What if Captain Groleo refuses to change course, though? And Arstan, Strong Belwas, what will they do?"

Ser Jorah stood. “Perhaps it’s time you found that out.”

“Yes,” she decided. “I’ll do it!” Dany threw back the coverlets and hopped from the bunk. “I’ll see the captain at once, command him to set course for Astapor.” She bent over her chest, threw open the lid, and seized the first garment to hand, a pair of loose sandsilk trousers. “Hand me my medallion belt,” she commanded Jorah as she pulled the sandsilk up over her hips. “And my vest—” she started to say, turning.

Ser Jorah slid his arms around her.

“Oh,” was all Dany had time to say as he pulled her close and pressed his lips down on hers. He smelled of sweat and salt and leather, and the iron studs on his jerkin dug into her naked breasts as he crushed her hard against him. One hand held her by the shoulder while the other slid down her spine to the small of her back, and her mouth opened for his tongue, though she never told it to. *His beard is scratchy,* she thought, *but his mouth is sweet.* The Dothraki wore no beards, only long mustaches, and only Khal Drogo had ever kissed her before. *He should not be doing this. I am his queen, not his woman.*

It was a long kiss, though how long Dany could not have said. When it ended, Ser Jorah let go of her, and she took a quick step backward. “You … you should not have …”

“I should not have waited so long,” he finished for her. “I should have kissed you in Qarth, in Vaes Tolorru. I should have kissed you in the red waste, every night and every day. You were made to be kissed, often and well.” His eyes were on her breasts.

Dany covered them with her hands, before her nipples could betray her. “I … that was not fitting. I am your queen.”

“My queen,” he said, “and the bravest, sweetest, and most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Daenerys—”

“*Your Grace!*”

“Your Grace,” he conceded, “*the dragon has three heads*, remember? You have wondered at that, ever since you heard it from the warlocks in the House of Dust. Well, here’s your meaning: Balerion, Meraxes, and Vhagar, ridden by Aegon, Rhaenys, and Visenya. The three-headed dragon of House Targaryen—three dragons, and *three riders.*”

“Yes,” said Dany, “but my brothers are dead.”

“Rhaenys and Visenya were Aegon’s wives as well as his sisters. You have no brothers, but you can take husbands. And I tell you truly, Daenerys, there is no man in all the world who will ever be half so true to you as me.”

BRAN

The ridge slanted sharply from the earth, a long fold of stone and soil shaped like a claw. Trees clung to its lower slopes, pines and hawthorn and ash, but higher up the ground was bare, the ridgeline stark against the cloudy sky.

He could feel the high stone calling him. Up he went, loping easy at first, then faster and higher, his strong legs eating up the incline. Birds burst from the branches overhead as he raced by, clawing and flapping their way into the sky. He could hear the wind sighing up amongst the leaves, the squirrels chittering to one another, even the sound a pinecone made as it tumbled to the forest floor. The smells were a song around him, a song that filled the good green world.

Gravel flew from beneath his paws as he gained the last few feet to stand upon the crest. The sun hung above the tall pines huge and red, and below him the trees and hills went on and on as far as he could see or smell. A kite was circling far above, dark against the pink sky.

Prince. The man-sound came into his head suddenly, yet he could feel the rightness of it. *Prince of the green, prince of the wolfswood.* He was strong and swift and fierce, and all that lived in the good green world went in fear of him.

Far below, at the base of the woods, something moved amongst the trees. A flash of grey, quick-glimpsed and gone again, but it was enough to make his ears prick up. Down there beside a swift green brook, another form slipped by, running. *Wolves*, he knew. His little cousins, chasing down some prey. Now the prince could see more of them, shadows on fleet grey paws. *A pack.*

He had a pack as well, once. Five they had been, and a sixth who stood aside. Somewhere down inside him were the sounds the men had given them to tell one from the other, but it was not by their sounds he knew them. He remembered their scents, his brothers and his sisters. They all had smelled alike, had smelled of *pack*, but each was different too.

His angry brother with the hot green eyes was near, the prince felt, though he had not seen him for many hunts. Yet with every sun that set he grew more distant, and he had been the last. The others were far scattered, like leaves blown by the wild wind.

Sometimes he could sense them, though, as if they were still with him, only hidden from his sight by a boulder or a stand of trees. He could not smell them, nor hear their howls by night, yet he felt their presence at his back … all but the sister they had lost. His tail drooped when he remembered her. *Four now, not five. Four and one more, the white who has no voice.*

These woods belonged to them, the snowy slopes and stony hills, the great green pines and the golden leaf oaks, the rushing streams and blue lakes fringed with fingers of white frost. But his sister had left the wilds, to walk in the halls of man-rock where other hunters ruled, and once within those halls it was hard to find the path back out. The wolf prince remembered.

The wind shifted suddenly.

Deer, and fear, and blood. The scent of prey woke the hunger in him. The prince sniffed the air again, turning, and then he was off, bounding along the ridgetop with jaws half-parted. The far side of the ridge was steeper than the one he'd come up, but he flew surefoot over stones and roots and rotting leaves, down the slope and through the trees, long strides eating up the ground. The scent pulled him onward, ever faster.

The deer was down and dying when he reached her, ringed by eight of his small grey cousins. The heads of the pack had begun to feed, the male first and then his female, taking turns tearing flesh from the red underbelly of their prey. The others waited patiently, all but the tail, who paced in a wary circle a few strides from the rest, his own tail tucked low. He would eat the last of all, whatever his brothers left him.

The prince was downwind, so they did not sense him until he leapt up upon a fallen log six strides from where they fed. The tail saw him first, gave a piteous whine, and slunk away. His pack brothers turned at the sound and bared their teeth, snarling, all but the head male and female.

The direwolf answered the snarls with a low warning growl and showed them his own teeth. He was bigger than his cousins, twice the size of the scrawny tail, half again as large as the two pack heads. He leapt down into their midst, and three of them broke, melting away into the brush.

Another came at him, teeth snapping. He met the attack head on, caught the wolf's leg in his jaws when they met, and flung him aside yelping and limping.

And then there was only the head wolf to face, the great grey male with his bloody muzzle fresh from the prey's soft belly. There was white on his muzzle as well, to mark him as an old wolf, but when his mouth opened, red slaver ran from his teeth.

He has no fear, the prince thought, *no more than me.* It would be a good fight. They went for each other.

Long they fought, rolling together over roots and stones and fallen leaves and the scattered entrails of the prey, tearing at each other with tooth and claw, breaking apart, circling each round the other, and bolting in to fight again. The prince was larger, and much the stronger, but his cousin had a pack. The female prowled around them closely, snuffing and snarling, and would interpose herself whenever her mate broke off bloodied. From time to time the other wolves would dart in as well, to snap at a leg or an ear when the prince was turned the other way. One angered him so much that he whirled in a black fury and tore out the attacker's throat. After that the others kept their distance.

And as the last red light was filtering through green boughs and golden, the old wolf lay down weary in the dirt, and rolled over to expose his throat and belly. It was submission.

The prince sniffed at him and licked the blood from fur and torn flesh. When the old wolf gave a soft whimper, the direwolf turned away. He was very hungry now, and the prey was his.

"Hodor."

The sudden sound made him stop and snarl. The wolves regarded him with green and yellow eyes, bright with the last light of day. None of them had heard it. It was a queer wind that blew only in his ears. He buried his jaws in the deer's belly and tore off a mouthful of flesh.

"Hodor, hodor."

No, he thought. *No, I won't.* It was a boy's thought, not a direwolf's. The woods were darkening all about him, until only the shadows of the trees remained, and the glow of his cousins' eyes. And *through* those and behind those eyes, he saw a big man's grinning face, and a stone vault whose walls were spotted with niter. The rich warm taste of blood faded on his tongue. *No, don't, don't, I want to eat, I want to, I want …*

"Hodor, hodor, hodor, hodor, hodor," Hodor chanted as he shook him softly by the shoulders, back and forth and back and forth. He was trying to be gentle, he always tried, but Hodor was seven feet tall and stronger than he knew, and his huge hands rattled Bran's teeth together. "*NO!*" he shouted angrily. "Hodor, leave off, I'm here, I'm *here.*"

Hodor stopped, looking abashed. "Hodor?"

The woods and wolves were gone. Bran was back again, down in the damp vault of some ancient watchtower that must have been abandoned thousands of years before. It wasn't much of a tower now. Even the tumbled stones were so overgrown with moss and ivy that you could hardly see them until you were right on top of them. "Tumbledown Tower", Bran had named the place; it was Meera who found the way down into the vault, however.

"You were gone too long." Jojen Reed was thirteen, only four years older than Bran. Jojen wasn't much bigger either, no more than two inches or maybe three, but he had a solemn way of talking that made him seem older and wiser than he really was. At Winterfell, Old Nan had dubbed him "little grandfather."

Bran frowned at him. "I wanted to eat."

"Meera will be back soon with supper."

"I'm sick of frogs." Meera was a frogeater from the Neck, so Bran couldn't really *blame* her for catching so many frogs, he supposed, but even so … "I wanted to eat the deer." For a moment he remembered the taste of it, the blood and the raw rich meat, and his mouth watered. *I won the fight for it. I won.*

"Did you mark the trees?"

Bran flushed. Jojen was always telling him to do things when he opened his third eye and put on Summer's skin. To claw the bark of a tree, to catch a rabbit and bring it back in his jaws uneaten, to push some rocks in a line. *Stupid things.* "I forgot," he said.

"You always forget."

It was true. He *meant* to do the things that Jojen asked, but once he was a wolf they never seemed important. There were always things to see and things to smell, a whole green world to hunt. And he could *run*! There was nothing better than running, unless it was running after prey. "I was a prince, Jojen," he told the older boy. "I was the prince of the woods."

"You are a prince," Jojen reminded him softly. "You remember, don't you? Tell me who you are."

"You *know*." Jojen was his friend and his teacher, but sometimes Bran just wanted to hit him.

"I want you to say the words. Tell me who you are."

"Bran," he said sullenly. *Bran the Broken.* "Brandon Stark." *The cripple boy.* "The Prince of Winterfell." Of Winterfell burned and tumbled, its people scattered and slain. The glass gardens were smashed, and hot water gushed from the cracked walls to steam beneath the sun. *How can you be the prince of someplace you might never see again?*

"And who is Summer?" Jojen prompted.

"My direwolf." He smiled. "Prince of the green."

"Bran the boy and Summer the wolf. You are two, then?"

"Two," he sighed, "and one." He hated Jojen when he got stupid like this. *At Winterfell he wanted me to dream my wolf dreams, and now that I know how he's always calling me back.*

"Remember that, Bran. Remember *yourself*, or the wolf will consume you. When you join, it is not enough to run and hunt and howl in Summer's skin."

It is for me, Bran thought. He liked Summer's skin better than his own. *What good is it to be a skinchanger if you can't wear the skin you like?*

"Will you remember? And next time, mark the tree. Any tree, it doesn't matter, so long as you do it."

"I will. I'll remember. I could go back and do it now, if you like. I won't forget this time." *But I'll eat my deer first, and fight with those little wolves some more.*

Jojen shook his head. "No. Best stay, and eat. With your own mouth. A warg cannot live on what his beast consumes."

How would you know? Bran thought resentfully. *You've never been a warg, you don't know what it's like.*

Hodor jerked suddenly to his feet, almost hitting his head on the barrel-vaulted ceiling. "HODOR!" he shouted, rushing to the door. Meera pushed it open just before he reached it, and stepped through into their refuge. "Hodor, hodor," the huge stableboy said, grinning.

Meera Reed was sixteen, a woman grown, but she stood no higher than her brother. All the crannogmen were small, she told Bran once when he asked why she wasn't taller. Brown-haired, green-eyed, and flat as a boy, she walked with a supple grace that Bran could only watch and envy. Meera wore a long sharp dagger, but her favorite way to fight was with a slender three-pronged frog spear in one hand and a woven net in the other.

"Who's hungry?" she asked, holding up her catch: two small silvery trout and six fat green frogs.

"I am," said Bran. *But not for frogs.* Back at Winterfell before all the bad things had happened, the Walders used to say that eating frogs would turn your teeth green and make moss grow under your arms. He wondered if the Walders were dead. He hadn't seen their corpses at Winterfell … but there had been a *lot* of corpses, and they hadn't looked inside the buildings.

"We'll just have to feed you, then. Will you help me clean the catch, Bran?"

He nodded. It was hard to sulk with Meera. She was much more cheerful than her brother, and always seemed to know how to make him smile. Nothing ever scared her or made her angry. *Well, except Jojen, sometimes …* Jojen Reed could scare most anyone. He dressed all in green, his eyes were murky as moss, and he had green dreams. What Jojen dreamed came true. *Except he dreamed me dead, and I'm not.* Only he was, in a way.

Jojen sent Hodor out for wood and built them a small fire while Bran and Meera were cleaning the fish and frogs. They used Meera's helm for a cooking pot, chopping up the catch into little cubes and tossing in some water and some wild onions Hodor had found to make a froggy stew. It wasn't as good as deer, but it wasn't bad either, Bran decided as he ate. "Thank you, Meera," he said. "My lady."

"You are most welcome, Your Grace."

"Come the morrow," Jojen announced, "we had best move on."

Bran could see Meera tense. "Have you had a green dream?"

"No," he admitted.

"Why leave, then?" his sister demanded. "Tumbledown Tower's a good place for us. No villages near, the woods are full of game, there's fish and frogs in the streams and lakes … and who is ever going to find us here?"

"This is not the place we are meant to be."

"It is safe, though."

"It *seems* safe, I know," said Jojen, "but for how long? There was a battle at Winterfell, we saw the dead. Battles mean wars. If some army should take us unawares …"

"It might be Robb's army," said Bran. "Robb will come back from the south soon, I know he will. He'll come back with all his banners and chase the ironmen away."

"Your maester said naught of Robb when he lay dying," Jojen reminded him. "*Ironmen on the Stony Shore,* he said, and, *east, the Bastard of Bolton.* Moat Cailin and Deepwood Motte fallen, the heir to Cerwyn dead, and the castellan of Torrhen's Square. *War everywhere,* he said, *each man against his neighbor.*"

"We have plowed this field before," his sister said. "You want to make for the Wall, and your three-eyed crow. That's well and good, but the Wall is a very long way and Bran has no legs but Hodor. If we were mounted …"

"If we were eagles we might fly," said Jojen sharply, "but we have no wings, no more than we have horses."

"There are horses to be had," said Meera. "Even in the deep of the wolfswood there are foresters, crofters, hunters. Some will have horses."

"And if they do, should we steal them? Are we thieves? The last thing we need is men hunting us."

"We could buy them," she said. "Trade for them."

"Look at us, Meera. A crippled boy with a direwolf, a simpleminded giant, and two crannogmen a thousand leagues from the Neck. *We will be known*. And word will spread. So long as Bran remains dead, he is safe. Alive, he becomes prey for those who want him dead for good and true." Jojen went to the fire to prod the embers with a stick. "Somewhere to the north, the three-eyed crow awaits us. Bran has need of a teacher wiser than me."

"How, Jojen?" his sister asked. "*How?*"

"Afoot," he answered. "A step at a time."

"The road from Greywater to Winterfell went on forever, and we were mounted then. You want us to travel a longer road on foot, without even knowing where it ends. Beyond the Wall, you say. I haven't been there, no more than you, but I know that Beyond the Wall's a big place, Jojen. Are there many three-eyed crows, or only one? How do we find him?"

"Perhaps he will find us."

Before Meera could find a reply to that, they heard the sound; the distant howl of a wolf, drifting through the night. "Summer?" asked Jojen, listening.

"No." Bran knew the voice of his direwolf.

"Are you certain?" said the little grandfather.

"Certain." Summer had wandered far afield today, and would not be back till dawn. *Maybe Jojen dreams green, but he can't tell a wolf from a direwolf.* He wondered why they all listened to Jojen so much. He was not a prince like Bran, nor big and strong like Hodor, nor as good a hunter as Meera, yet somehow it was always Jojen telling them what to do. "We should steal horses like Meera wants," Bran said, "and ride to the Umbers up at Last Hearth." He thought a moment. "Or we could steal a boat and sail down the White Knife to White Harbor town. That fat Lord Manderly rules there, he was friendly at the harvest feast. He wanted to build ships. Maybe he built some, and we could sail to Riverrun and bring Robb home with all his army. Then it wouldn't matter who knew I was alive. Robb wouldn't let anyone hurt us."

"Hodor!" burped Hodor. "Hodor, hodor."

He was the only one who liked Bran's plan, though. Meera just smiled at him and Jojen frowned. They never listened to what he wanted, even though Bran was a Stark and a prince besides, and the Reeds of the Neck were Stark bannermen.

"Hoooodor," said Hodor, swaying. "Hooooooodor, hooooooodor, hoDOR, hoDOR, hoDOR." Sometimes he liked to do this, just saying his name different ways, over and over and over. Other times, he would stay so quiet you forgot he was there. There was never any knowing with Hodor. "*HODOR, HODOR, HODOR!*" he shouted.

He is not going to stop, Bran realized. "Hodor," he said, "why don't you go outside and train with your sword?"

The stableboy had forgotten about his sword, but now he remembered. "Hodor!" he burped. He went for his blade. They had three tomb swords taken from the crypts of Winterfell where Bran and his brother Rickon had hidden from Theon Greyjoy's ironmen. Bran claimed his uncle Brandon's sword, Meera the one she found upon the knees of his grandfather Lord Rickard. Hodor's blade was much older, a huge heavy piece of iron, dull from centuries of neglect and well spotted with rust. He could swing it for hours at a time. There was a rotted tree near the tumbled stones that he had hacked half to pieces.

Even when he went outside they could hear him through the walls, bellowing "HODOR!" as he cut and slashed at his tree. Thankfully the wolfswood was huge, and there was not like to be anyone else around to hear.

"Jojen, what did you mean about a teacher?" Bran asked. "*You're* my teacher. I know I never marked the tree, but I will the next time. My third eye is open like you wanted …"

"So wide open that I fear you may fall through it, and live all the rest of your days as a wolf of the woods."

"I won't, I promise."

"The boy promises. Will the wolf remember? You run with Summer, you hunt with him, kill with him … but you bend to his will more than him to yours."

"I just forget," Bran complained. "I'm only nine. I'll be better when I'm older. Even Florian the Fool and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight weren't great knights when they were *nine.*"

"That is true," said Jojen, "and a wise thing to say, if the days were still growing longer … but they aren't. You are a summer child, I know. Tell me the words of House Stark."

"*Winter is coming*." Just saying it made Bran feel cold.

Jojen gave a solemn nod. "I dreamed of a winged wolf bound to earth by chains of stone, and came to Winterfell to free him. The chains are off you now, yet still you do not fly."

"Then *you* teach me." Bran still feared the three-eyed crow who haunted his dreams sometimes, pecking endlessly at the skin between his eyes and telling him to fly. "You're a greenseer."

"No," said Jojen, "only a boy who dreams. The greenseers were more than that. They were wargs as well, as *you* are, and the greatest of them could wear the skins of *any* beast that flies or swims or crawls, and could look through the eyes of the weirwoods as well, and see the truth that lies beneath the world.

"The gods give many gifts, Bran. My sister is a hunter. It is given to her to run swiftly, and stand so still she seems to vanish. She has sharp ears, keen eyes, a steady hand with net and spear. She can breathe mud and fly through trees. I could not do these things, no more than you could. To me the gods gave the green dreams, and to you … you could be more than me, Bran. You are the winged wolf, and there is no saying how far and high you might fly … if you had someone to teach you. How can I help you master a gift I do not understand? We remember the First Men in the Neck, and the children of the forest who were their friends … but so much is forgotten, and so much we never knew."

Meera took Bran by the hand. "If we stay here, troubling no one, you'll be safe until the war ends. You will not learn, though, except what my brother can teach you, and you've heard what he says. If we leave this place to seek refuge at Last Hearth or beyond the Wall, we risk being taken. You are only a boy, I know, but you are our prince as well, our lord's son and our king's true heir. We have sworn you our faith by earth and water, bronze and iron, ice and fire. The risk is yours, Bran, as is the gift. The choice should be yours too, I think. We are your servants to command." She grinned. "At least in this."

"You mean," Bran said, "you'll do what *I* say? Truly?"

"Truly, my prince," the girl replied, "so consider well."

Bran tried to think it through, the way his father might have. The Greatjon's uncles Hother Whoresbane and Mors Crowfood were fierce men, but he thought they would be loyal. And the Karstarks, them too. Karhold was a strong castle, Father always said. *We would be safe with the Umbers or the Karstarks.*

Or they could go south to fat Lord Manderly. At Winterfell, he'd laughed a lot, and never seemed to look at Bran with so much pity as the other lords. Castle Cerwyn was closer than White Harbor, but Maester Luwin had said that Cley Cerwyn was dead. *The Umbers and the Karstarks and the Manderlys may all be dead as well,* he realized. As he would be, if he was caught by the ironmen or the Bastard of Bolton.

If they stayed here, hidden down beneath Tumbledown Tower, no one would find them. He would stay alive. *And crippled.*

Bran realized he was crying. *Stupid baby*, he thought at himself. No matter where he went, to Karhold or White Harbor or Greywater Watch, he'd be a cripple when he got there. He balled his hands into fists. "I want to fly," he told them. "Please. Take me to the crow."

DAVOS

When he came up on deck, the long point of Driftmark was dwindling behind them while Dragonstone rose from the sea ahead. A pale grey wisp of smoke blew from the top of the mountain to mark where the island lay. *Dragonmont is restless this morning*, Davos thought, *or else Melisandre is burning someone else.*

Melisandre had been much in his thoughts as *Shayala's Dance* made her way across Blackwater Bay and through the Gullet, tacking against perverse contrary winds. The great fire that burned atop the Sharp Point watchtower at the end of Massey's Hook reminded him of the ruby she wore at her throat, and when the world turned red at dawn and sunset the drifting clouds turned the same color as the silks and satins of her rustling gowns.

She would be waiting on Dragonstone as well, waiting in all her beauty and all her power, with her god and her shadows and his king. The red priestess had always seemed loyal to Stannis, until now. *She has broken him, as a man breaks a horse. She would ride him to power if she could, and for that she gave my sons to the fire. I will cut the living heart from her breast and see how it burns.* He touched the hilt of the fine long Lysene dirk that the captain had given him.

The captain had been very kind to him. His name was Khorane Sathmantes, a Lyseni like Salladhor Saan, whose ship this was. He had the pale blue eyes you often saw on Lys, set in a bony weatherworn face, but he had spent many years trading in the Seven Kingdoms. When he learned that the man he had plucked from the sea was the celebrated onion knight, he gave him the use of his own cabin and his own clothes, and a pair of new boots that almost fit. He insisted that Davos share his provisions as well, though that turned out badly. His stomach could not tolerate the snails and lampreys and other rich food Captain Khorane so relished, and after his first meal at the captain's table he spent the rest of the day with one end or the other dangling over the rail.

Dragonstone loomed larger with every stroke of the oars. Davos could see the shape of the mountain now, and on its side the great black citadel with its gargoyles and dragon towers. The bronze figurehead at the bow of *Shayala's Dance* sent up wings of salt spray as it cut the waves. He leaned his weight against the rail, grateful for its support. His ordeal had weakened him. If he stood too long his legs shook, and sometimes he fell prey to uncontrollable fits of coughing and brought up gobs of bloody phlegm. *It is nothing*, he told himself. *Surely the gods did not bring me safe through fire and sea only to kill me with a flux.*

As he listened to the pounding of the oarmaster's drum, the thrum of the sail, and the rhythmic swish and creak of the oars, he thought back to his younger days, when these same sounds woke dread in his heart on many a misty morn. They heralded the approach of old Ser Tristimun's sea watch, and the sea watch was death to smugglers when Aerys Targaryen sat the Iron Throne.

But that was another lifetime, he thought. *That was before the onion ship, before Storm's End, before Stannis shortened my fingers. That was before the war or the red comet, before I was a Seaworth or a knight. I was a different man in those days, before Lord Stannis raised me high.*

Captain Khorane had told him of the end of Stannis's hopes, on the night the river burned. The Lannisters had taken him from the flank, and his fickle bannermen had abandoned him by the hundreds in the hour of his greatest need. "King Renly's shade was seen as well," the captain said, "slaying right and left as he led the lion lord's van. It's said his green armor took a ghostly glow from the wildfire, and his antlers ran with golden flames."

Renly's shade. Davos wondered if his sons would return as shades as well. He had seen too many queer things on the sea to say that ghosts did not exist. "Did none keep faith?" he asked.

"Some few," the captain said. "The queen's kin, them in chief. We took off many who wore the fox-and-flowers, though many more were left ashore, with all manner of badges. Lord Florent is the King's Hand on Dragonstone now."

The mountain grew taller, crowned all in pale smoke. The sail sang, the drum beat, the oars pulled smoothly, and before very long the mouth of the harbor opened before them. *So empty*, Davos thought, remembering how it had been before, with the ships crowding every quay and rocking at anchor off the breakwater. He could see Salladhor Saan's flagship *Valyrian* moored at the quay where *Fury* and her sisters had once tied up. The ships on either side of her had striped Lysene hulls as well. In vain he looked for any sign of *Lady Marya* or *Wraith.*

They pulled down the sail as they entered the harbor, to dock on oars alone. The captain came to Davos as they were tying up. "My prince will wish to see you at once."

A fit of coughing seized Davos as he tried to answer. He clutched the rail for support and spat over the side. "The king," he wheezed. "I must go to the king." *For where the king is, I will find Melisandre.*

"No one goes to the king," Khorane Sathmantes replied firmly. "Salladhor Saan will tell you. Him first."

Davos was too weak to defy him. He could only nod.

Salladhor Saan was not aboard his *Valyrian*. They found him at another quay a quarter mile distant, down in the hold of a big-bellied Pentoshi cog named *Bountiful Harvest*, counting cargo with two eunuchs. One held a lantern, the other a wax tablet and stylus. "Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine," the old rogue was saying when Davos and the captain came down the hatch. Today he wore a wine-colored tunic and high boots of bleached white leather inlaid with silver scrollwork. Pulling the stopper from a jar, he sniffed, sneezed, and said, "A coarse grind, and of the second quality, my nose declares. The bill of lading is saying forty-three jars. Where have the others gotten to, I am wondering? These Pentoshi, do they think I am not counting?" When he saw Davos he stopped suddenly. "Is it pepper stinging my eyes, or tears? Is this the knight of the onions who stands before me? No, how can it be, my dear friend Davos died on the burning river, all agree. Why has he come to haunt me?"

"I am no ghost, Salla."

"What else? My onion knight was never so thin or so pale as you." Salladhor Saan threaded his way between the jars of spice and bolts of cloth that filled the hold of the merchanter, wrapped Davos in a fierce embrace, then kissed him once on each cheek and a third time on his forehead. "You are still warm, ser, and I feel your heart thumpetythumping. Can it be true? The sea that swallowed you has spit you up again."

Davos was reminded of Patchface, Princess Shireen's lackwit fool. He had gone into the sea as well, and when he came out he was mad. *Am I mad as well?* He coughed into a gloved hand and said, "I swam beneath the chain and washed ashore on a spear of the merling king. I would have died there, if *Shayala's Dance* had not come upon me."

Salladhor Saan threw an arm around the captain's shoulders. "This was well done, Khorane. You will be having a fine reward, I am thinking. Meizo Mahr, be a good eunuch and take my friend Davos to the owner's cabin.

"Fetch him some hot wine with cloves, I am misliking the sound of that cough. Squeeze some lime in it as well. And bring white cheese and a bowl of those cracked green olives we counted earlier! Davos, I will join you soon, once I have bespoken our good captain. You will be forgiving me, I know. Do not eat all the olives, or I must be cross with you!"

Davos let the elder of the two eunuchs escort him to a large and lavishly furnished cabin at the stern of the ship. The carpets were deep, the windows stained glass, and any of the great leather chairs would have seated three of Davos quite comfortably. The cheese and olives arrived shortly, and a cup of steaming hot red wine. He held it between his hands and sipped it gratefully. The warmth felt soothing as it spread through his chest.

Salladhor Saan appeared not long after. "You must be forgiving me for the wine, my friend. These Pentoshi would drink their own water if it were purple."

"It will help my chest," said Davos. "Hot wine is better than a compress, my mother used to say."

"You shall be needing compresses as well, I am thinking. Sitting on a spear all this long time, oh my. How are you finding that excellent chair? He has fat cheeks, does he not?"

"Who?" asked Davos, between sips of hot wine.

"Illyrio Mopatis. A whale with whiskers, I am telling you truly. These chairs were built to his measure, though he is seldom bestirring himself from Pentos to sit in them. A fat man always sits comfortably, I am thinking, for he takes his pillow with him wherever he goes."

"How is it you come by a Pentoshi ship?" asked Davos. "Have you gone pirate again, my lord?" He set his empty cup aside.

"Vile calumny. Who has suffered more from pirates than Salladhor Saan? I ask only what is due me. Much gold is owed, oh yes, but I am not without reason, so in place of coin I have taken a handsome parchment, very crisp. It bears the name and seal of Lord Alester Florent, the Hand of the King. I am made Lord of Blackwater Bay, and no vessel may be crossing my lordly waters without my lordly leave, no. And when these outlaws are trying to steal past me in the night to avoid my lawful duties and customs, why, they are no better than smugglers, so I am well within my rights to seize them." The old pirate laughed. "I cut off no man's fingers, though. What good are bits of fingers? The ships I am taking, the cargoes, a few ransoms, nothing unreasonable." He gave Davos a sharp look. "You are unwell, my friend. That cough … and so thin, I am seeing your bones through your skin. And yet I am not seeing your little bag of fingerbones …"

Old habit made Davos reach for the leather pouch that was no longer there. "I lost it in the river." *My luck*.

"The river was terrible," Salladhor Saan said solemnly. "Even from the bay, I was seeing, and shuddering."

Davos coughed, spat, and coughed again. "I saw *Black Betha* burning, and *Fury* as well," he finally managed, hoarsely. "Did none of our ships escape the fire?" Part of him still hoped.

"*Lord Steffon, Ragged Jenna, Swift Sword, Laughing Lord,* and some others were upstream of the pyromancers' pissing, yes. They did not burn, but with the chain raised, neither could they be flying. Some few were surrendering. Most rowed far up the Blackwater, away from the battling, and then were sunk by their crews so they would not be falling into Lannister hands. *Ragged Jenna* and *Laughing Lord* are still playing pirate on the river, I have heard, but who can say if it is so?"

"*Lady Marya?*" Davos asked. "*Wraith?*"

Salladhor Saan put a hand on Davos's forearm and gave a squeeze. "No. Of them, no. I am sorry, my friend. They were good men, your Dale and Allard. But this comfort I can give you—your young Devan was among those we took off at the end. The brave boy never once left the king's side, or so they say."

For a moment, he felt almost dizzy, his relief was so palpable. He had been afraid to ask about Devan. "The Mother is merciful. I must go to him, Salla. I must see him."

"Yes," said Salladhor Saan. "And you will be wanting to sail to Cape Wrath, I know, to see your wife and your two little ones. You must be having a new ship, I am thinking."

"His Grace will give me a ship," said Davos.

The Lyseni shook his head. "Of ships, His Grace has none, and Salladhor Saan has many. The king's ships burned up on the river, but not mine. You shall have one, old friend. You will sail for me, yes? You will dance into Braavos and Myr and Volantis in the black of night, all unseen, and dance out again with silks and spices. We will be having fat purses, yes."

"You are kind, Salla, but my duty's to my king, not your purse. The war will go on. Stannis is still the rightful heir by all the laws of the Seven Kingdoms."

"All the laws are not helping when all the ships burn up, I am thinking. And your king, well, you will be finding him changed, I am fearing. Since the battle, he sees no one, but broods in his Stone Drum. Queen Selyse keeps court for him with her uncle the Lord Alester, who is naming himself

the Hand. The king's seal she has given to this uncle, to fix to the letters he writes, even to my pretty parchment. But it is a little kingdom they are ruling, poor and rocky, yes. There is no gold, not even a little bit to pay faithful Salladhor Saan what is owed him, and only those knights that we took off at the end, and no ships but my little brave few."

A sudden racking cough bent Davos over. Salladhor Saan moved to help him, but he waved him off, and after a moment he recovered. "No one?" he wheezed. "What do you mean, he sees no one?" His voice sounded wet and thick, even in his own ears, and for a moment the cabin swam dizzily around him.

"No one but *her*," said Salladhor Saan, and Davos did not have to ask who he meant. "My friend, you tire yourself. It is a bed you are needing, not Salladhor Saan. A bed and many blankets, with a hot compress for your chest and more wine and cloves."

Davos shook his head. "I will be fine. Tell me, Salla, I must know. No one but Melisandre?"

The Lyseni gave him a long doubtful look, and continued reluctantly. "The guards keep all others away, even his queen and his little daughter. Servants bring meals that no one eats." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Queer talking I have heard, of hungry fires within the mountain, and how Stannis and the red woman go down together to watch the flames. There are shafts, they say, and secret stairs down into the mountain's heart, into hot places where only *she* may walk unburned. It is enough and more to give an old man such terrors that sometimes he can scarcely find the strength to eat."

Melisandre. Davos shivered. "The red woman did this to him," he said. "She sent the fire to consume us, to punish Stannis for setting her aside, to teach him that he could not hope to win without her sorceries."

The Lyseni chose a plump olive from the bowl between them. "You are not the first to be saying this, my friend. But if I am you, I am not saying it so loudly. Dragonstone crawls with these queen's men, oh yes, and they have sharp ears and sharper knives." He popped the olive into his mouth.

"I have a knife myself. Captain Khorane made me a gift of it." He pulled out the dirk and laid it on the table between them. "A knife to cut out Melisandre's heart. If she has one."

Salladhor Saan spit out an olive pit. "Davos, good Davos, you must not be saying such things, even in jest."

"No jest. I mean to kill her." *If she can be killed by mortal weapons.* Davos was not certain that she could. He had seen old Maester Cressen slip poison into her wine, with his own eyes he had seen it, but when they both drank from the poisoned cup it was the maester who died, not the red priestess. *A knife in the heart, though … even demons can be killed by cold iron, the singers say.*

"These are dangerous talkings, my friend," Salladhor Saan warned him. "I am thinking you are still sick from the sea. The fever has cooked your wits, yes. Best you are taking to your bed for a long resting, until you are stronger."

Until my resolve weakens, you mean. Davos got to his feet. He did feel feverish and a little dizzy, but it did not matter. "You are a treacherous old rogue, Salladhor Saan, but a good friend all the same."

The Lyseni stroked his pointed silver beard. "So with this great friend you will be staying, yes?"

"No, I will be going." He coughed.

"Go? Look at you! You cough, you tremble, you are thin and weak. Where will you be going?"

"To the castle. My bed is there, and my son."

"And the red woman," Salladhor Saan said suspiciously. "She is in the castle also."

"Her too." Davos slid the dirk back into its sheath.

"You are an onion smuggler, what do you know of skulkings and stabbings? And you are ill, you cannot even hold the dirk. Do you know what will be happening to you, if you are caught? While we were burning on the river, the queen was burning traitors. *Servants of the dark*, she named them, poor men, and the red woman sang as the fires were lit."

Davos was unsurprised. *I knew*, he thought, *I knew before he told me.* "She took Lord Sunglass from the dungeons," he guessed, "and Hubard Rambton's sons."

"Just so, and burned them, as she will burn you. If you kill the red woman, they will burn you for revenge, and if you fail to kill her, they will burn you for the trying. She will sing and you will scream, and then you will die. And you have only just come back to life!"

"And this is why," said Davos. "To do this thing. To make an end of Melisandre of Asshai and all her works. Why else would the sea have spit me out? You know Blackwater Bay as well as I do, Salla. No sensible captain would ever take his ship through the spears of the merling king and risk ripping out his bottom. *Shayala's Dance* should never have come near me."

"A wind," insisted Salladhor Saan loudly, "an ill wind, is all. A wind drove her too far to the south."

"And who sent the wind? Salla, the Mother spoke to me."

The old Lyseni blinked at him. "Your mother is dead …"

"*The* Mother. She blessed me with seven sons, and yet I let them burn her. She spoke to me. We *called* the fire, she said. We called the shadows too. I rowed Melisandre into the bowels of Storm's End and watched her birth a horror." He saw it still in his nightmares, the gaunt black hands pushing against her thighs as it wriggled free of her swollen womb. "She killed Cressen and Lord Renly and a brave man named Cortnay Penrose, and she killed my sons as well. Now it is time someone killed her."

"*Someone*," said Salladhor Saan. "Yes, just so, someone. But not you. You are weak as a child, and no warrior. Stay, I beg you, we will talk more and you will eat, and perhaps we will sail to Braavos and hire a Faceless Man to do this thing, yes? But you, no, you must sit and eat."

He is making this much harder, thought Davos wearily, *and it was perishingly hard to begin with.* "I have vengeance in my belly, Salla. It leaves no room for food. Let me go now. For our friendship, wish me luck and let me go."

Salladhor Saan pushed himself to his feet. "You are no true friend, I am thinking. When you are dead, who will be bringing your ashes and bones back to your lady wife and telling her that she has lost a husband and four sons? Only sad old Salladhor Saan. But so be it, brave ser knight, go rushing to your grave. I will gather your bones in a sack and give them to the sons you leave behind, to wear in little bags around their necks." He waved an angry hand, with rings on every finger. "Go, go, go, go, go."

Davos did not want to leave like this. "Salla—"

"*GO*. Or stay, better, but if you are going, go."

He went.

His walk up from the *Bountiful Harvest* to the gates of Dragonstone was long and lonely. The dockside streets where soldiers and sailors and smallfolk had thronged were empty and deserted. Where once he had stepped around squealing pigs and naked children, rats scurried. His legs felt like pudding beneath him, and thrice the coughing racked him so badly that he had to stop and rest. No one came to help him, nor even peered through a window to see what was the matter. The windows were shuttered, the doors barred, and more than half the houses displayed some mark of mourning. *Thousands sailed up the Blackwater Rush, and hundreds came back*, Davos reflected. *My sons did not die alone. May the Mother have mercy on them all.*

When he reached the castle gates, he found them shut as well. Davos pounded on the iron-studded wood with his fist. When there was no answer, he kicked at it, again and again. Finally, a crossbowman appeared atop the barbican, peering down between two towering gargoyles. "Who goes there?"

He craned his head back and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Ser Davos Seaworth, to see His Grace."

"Are you drunk? Go away and stop that pounding."

Salladhor Saan had warned him. Davos tried a different tack. “Send for my son, then. Devan, the king’s squire.”

The guard frowned. “Who did you say you were?”

“Davos,” he shouted. “The onion knight.”

The head vanished, to return a moment later. “Be off with you. The onion knight died on the river. His ship burned.”

“His ship burned,” Davos agreed, “but he lived, and here he stands. Is Jate still captain of the gate?”

“Who?”

“Jate Blackberry. He knows me well enough.”

“I never heard of him. Most like he’s dead.”

“Lord Chyttering, then.”

“That one I know. He burned on the Blackwater.”

“Hookface Will? Hal the Hog?”

“Dead and dead,” the crossbowman said, but his face betrayed a sudden doubt. “You wait there.” He vanished again.

Davos waited. *Gone, all gone*, he thought dully, remembering how fat Hal’s white belly always showed beneath his grease-stained doublet, the long scar the fish hook had left across Will’s face, the way Jate always doffed his cap at the women, be they five or fifty, highborn or low. *Drowned or burned, with my sons and a thousand others, gone to make a king in hell.*

Suddenly the crossbowman was back. “Go round to the sally port and they’ll admit you.”

Davos did as he was bid. The guards who ushered him inside were strangers to him. They carried spears, and on their breasts they wore the fox-and-flowers sigil of House Florent. They escorted him not to the Stone Drum, as he’d expected, but under the arch of the Dragon’s Tail and down to Aegon’s Garden. “Wait here,” their sergeant told him.

“Does His Grace know that I’ve returned?” asked Davos.

“Bugger all if I know. Wait, I said.” The man left, taking his spearmen with him.

Aegon’s Garden had a pleasant piney smell to it, and tall dark trees rose on every side. There were wild roses as well, and towering thorny hedges, and a boggy spot where cranberries grew.

Why have they brought me here? Davos wondered.

Then he heard a faint ringing of bells, and a child’s giggle, and suddenly the fool Patchface popped from the bushes, shambling along as fast as he could go with the Princess Shireen hot on his heels. “You come back now,” she was shouting after him. “Patches, you come back.”

When the fool saw Davos, he jerked to a sudden halt, the bells on his antlered tin helmet going *ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling*. Hopping from one foot to the other, he sang, “*Fool’s blood, king’s blood, blood on the maiden’s thigh, but chains for the guests and chains for the bridegroom, aye aye aye.*” Shireen almost caught him then, but at the last instant he hopped over a patch of bracken and vanished among the trees. The princess was right behind him. The sight of them made Davos smile.

He had turned to cough into his gloved hand when another small shape crashed out of the hedge and bowled right into him, knocking him off his feet.

The boy went down as well, but he was up again almost at once. “What are you doing here?” he demanded as he brushed himself off. Jet-black hair fell to his collar, and his eyes were a startling blue. “You shouldn’t get in my way when I’m running.”

“No,” Davos agreed. “I shouldn’t.” Another fit of coughing seized him as he struggled to his knees.

“Are you unwell?” The boy took him by the arm and pulled him to his feet. “Should I summon the maester?”

Davos shook his head. “A cough. It will pass.”

The boy took him at his word. “We were playing monsters and maidens,” he explained. “I was the monster. It’s a childish game but my cousin likes it. Do you have a name?”

“Ser Davos Seaworth.”

The boy looked him up and down dubiously. “Are you certain? You don’t look very knightly.”

“I am the knight of the onions, my lord.”

The blue eyes blinked. “The one with the black ship?”

“You know that tale?”

“You brought my uncle Stannis fish to eat before I was born, when Lord Tyrell had him under siege.” The boy drew himself up tall. “I am Edric Storm,” he announced. “King Robert’s son.”

“Of course you are.” Davos had known that almost at once. The lad had the prominent ears of a Florent, but the hair, the eyes, the jaw, the cheekbones, those were all Baratheon.

“Did you know my father?” Edric Storm demanded.

“I saw him many a time while calling on your uncle at court, but we never spoke.”

“My father taught me to fight,” the boy said proudly. “He came to see me almost every year, and sometimes we trained together. On my last name day he sent me a warhammer just like his, only smaller. They made me leave it at Storm’s End, though. Is it true my uncle Stannis cut off your fingers?”

“Only the last joint. I still have fingers, only shorter.”

“Show me.”

Davos peeled his glove off. The boy studied his hand carefully. “He did not shorten your thumb?”

“No.” Davos coughed. “No, he left me that.”

“He should not have chopped any of your fingers,” the lad decided. “That was ill done.”

“I was a smuggler.”

“Yes, but you smuggled him fish and onions.”

“Lord Stannis knighted me for the onions, and took my fingers for the smuggling.” He pulled his glove back on.

“My father would not have chopped your fingers.”

“As you say, my lord.” *Robert was a different man than Stannis, true enough. The boy is like him. Aye, and like Renly as well.* That thought made him anxious.

The boy was about to say something more when they heard steps. Davos turned. Ser Axell Florent was coming down the garden path with a dozen guards in quilted jerkins. On their breasts they wore the fiery heart of the Lord of Light. *Queen’s men*, Davos thought. A cough came on him suddenly.

Ser Axell was short and muscular, with a barrel chest, thick arms, bandy legs, and hair growing from his ears. The queen’s uncle, he had served as castellan of Dragonstone for a decade, and had always treated Davos courteously, knowing he enjoyed the favor of Lord Stannis. But there was neither courtesy nor warmth in his tone as he said, “Ser Davos, and undrowned. How can that be?”

“Onions float, ser. Have you come to take me to the king?”

“I have come to take you to the dungeon.” Ser Axell waved his men forward. “Seize him, and take his dirk. He means to use it on our lady.”

JAIME

Jaime was the first to spy the inn. The main building hugged the south shore where the river bent, its long low wings outstretched along the water as if to embrace travelers sailing downstream. The lower story was grey stone, the upper whitewashed wood, the roof slate. He could see stables as well, and an arbor heavy with vines. "No smoke from the chimneys," he pointed out as they approached. "Nor lights in the windows."

"The inn was still open when last I passed this way," said Ser Cleos Frey. "They brewed a fine ale. Perhaps there is still some to be had in the cellars."

"There may be people," Brienne said. "Hiding. Or dead."

"Frightened of a few corpses, wench?" Jaime said.

She glared at him. "My name is—"

"—Brienne, yes. Wouldn't you like to sleep in a bed for a night, Brienne? We'd be safer than on the open river, and it might be prudent to find what's happened here."

She gave no answer, but after a moment she pushed at the tiller to angle the skiff in toward the weathered wooden dock. Ser Cleos scrambled to take down the sail. When they bumped softly against the pier, he climbed out to tie them up. Jaime clambered after him, made awkward by his chains.

At the end of the dock, a flaking shingle swung from an iron post, painted with the likeness of a king upon his knees, his hands pressed together in the gesture of fealty. Jaime took one look and laughed aloud. "We could not have found a better inn."

"Is this some special place?" the wench asked, suspicious.

Ser Cleos answered. "This is the Inn of the Kneeling Man, my lady. It stands upon the very spot where the last King in the North knelt before Aegon the Conqueror to offer his submission. That's him on the sign, I suppose."

"Torrhen had brought his power south after the fall of the two kings on the Field of Fire," said Jaime, "but when he saw Aegon's dragon and the size of his host, he chose the path of wisdom and bent his frozen knees." He stopped at the sound of a horse's whinny. "Horses in the stable. One at least." *And one is all I need to put the wench behind me.* "Let's see who's home, shall we?" Without waiting for an answer, Jaime went clinking down the dock, put a shoulder to the door, shoved it open …

… and found himself eye to eye with a loaded crossbow. Standing behind it was a chunky boy of fifteen. "Lion, fish, or wolf?" the lad demanded.

"We were hoping for capon." Jaime heard his companions entering behind him. "The crossbow is a coward's weapon."

"It'll put a bolt through your heart all the same."

"Perhaps. But before you can wind it again my cousin here will spill your entrails on the floor."

"Don't be scaring the lad, now," Ser Cleos said.

"We mean no harm," the wench said. "And we have coin to pay for food and drink." She dug a silver piece from her pouch.

The boy looked suspiciously at the coin, and then at Jaime's manacles. "Why's this one in irons?"

"Killed some crossbowmen," said Jaime. "Do you have ale?"

"Yes." The boy lowered the crossbow an inch. "Undo your swordbelts and let them fall, and might be we'll feed you." He edged around to peer through the thick, diamond-shaped windowpanes and see if any more of them were outside. "That's a Tully sail."

"We come from Riverrun." Brienne undid the clasp on her belt and let it clatter to the floor. Ser Cleos followed suit.

A sallow man with a pocked doughy face stepped through the cellar door, holding a butcher's heavy cleaver. "Three, are you? We got horsemeat enough for three. The horse was old and tough, but the meat's still fresh."

"Is there bread?" asked Brienne.

"Hardbread and stale oatcakes."

Jaime grinned. "Now there's an honest innkeep. They'll all serve you stale bread and stringy meat, but most don't own up to it so freely."

"I'm no innkeep. I buried him out back, with his women."

"Did you kill them?"

"Would I tell you if I did?" The man spat. "Likely it were wolves' work, or maybe lions, what's the difference? The wife and I found them dead. The way we see it, the place is ours now."

"Where is this wife of yours?" Ser Cleos asked.

The man gave him a suspicious squint. "And why would you be wanting to know that? She's not here … no more'n you three will be, unless I like the taste of your silver."

Brienne tossed the coin to him. He caught it in the air, bit it, and tucked it away.

"She's got more," the boy with the crossbow announced.

"So she does. Boy, go down and find me some onions."

The lad raised the crossbow to his shoulder, gave them one last sullen look, and vanished into the cellar.

"Your son?" Ser Cleos asked.

"Just a boy the wife and me took in. We had two sons, but the lions killed one and the other died of the flux. The boy lost his mother to the Bloody Mummers. These days, a man needs someone to keep watch while he sleeps." He waved the cleaver at the tables. "Might as well sit."

The hearth was cold, but Jaime picked the chair nearest the ashes and stretched out his long legs under the table. The clink of his chains accompanied his every movement. *An irritating sound. Before this is done, I'll wrap these chains around the wench's throat, see how she likes them then.*

The man who wasn't an innkeep charred three huge horse steaks and fried the onions in bacon grease, which almost made up for the stale oatcakes. Jaime and Cleos drank ale, Brienne a cup of cider. The boy kept his distance, perching atop the cider barrel with his crossbow across his knees, cocked and loaded. The cook drew a tankard of ale and sat with them. "What news from Riverrun?" he asked Ser Cleos, taking him for their leader.

Ser Cleos glanced at Brienne before answering. "Lord Hoster is failing, but his son holds the fords of the Red Fork against the Lannisters. There have been battles."

"Battles everywhere. Where are you bound, ser?"

"King's Landing." Ser Cleos wiped grease off his lips.

Their host snorted. "Then you're three fools. Last I heard, King Stannis was outside the city walls. They say he has a hundred thousand men and a magic sword."

Jaime's hands wrapped around the chain that bound his wrists, and he twisted it taut, wishing for the strength to snap it in two. *Then I'd show Stannis where to sheathe his magic sword.*

"I'd stay well clear of that kingsroad, if I were you," the man went on. "It's worse than bad, I hear. Wolves and lions both, and bands of broken men preying on anyone they can catch."

"Vermin," declared Ser Cleos with contempt. "Such would never dare to trouble armed men."

"Begging your pardon, ser, but I see one armed man, traveling with a woman and a prisoner in chains."

Brienne gave the cook a dark look. *The wench does hate being reminded that she's a wench*, Jaime reflected, twisting at the chains again. The links were cold and hard against his flesh, the iron implacable. The manacles had chafed his wrists raw.

"I mean to follow the Trident to the sea," the wench told their host. "We'll find mounts at Maidenpool and ride by way of Duskendale and Rosby. That should keep us well away from the worst of the fighting."

Their host shook his head. "You'll never reach Maidenpool by river. Not thirty miles from here a couple boats burned and sank, and the channel's been silting up around them. There's a nest

of outlaws there preying on anyone tries to come by, and more of the same downriver around the Skipping Stones and Red Deer Island. And the lightning lord's been seen in these parts as well. He crosses the river wherever he likes, riding this way and that way, never still."

"And who is this lightning lord?" demanded Ser Cleos Frey.

"Lord Beric, as it please you, ser. They call him that 'cause he strikes so sudden, like lightning from a clear sky. It's said he cannot die."

They all die when you shove a sword through them, Jaime thought. "Does Thoros of Myr still ride with him?"

"Aye. The red wizard. I've heard tell he has strange powers."

Well, he had the power to match Robert Baratheon drink for drink, and there were few enough who could say that. Jaime had once heard Thoros tell the king that he became a red priest because the robes hid the winestains so well. Robert had laughed so hard he'd spit ale all over Cersei's silken mantle. "Far be it from me to make objection," he said, "but perhaps the Trident is not our safest course."

"I'd say that's so," their cook agreed. "Even if you get past Red Deer Island and don't meet up with Lord Beric and the red wizard, there's still the ruby ford before you. Last I heard, it was the Leech Lord's wolves held the ford, but that was some time past. By now it could be lions again, or Lord Beric, or anyone."

"Or no one," Brienne suggested.

"If m'lady cares to wager her skin on that I won't stop her … but if I was you, I'd leave this here river, cut overland. If you stay off the main roads and shelter under the trees of a night, hidden as it were … well, I still wouldn't want to go with you, but you might stand a mummer's chance."

The big wench was looking doubtful. "We would need horses."

"There are horses here," Jaime pointed out. "I heard one in the stable."

"Aye, there are," said the innkeep, who wasn't an innkeep. "Three of them, as it happens, but they're not for sale."

Jaime had to laugh. "Of course not. But you'll show them to us anyway."

Brienne scowled, but the man who wasn't an innkeep met her eyes without blinking, and after a moment, reluctantly, she said, "Show me," and they all rose from the table.

The stables had not been mucked out in a long while, from the smell of them. Hundreds of fat black flies swarmed amongst the straw, buzzing from stall to stall and crawling over the mounds of horse dung that lay everywhere, but there were only the three horses to be seen. They made an unlikely trio; a lumbering brown plow horse, an ancient white gelding blind in one eye, and a knight's palfrey, dapple grey and spirited. "They're not for sale at any price," their alleged owner announced.

"How did you come by these horses?" Brienne wanted to know.

"The dray was stabled here when the wife and me come on the inn," the man said, "along with the one you just ate. The gelding come wandering up one night, and the boy caught the palfrey running free, still saddled and bridled. Here, I'll show you."

The saddle he showed them was decorated with silver inlay. The saddlecloth had originally been checkered pink and black, but now it was mostly brown. Jaime did not recognize the original colors, but he recognized bloodstains easily enough. "Well, her owner won't be coming to claim her anytime soon." He examined the palfrey's legs, counted the gelding's teeth. "Give him a gold piece for the grey, if he'll include the saddle," he advised Brienne. "A silver for the plow horse. He ought to pay us for taking the white off his hands."

"Don't speak discourteously of your horse, ser." The wench opened the purse Lady Catelyn had given her and took out three golden coins. "I will pay you a dragon for each."

He blinked and reached for the gold, then hesitated and drew his hand back. "I don't know. I can't ride no golden dragon if I need to get away. Nor eat one if I'm hungry."

"You can have our skiff as well," she said. "Sail up the river or down, as you like."

"Let me have a taste o' that gold." The man took one of the coins from her palm and bit it. "Hm. Real enough, I'd say. Three dragons *and* the skiff?"

"He's robbing you blind, wench," Jaime said amiably.

"I'll want provisions too," Brienne told their host, ignoring Jaime. "Whatever you have that you can spare."

"There's more oatcakes." The man scooped the other two dragons from her palm and jingled them in his fist, smiling at the sound they made. "Aye, and smoked salt fish, but that will cost you silver. My beds will be costing as well. You'll be wanting to stay the night."

"No," Brienne said at once.

The man frowned at her. "Woman, you don't want to go riding at night through strange country on horses you don't know. You're like to blunder into some bog or break your horse's leg."

"The moon will be bright tonight," Brienne said. "We'll have no trouble finding our way."

Their host chewed on that. "If you don't have the silver, might be some coppers would buy you them beds, and a coverlet or two to keep you warm. It's not like I'm turning travelers away, if you get my meaning."

"That sounds more than fair," said Ser Cleos.

"The coverlets is fresh washed, too. My wife saw to that before she had to go off. Not a flea to be found neither, you have my word on that." He jingled the coins again, smiling.

Ser Cleos was plainly tempted. "A proper bed would do us all good, my lady," he said to Brienne. "We'd make better time on the morrow once refreshed." He looked to his cousin for support.

"No, coz, the wench is right. We have promises to keep, and long leagues before us. We ought ride on."

"But," said Cleos, "you said yourself—"

"Then." *When I thought the inn deserted*. "Now I have a full belly, and a moonlight ride will be just the thing." He smiled for the wench. "But unless you mean to throw me over the back of that plow horse like a sack of flour, someone had best do something about these irons. It's difficult to ride with your ankles chained together."

Brienne frowned at the chain. The man who wasn't an innkeep rubbed his jaw. "There's a smithy round back of the stable."

"Show me," Brienne said.

"Yes," said Jaime, "and the sooner the better. There's far too much horse shit about here for my taste. I would hate to step in it." He gave the wench a sharp look, wondering if she was bright enough to take his meaning.

He hoped she might strike the irons off his wrists as well, but Brienne was still suspicious. She split the ankle chain in the center with a half-dozen sharp blows from the smith's hammer delivered to the blunt end of a steel chisel. When he suggested that she break the wrist chain as well, she ignored him.

"Six miles downriver you'll see a burned village," their host said as he was helping them saddle the horses and load their packs. This time he directed his counsel at Brienne. "The road splits there. If you turn south, you'll come on Ser Warren's stone towerhouse. Ser Warren went off and died, so I couldn't say who holds it now, but it's a place best shunned. You'd do better to follow the track through the woods, south by east."

"We shall," she answered. "You have my thanks."

More to the point, he has your gold. Jaime kept the thought to himself. He was tired of being disregarded by this huge ugly cow of a woman.

She took the plow horse for herself and assigned the palfrey to Ser Cleos. As threatened, Jaime drew the one-eyed gelding, which put an end to any thoughts he might have had of giving his horse a kick and leaving the wench in his dust.

The man and the boy came out to watch them leave. The man wished them luck and told them to come back in better times, while the lad stood silent, his crossbow under his arm. “Take up the spear or maul,” Jaime told him, “they’ll serve you better.” The boy stared at him distrustfully. *So much for friendly advice.* He shrugged, turned his horse, and never looked back.

Ser Cleos was all complaints as they rode out, still in mourning for his lost featherbed. They rode east, along the bank of the moonlit river. The Red Fork was very broad here, but shallow, its banks all mud and reeds. Jaime’s mount plodded along placidly, though the poor old thing had a tendency to want to drift off to the side of his good eye. It felt good to be mounted once more. He had not been on a horse since Robb Stark’s archers had killed his destrier under him in the Whispering Wood.

When they reached the burned village, a choice of equally unpromising roads confronted them; narrow tracks, deeply rutted by the carts of farmers hauling their grain to the river. One wandered off toward the southeast and soon vanished amidst the trees they could see in the distance, while the other, straighter and stonier, arrowed due south. Brienne considered them briefly, and then swung her horse onto the southern road. Jaime was pleasantly surprised; it was the same choice he would have made.

“But this is the road the innkeep warned us against,” Ser Cleos objected.

“He was no innkeep.” She hunched gracelessly in the saddle, but seemed to have a sure seat nonetheless. “The man took too great an interest in our choice of route, and those woods … such places are notorious haunts of outlaws. He may have been urging us into a trap.”

“Clever wench.” Jaime smiled at his cousin. “Our host has friends down that road, I would venture. The ones whose mounts gave that stable such a memorable aroma.”

“He may have been lying about the river as well, to put us on these horses,” the wench said, “but I could not take the risk. There will be soldiers at the ruby ford and the crossroads.”

Well, she may be ugly but she’s not entirely stupid. Jaime gave her a grudging smile.

The ruddy light from the upper windows of the stone towerhouse gave them warning of its presence a long way off, and Brienne led them off into the fields. Only when the stronghold was well to the rear did they angle back and find the road again.

Half the night passed before the wench allowed that it might be safe to stop. By then all three of them were drooping in their saddles. They sheltered in a small grove of oak and ash beside a sluggish stream. The wench would allow no fire, so they shared a midnight supper of stale oatcakes and salt fish. The night was strangely peaceful. The half-moon sat overhead in a black felt sky, surrounded by stars. Off in the distance, some wolves were howling. One of their horses whickered nervously. There was no other sound. *The war has not touched this place*, Jaime thought. He was glad to be here, glad to be alive, glad to be on his way back to Cersei.

“I’ll take the first watch,” Brienne told Ser Cleos, and Frey was soon snoring softly.

Jaime sat against the bole of an oak and wondered what Cersei and Tyrion were doing just now. “Do you have any siblings, my lady?” he asked.

Brienne squinted at him suspiciously. “No. I was my father’s only s—child.”

Jaime chuckled. “*Son*, you meant to say. Does he think of you as a son? You make a queer sort of daughter, to be sure.”

Wordless, she turned away from him, her knuckles tight on her sword hilt. *What a wretched creature this one is*. She reminded him of Tyrion in some queer way, though at first blush two people could scarcely be any more dissimilar. Perhaps it was that thought of his brother that made him say, “I did not intend to give offense, Brienne. Forgive me.”

“Your crimes are past forgiving, Kingslayer.”

“That name again.” Jaime twisted idly at his chains. “Why do I enrage you so? I’ve never done you harm that I know of.”

“You’ve harmed others. Those you were sworn to protect. The weak, the innocent …”

“… the king?” It always came back to Aerys. “Don’t presume to judge what you do not understand, wench.”

"My name is—"

"—Brienne, yes. Has anyone ever told you that you're as tedious as you are ugly?"

"You will not provoke me to anger, Kingslayer."

"Oh, I might, if I cared enough to try."

"Why did you take the oath?" she demanded. "Why don the white cloak if you meant to betray all it stood for?"

Why? What could he say that she might possibly understand? "I was a boy. Fifteen. It was a great honor for one so young."

"That is no answer," she said scornfully.

You would not like the truth. He had joined the Kingsguard for love, of course.

Their father had summoned Cersei to court when she was twelve, hoping to make her a royal marriage. He refused every offer for her hand, preferring to keep her with him in the Tower of the Hand while she grew older and more womanly and ever more beautiful. No doubt he was waiting for Prince Viserys to mature, or perhaps for Rhaegar's wife to die in childbed. Elia of Dorne was never the healthiest of women.

Jaime, meantime, had spent four years as squire to Ser Sumner Crakehall and earned his spurs against the Kingswood Brotherhood. But when he made a brief call at King's Landing on his way back to Casterly Rock, chiefly to see his sister, Cersei took him aside and whispered that Lord Tywin meant to marry him to Lysa Tully, had gone so far as to invite Lord Hoster to the city to discuss dower. But if Jaime took the white, he could be near her always. Old Ser Harlan Grandison had died in his sleep, as was only appropriate for one whose sigil was a sleeping lion. Aerys would want a young man to take his place, so why not a roaring lion in place of a sleepy one?

"Father will never consent," Jaime objected.

"The king won't ask him. And once it's done, Father can't object, not openly. Aerys had Ser Ilyn Payne's tongue torn out just for boasting that it was the Hand who truly ruled the Seven Kingdoms. The captain of the Hand's guard, and yet Father dared not try and stop it! He won't stop this, either."

"But," Jaime said, "there's Casterly Rock …"

"Is it a rock you want? Or me?"

He remembered that night as if it were yesterday. They spent it in an old inn on Eel Alley, well away from watchful eyes. Cersei had come to him dressed as a simple serving wench, which somehow excited him all the more. Jaime had never seen her more passionate. Every time he went to sleep, she woke him again. By morning Casterly Rock seemed a small price to pay to be near her always. He gave his consent, and Cersei promised to do the rest.

A moon's turn later, a royal raven arrived at Casterly Rock to inform him that he had been chosen for the Kingsguard. He was commanded to present himself to the king during the great tourney at Harrenhal to say his vows and don his cloak.

Jaime's investiture freed him from Lysa Tully. Elsewise, nothing went as planned. His father had never been more furious. He could not object openly—Cersei had judged that correctly—but he resigned the Handship on some thin pretext and returned to Casterly Rock, taking his daughter with him. Instead of being together, Cersei and Jaime just changed places, and he found himself alone at court, guarding a mad king while four lesser men took their turns dancing on knives in his father's ill-fitting shoes. So swiftly did the Hands rise and fall that Jaime remembered their heraldry better than their faces. The horn-of-plenty Hand and the dancing griffins Hand had both been exiled, the mace-and-dagger Hand dipped in wildfire and burned alive. Lord Rossart had been the last. His sigil had been a burning torch; an unfortunate choice, given the fate of his predecessor, but the alchemist had been elevated largely because he shared the king's passion for fire. *I ought to have drowned Rossart instead of gutting him.*

Brienne was still awaiting his answer. Jaime said, "You are not old enough to have known Aerys Targaryen …"

She would not hear it. “Aerys was mad and cruel, no one has ever denied that. He was still king, crowned and anointed. And you had sworn to protect him.”

“I know what I swore.”

“And what you did.” She loomed above him, six feet of freckled, frowning, horse-toothed disapproval.

“Yes, and what *you* did as well. We’re both kingslayers here, if what I’ve heard is true.”

“I never harmed Renly. I’ll kill the man who says I did.”

“Best start with Cleos, then. And you’ll have a deal of killing to do after that, the way he tells the tale.”

“*Lies.* Lady Catelyn was there when His Grace was murdered, she saw. There was a shadow. The candles guttered and the air grew cold, and there was blood—”

“Oh, very good.” Jaime laughed. “Your wits are quicker than mine, I confess it. When they found me standing over my dead king, I never thought to say, ‘No, no, it wasn’t me, it was a shadow, a terrible cold shadow.’” He laughed again. “Tell me true, one kingslayer to another—did the Starks pay you to slit his throat, or was it Stannis? Had Renly spurned you, was that the way of it? Or perhaps your moon’s blood was on you. Never give a wench a sword when she’s bleeding.”

For a moment, Jaime thought Brienne might strike him. *A step closer, and I’ll snatch that dagger from her sheath and bury it up her womb.* He gathered a leg under him, ready to spring, but the wench did not move. “It is a rare and precious gift to be a knight,” she said, “and even more so a knight of the Kingsguard. It is a gift given to few, a gift you scorned and soiled.”

A gift you want desperately, wench, and can never have. “I earned my knighthood. Nothing was given to me. I won a tourney mêlée thirteen, when I was yet a squire. At fifteen, I rode with Ser Arthur Dayne against the Kingswood Brotherhood, and he knighted me on the battlefield. It was that white cloak that soiled me, not the other way around. So spare me your envy. It was the gods who neglected to give you a cock, not me.”

The look Brienne gave him then was full of loathing. *She would gladly hack me to pieces, but for her precious vow*, he reflected. *Good. I’ve had enough of feeble pieties and maidens’ judgments.* The wench stalked off without saying a word. Jaime curled up beneath his cloak, hoping to dream of Cersei.

But when he closed his eyes, it was Aerys Targaryen he saw, pacing alone in his throne room, picking at his scabbed and bleeding hands. The fool was always cutting himself on the blades and barbs of the Iron Throne. Jaime had slipped in through the king’s door, clad in his golden armor, sword in hand. *The golden armor, not the white, but no one ever remembers that. Would that I had taken off that damned cloak as well.*

When Aerys saw the blood on his blade, he demanded to know if it was Lord Tywin’s. “I want him dead, the traitor. I want his head, you’ll bring me his head, or you’ll burn with all the rest. All the traitors. Rossart says they are *inside the walls*! He’s gone to make them a warm welcome. Whose blood? *Whose?*”

“Rossart’s,” answered Jaime.

Those purple eyes grew huge then, and the royal mouth drooped open in shock. He lost control of his bowels, turned, and ran for the Iron Throne. Beneath the empty eyes of the skulls on the walls, Jaime hauled the last dragonking bodily off the steps, squealing like a pig and smelling like a privy. A single slash across his throat was all it took to end it. *So easy*, he remembered thinking. *A king should die harder than this.* Rossart at least had tried to make a fight of it, though if truth be told he fought like an alchemist. *Queer that they never ask who killed Rossart … but of course, he was no one, lowborn, Hand for a fortnight, just another mad fancy of the Mad King.*

Ser Elys Westerling and Lord Crakehall and others of his father’s knights burst into the hall in time to see the last of it, so there was no way for Jaime to vanish and let some braggart steal the

praise or blame. It would be blame, he knew at once when he saw the way they looked at him … though perhaps that was fear. Lannister or no, he was one of Aerys's seven.

"The castle is ours, ser, and the city," Roland Crakehall told him, which was half true. Targaryen loyalists were still dying on the serpentine steps and in the armory, Gregor Clegane and Amory Lorch were scaling the walls of Maegor's Holdfast, and Ned Stark was leading his northmen through the King's Gate even then, but Crakehall could not have known that. He had not seemed surprised to find Aerys slain; Jaime had been Lord Tywin's son long before he had been named to the Kingsguard.

"Tell them the Mad King is dead," he commanded. "Spare all those who yield and hold them captive."

"Shall I proclaim a new king as well?" Crakehall asked, and Jaime read the question plain: Shall it be your father, or Robert Baratheon, or do you mean to try to make a new dragonking? He thought for a moment of the boy Viserys, fled to Dragonstone, and of Rhaegar's infant son Aegon, still in Maegor's with his mother. *A new Targaryen king, and my father as Hand. How the wolves will howl, and the storm lord choke with rage.* For a moment he was tempted, until he glanced down again at the body on the floor, in its spreading pool of blood. *His blood is in both of them*, he thought. "Proclaim who you bloody well like," he told Crakehall. Then he climbed the Iron Throne and seated himself with his sword across his knees, to see who would come to claim the kingdom. As it happened, it had been Eddard Stark.

You had no right to judge me either, Stark.

In his dreams, the dead came burning, gowned in swirling green flames. Jaime danced around them with a golden sword, but for every one he struck down two more arose to take his place.

Brienne woke him with a boot in the ribs. The world was still black, and it had begun to rain. They broke their fast on oatcakes, salt fish, and some blackberries that Ser Cleos had found, and were back in the saddle before the sun came up.

TYRION

The eunuch was humming tunelessly to himself as he came through the door, dressed in flowing robes of peach-colored silk and smelling of lemons. When he saw Tyrion seated by the hearth, he stopped and grew very still. “My lord Tyrion,” came out in a squeak, punctuated by a nervous giggle.

“So you *do* remember me? I had begun to wonder.”

“It is so *very* good to see you looking so strong and well.” Varys smiled his slimiest smile. “Though I confess, I had not thought to find you in mine own humble chambers.”

“They are humble. Excessively so, in truth.” Tyrion had waited until Varys was summoned by his father before slipping in to pay him a visit. The eunuch’s apartments were sparse and small, three snug windowless chambers under the north wall. “I’d hoped to discover bushel baskets of juicy secrets to while away the waiting, but there’s not a paper to be found.” He’d searched for hidden passages too, knowing the Spider must have ways of coming and going unseen, but those had proved equally elusive. “There was *water* in your flagon, gods have mercy,” he went on, “your sleeping cell is no wider than a coffin, and that bed … is it actually made of stone, or does it only feel that way?”

Varys closed the door and barred it. “I am plagued with backaches, my lord, and prefer to sleep upon a hard surface.”

“I would have taken you for a featherbed man.”

“I am full of surprises. Are you cross with me for abandoning you after the battle?”

“It made me think of you as one of my family.”

“It was not for want of love, my good lord. I have such a delicate disposition, and your scar is so dreadful to look upon …” He gave an exaggerated shudder. “Your poor nose …”

Tyrion rubbed irritably at the scab. “Perhaps I should have a new one made of gold. What sort of nose would you suggest, Varys? One like yours, to smell out secrets? Or should I tell the goldsmith that I want my father’s nose?” He smiled. “My noble father labors so diligently that I scarce see him anymore. Tell me, is it true that he’s restoring Grand Maester Pycelle to the small council?”

“It is, my lord.”

“Do I have my sweet sister to thank for that?” Pycelle had been his sister’s creature; Tyrion had stripped the man of office, beard, and dignity, and flung him down into a black cell.

“Not at all, my lord. Thank the archmaesters of Oldtown, those who wished to insist on Pycelle’s restoration on the grounds that only the Conclave may make or unmake a Grand Maester.”

Bloody fools, thought Tyrion. “I seem to recall that Maegor the Cruel’s headsman unmade three with his axe.”

“Quite true,” Varys said. “And the second Aegon fed Grand Maester Gerardys to his dragon.”

“Alas, I am quite dragonless. I suppose I could have dipped Pycelle in wildfire and set him ablaze. Would the Citadel have preferred that?”

“Well, it would have been more in keeping with tradition.” The eunuch tittered. “Thankfully, wiser heads prevailed, and the Conclave accepted the fact of Pycelle’s dismissal and set about choosing his successor. After giving due consideration to Maester Turquin the cordwainer’s son and Maester Erreck the hedge knight’s bastard, and thereby demonstrating to their own satisfaction that ability counts for more than birth in their order, the Conclave was on the verge of sending us Maester Gormon, a Tyrell of Highgarden. When I told your lord father, he acted at once.”

The Conclave met in Oldtown behind closed doors, Tyrion knew; its deliberations were supposedly a secret. *So Varys has little birds in the Citadel too.* “I see. So my father decided to nip the rose before it bloomed.” He had to chuckle. “Pycelle is a toad. But better a Lannister toad than a Tyrell toad, no?”

“Grand Maester Pycelle has always been a good friend to your House,” Varys said sweetly. “Perhaps it will console you to learn that Ser Boros Blount is also being restored.”

Cersei had stripped Ser Boros of his white cloak for failing to die in the defense of Prince Tommen when Bronn had seized the boy on the Rosby road. The man was no friend of Tyrion's, but after that he likely hated Cersei almost as much. *I suppose that's something.* "Blount is a blustering coward," he said amiably.

"Is he? Oh dear. Still, the knights of the Kingsguard *do* serve for life, traditionally. Perhaps Ser Boros will prove braver in future. He will no doubt remain very loyal."

"To my father," said Tyrion pointedly.

"While we are on the subject of the Kingsguard … I wonder, could this delightfully unexpected visit of yours happen to concern Ser Boros's fallen brother, the gallant Ser Mandon Moore?" The eunuch stroked a powdered cheek. "Your man Bronn seems most interested in him of late."

Bronn had turned up all he could on Ser Mandon, but no doubt Varys knew a deal more … should he choose to share it. "The man seems to have been quite friendless," Tyrion said carefully.

"Sadly," said Varys, "oh, sadly. You might find some kin if you turned over enough stones back in the Vale, but here … Lord Arryn brought him to King's Landing and Robert gave him his white cloak, but neither loved him much, I fear. Nor was he the sort the smallfolk cheer in tourneys, despite his undoubted prowess. Why, even his brothers of the Kingsguard never warmed to him. Ser Barristan was once heard to say that the man had no friend but his sword and no life but duty … but you know, I do not think Selmy meant it altogether as praise. Which is queer when you consider it, is it not? Those are the very qualities we seek in our Kingsguard, it could be said—men who live not for themselves, but for their king. By those lights, our brave Ser Mandon was the perfect white knight. And he died as a knight of the Kingsguard ought, with sword in hand, defending one of the king's own blood." The eunuch gave him a slimy smile and watched him sharply.

Trying to murder one of the king's own blood, you mean. Tyrion wondered if Varys knew rather more than he was saying. Nothing he'd just heard was new to him; Bronn had brought back much the same reports. He needed a link to Cersei, some sign that Ser Mandon had been his sister's catspaw. *What we want is not always what we get*, he reflected bitterly, which reminded him …

"It is not Ser Mandon who brings me here."

"To be sure." The eunuch crossed the room to his flagon of water. "May I serve you, my lord?" he asked as he filled a cup.

"Yes. But not with water." He folded his hands together. "I want you to bring me Shae."

Varys took a drink. "Is that wise, my lord? The dear sweet child. It would be such a shame if your father hanged her."

It did not surprise him that Varys knew. "No, it's not wise, it's bloody madness. I want to see her one last time, before I send her away. I cannot abide having her so close."

"I understand."

How could you? Tyrion had seen her only yesterday, climbing the serpentine steps with a pail of water. He had watched as a young knight had offered to carry the heavy pail. The way she had touched his arm and smiled for him had tied Tyrion's guts into knots. They passed within inches of each other, him descending and her climbing, so close that he could smell the clean fresh scent of her hair. "M'lord," she'd said to him, with a little curtsy, and he wanted to reach out and grab her and kiss her right there, but all he could do was nod stiffly and waddle on past. "I have seen her several times," he told Varys, "but I dare not speak to her. I suspect that all my movements are being watched."

"You are wise to suspect so, my good lord."

"Who?" He cocked his head.

"The Kettleblacks report frequently to your sweet sister."

"When I think of how much coin I paid those wretched … do you think there's any chance that more gold might win them away from Cersei?"

"There is always a chance, but I should not care to wager on the likelihood. They are knights now, all three, and your sister has promised them further advancement." A wicked little titter burst

from the eunuch's lips. "And the eldest, Ser Osmund of the Kingsguard, dreams of certain other … *favors* … as well. You can match the queen coin for coin, I have no doubt, but she has a second purse that is quite inexhaustible."

Seven hells, thought Tyrion. "Are you suggesting that Cersei's fucking Osmund Kettleblack?"

"Oh, dear me, no, that would be dreadfully dangerous, don't you think? No, the queen only *hints* … perhaps on the morrow, or when the wedding's done … and then a smile, a whisper, a ribald jest … a breast brushing lightly against his sleeve as they pass … and yet it seems to serve. But what would a eunuch know of such things?" The tip of his tongue ran across his lower lip like a shy pink animal.

If I could somehow push them beyond sly fondling, arrange for Father to catch them abed together … Tyrion fingered the scab on his nose. He did not see how it could be done, but perhaps some plan would come to him later. "Are the Kettleblacks the only ones?"

"Would that were true, my lord. I fear there are many eyes upon you. You are … how shall we say? *Conspicuous?* And not well loved, it grieves me to tell you. Janos Slynt's sons would gladly inform on you to avenge their father, and our sweet Lord Petyr has friends in half the brothels of King's Landing. Should you be so unwise as to visit any of them, he will know at once, and your lord father soon thereafter."

It's even worse than I feared. "And my father? Who does he have spying on me?"

This time the eunuch laughed aloud. "Why, me, my lord."

Tyrion laughed as well. He was not so great a fool as to trust Varys any further than he had to —but the eunuch already knew enough about Shae to get her well and thoroughly hanged. "You will bring Shae to me through the walls, hidden from all these eyes. As you have done before."

Varys wrung his hands. "Oh, my lord, nothing would please me more, but … King Maegor wanted no rats in his own walls, if you take my meaning. He did require a means of secret egress, should he ever be trapped by his enemies, but that door does not connect with any other passages. I can steal your Shae away from Lady Lollys for a time, to be sure, but I have no way to bring her to your bedchamber without us being seen."

"Then bring her somewhere else."

"But where? There is no safe place."

"There is." Tyrion grinned. "Here. It's time to put that rock-hard bed of yours to better use, I think."

The eunuch's mouth opened. Then he giggled. "Lollys tires easily these days. She is great with child. I imagine she will be safely asleep by moonrise."

Tyrion hopped down from the chair. "Moonrise, then. See that you lay in some wine. And two clean cups."

Varys bowed. "It shall be as my lord commands."

The rest of the day seemed to creep by as slow as a worm in molasses. Tyrion climbed to the castle library and tried to distract himself with Beldecar's *History of the Rhoynish Wars*, but he could hardly see the elephants for imagining Shae's smile. Come the afternoon, he put the book aside and called for a bath. He scrubbed himself until the water grew cool, and then had Pod even out his whiskers. His beard was a trial to him; a tangle of yellow, white, and black hairs, patchy and coarse, it was seldom less than unsightly, but it did serve to conceal some of his face, and that was all to the good.

When he was as clean and pink and trimmed as he was like to get, Tyrion looked over his wardrobe, and chose a pair of tight satin breeches in Lannister crimson and his best doublet, the heavy black velvet with the lion's head studs. He would have donned his chain of golden hands as well, if his father hadn't stolen it while he lay dying. It was not until he was dressed that he realized the depths of his folly. *Seven hells, dwarf, did you lose all your sense along with your nose? Anyone who sees you is going to wonder why you've put on your court clothes to visit the eunuch.* Cursing, Tyrion stripped and dressed again, in simpler garb; black woolen breeches, an old white tunic, and a

faded brown leather jerkin. *It doesn't matter*, he told himself as he waited for moonrise. *Whatever you wear, you're still a dwarf. You'll never be as tall as that knight on the steps, him with his long straight legs and hard stomach and wide manly shoulders.*

The moon was peeping over the castle wall when he told Podrick Payne that he was going to pay a call on Varys. "Will you be long, my lord?" the boy asked.

"Oh, I hope so."

With the Red Keep so crowded, Tyrion could not hope to go unnoticed. Ser Balon Swann stood guard on the door, and Ser Loras Tyrell on the drawbridge. He stopped to exchange pleasantries with both of them. It was strange to see the Knight of Flowers all in white when before he had always been as colorful as a rainbow. "How old are you, Ser Loras?" Tyrion asked him.

"Seventeen, my lord."

Seventeen, and beautiful, and already a legend. Half the girls in the Seven Kingdoms want to bed him, and all the boys want to be him. "If you will pardon my asking, ser—why would anyone choose to join the Kingsguard at seventeen?"

"Prince Aemon the Dragonknight took his vows at seventeen," Ser Loras said, "and your brother Jaime was younger still."

"I know their reasons. What are yours? The honor of serving beside such paragons as Meryn Trant and Boros Blount?" He gave the boy a mocking grin. "To guard the king's life, you surrender your own. You give up your lands and titles, give up hope of marriage, children …"

"House Tyrell continues through my brothers," Ser Loras said. "It is not necessary for a third son to wed, or breed."

"Not necessary, but some find it pleasant. What of love?"

"When the sun has set, no candle can replace it."

"Is that from a song?" Tyrion cocked his head, smiling. "Yes, you are seventeen, I see that now."

Ser Loras tensed. "Do you mock me?"

A prickly lad. "No. If I've given offense, forgive me. I had my own love once, and we had a song as well." *I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair.* He bid Ser Loras a good evening and went on his way.

Near the kennels a group of men-at-arms were fighting a pair of dogs. Tyrion stopped long enough to see the smaller dog tear half the face off the larger one, and earned a few coarse laughs by observing that the loser now resembled Sandor Clegane. Then, hoping he had disarmed their suspicions, he proceeded to the north wall and down the short flight of steps to the eunuch's meager abode. The door opened as he was lifting his hand to knock.

"Varys?" Tyrion slipped inside. "Are you there?" A single candle lit the gloom, spicing the air with the scent of jasmine.

"My lord." A woman sidled into the light; plump, soft, matronly, with a round pink moon of a face and heavy dark curls. Tyrion recoiled. "Is something amiss?" she asked.

Varys, he realized with annoyance. "For one horrid moment, I thought you'd brought me Lollys instead of Shae. Where is she?"

"Here, m'lord." She put her hands over his eyes from behind. "Can you guess what I'm wearing?"

"Nothing?"

"Oh, you're so *smart*," she pouted, snatching her hands away. "How did you know?"

"You're very beautiful in nothing."

"Am I?" she said. "Am I truly?"

"Oh yes."

"Then shouldn't you be fucking me instead of talking?"

"We need to rid ourselves of Lady Varys first. I am not the sort of dwarf who likes an audience."

"He's gone," Shae said.

Tyrion turned to look. It was true. The eunuch had vanished, skirts and all. *The hidden doors are here somewhere, they have to be.* That was as much as he had time to think, before Shae turned his head to kiss him. Her mouth was wet and hungry, and she did not even seem to see his scar, or the raw scab where his nose had been. Her skin was warm silk beneath his fingers. When his thumb brushed against her left nipple, it hardened at once. "Hurry," she urged, between kisses, as his fingers went to his laces, "oh, hurry, hurry, I want you in me, in me, in me." He did not even have time to undress properly. Shae pulled his cock out of his breeches, then pushed him down onto the floor and climbed atop him. She screamed as he pushed past her lips, and rode him wildly, moaning, "My giant, my giant, my giant," every time she slammed down on him. Tyrion was so eager that he exploded on the fifth stroke, but Shae did not seem to mind. She smiled wickedly when she felt him spurting, and leaned forward to kiss the sweat from his brow. "My giant of Lannister," she murmured. "Stay inside me, please. I like to feel you there."

So Tyrion did not move, except to put his arms around her. *It feels so good to hold her, and to be held*, he thought. *How can something this sweet be a crime worth hanging her for?* "Shae," he said, "sweetling, this must be our last time together. The danger is too great. If my lord father should find you …"

"I like your scar." She traced it with her finger. "It makes you look very fierce and strong."

He laughed. "Very ugly, you mean."

"M'lord will never be ugly in my eyes." She kissed the scab that covered the ragged stub of his nose.

"It's not my face that need concern you, it's my father—"

"He does not frighten me. Will m'lord give me back my jewels and silks now? I asked Varys if I could have them when you were hurt in the battle, but he wouldn't give them to me. What would have become of them if you'd died?"

"I didn't die. Here I am."

"I know." Shae wriggled atop him, smiling. "Just where you belong." Her mouth turned pouty. "But how long must I go on with Lollys, now that you're well?"

"Have you been listening?" Tyrion said. "You can stay with Lollys if you like, but it would be best if you left the city."

"I don't want to leave. You promised you'd move me into a manse again after the battle." Her cunt gave him a little squeeze, and he started to stiffen again inside her. "A Lannister always pays his debts, you said."

"Shae, gods be damned, stop that. *Listen* to me. You have to go away. The city's full of Tyrells just now, and I am closely watched. You don't understand the dangers."

"Can I come to the king's wedding feast? Lollys won't go. I told her no one's like to rape her in the king's own throne room, but she's so *stupid*." When Shae rolled off, his cock slid out of her with a soft wet sound. "Symon says there's to be a singers' tourney, and tumblers, even a fools' joust."

Tyrion had almost forgotten about Shae's thrice-damned singer. "How is it you spoke to Symon?"

"I told Lady Tanda about him, and she hired him to play for Lollys. The music calms her when the baby starts to kick. Symon says there's to be a dancing bear at the feast, and wines from the Arbor. I've never seen a bear dance."

"They do it worse than I do." It was the singer who concerned him, not the bear. One careless word in the wrong ear, and Shae would hang.

"Symon says there's to be seventy-seven courses and a hundred doves baked into a great pie," Shae gushed. "When the crust's opened, they'll all burst out and fly."

"After which they will roost in the rafters and rain down birdshit on the guests." Tyrion had suffered such wedding pies before. The doves liked to shit on *him* especially, or so he had always suspected.

"Couldn't I dress in my silks and velvets and go as a lady instead of a maidservant? No one would know I wasn't."

Everyone would know you weren't, thought Tyrion. "Lady Tanda might wonder where Lollys's bedmaid found so many jewels."

"There's to be a thousand guests, Symon says. She'd never even see me. I'd find a place in some dark corner below the salt, but whenever you got up to go to the privy I could slip out and meet you." She cupped his cock and stroked it gently. "I won't wear any smallclothes under my gown, so m'lord won't even need to unlace me." Her fingers teased him, up and down. "Or if he liked, I could do this for him." She took him in her mouth.

Tyrion was soon ready again. This time he lasted much longer. When he finished Shae crawled back up him and curled up naked under his arm. "You'll let me come, won't you?"

"Shae," he groaned, "it *is not safe.*"

For a time she said nothing at all. Tyrion tried to speak of other things, but he met a wall of sullen courtesy as icy and unyielding as the Wall he'd once walked in the north. *Gods be good*, he thought wearily as he watched the candle burn down and begin to gutter, *how could I let this happen again, after Tysha? Am I as great a fool as my father thinks?* Gladly would he have given her the promise she wanted, and gladly walked her back to his own bedchamber on his arm to let her dress in the silks and velvets she loved so much. Had the choice been his, she could have sat beside him at Joffrey's wedding feast, and danced with all the bears she liked. But he could not see her hang.

When the candle burned out, Tyrion disentangled himself and lit another. Then he made a round of the walls, tapping on each in turn, searching for the hidden door. Shae sat with her legs drawn up and her arms wrapped around them, watching him. Finally, she said, "They're under the bed. The secret steps."

He looked at her, incredulous. "The bed? The bed is solid stone. It weighs half a ton."

"There's a place where Varys pushes, and it floats right up. I asked him how, and he said it was magic."

"Yes." Tyrion had to grin. "A counterweight spell."

Shae stood. "I should go back. Sometimes the baby kicks and Lollys wakes and calls for me."

"Varys should return shortly. He's probably listening to every word we say." Tyrion set the candle down. There was a wet spot on the front of his breeches, but in the darkness it ought to go unnoticed. He told Shae to dress and wait for the eunuch.

"I will," she promised. "You are my lion, aren't you? My giant of Lannister?"

"I am," he said. "And you're—"

"—your whore." She laid a finger to his lips. "I know. I'd be your lady, but I never can. Else you'd take me to the feast. It doesn't matter. I like being a whore for you, Tyrion. Just keep me, my lion, and keep me safe."

"I shall," he promised. *Fool, fool,* the voice inside him screamed. *Why did you say that? You came here to send her away!* Instead he kissed her once more.

The walk back seemed long and lonely. Podrick Payne was asleep in his trundle bed at the foot of Tyrion's, but he woke the boy. "Bronn," he said.

"Ser Bronn?" Pod rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Oh. Should I get him? My lord?"

"Why no, I woke you up so we could have a little chat about the way he dresses," said Tyrion, but his sarcasm was wasted. Pod only gaped at him in confusion until he threw up his hands and said, "Yes, get him. Bring him. Now."

The lad dressed hurriedly and all but ran from the room. *Am I really so terrifying?* Tyrion wondered, as he changed into a bedrobe and poured himself some wine.

He was on his third cup and half the night was gone before Pod finally returned, with the sellsword knight in tow. "I hope the boy had a damn good reason dragging me out of Chataya's," Bronn said as he seated himself.

"*Chataya's?*" Tyrion said, annoyed.

"It's good to be a knight. No more looking for the cheaper brothels down the street." Bronn grinned. "Now it's Alayaya and Marei in the same featherbed, with Ser Bronn in the middle."

Tyrion had to bite back his annoyance. Bronn had as much right to bed Alayaya as any other man, but still … *I never touched her, much as I wanted to, but Bronn could not know that. He should have kept his cock out of her*. He dare not visit Chataya's himself. If he did, Cersei would see that his father heard of it, and 'Yaya would suffer more than a whipping. He'd sent the girl a necklace of silver and jade and a pair of matching bracelets by way of apology, but other than that …

This is fruitless. "There is a singer who calls himself Symon Silver Tongue," Tyrion said wearily, pushing his guilt aside. "He plays for Lady Tanda's daughter sometimes."

"What of him?"

Kill him, he might have said, but the man had done nothing but sing a few songs. *And fill Shae's sweet head with visions of doves and dancing bears.* "Find him," he said instead. "Find him before someone else does."

ARYA

She was grubbing for vegetables in a dead man's garden when she heard the singing. Arya stiffened, still as stone, listening, the three stringy carrots in her hand suddenly forgotten. She thought of the Bloody Mummers and Roose Bolton's men, and a shiver of fear went down her back. *It's not fair, not when we finally found the Trident, not when we thought we were almost safe.*

Only why would the Mummers be singing?

The song came drifting up the river from somewhere beyond the little rise to the east. "*Off to Gulltown to see the fair maid, heigh-ho, heigh-ho …*"

Arya rose, carrots dangling from her hand. It sounded like the singer was coming up the river road. Over among the cabbages, Hot Pie had heard it too, to judge by the look on his face. Gendry had gone to sleep in the shade of the burned cottage, and was past hearing anything.

"*I'll steal a sweet kiss with the point of my blade, heigh-ho, heigh-ho*." She thought she heard a woodharp too, beneath the soft rush of the river.

"Do you hear?" Hot Pie asked in a hoarse whisper, as he hugged an armful of cabbages. "Someone's coming."

"Go wake Gendry," Arya told him. "Just shake him by the shoulder, don't make a lot of noise." Gendry was easy to wake, unlike Hot Pie, who needed to be kicked and shouted at.

"*I'll make her my love and we'll rest in the shade, heigh-ho, heigh-ho.*" The song swelled louder with every word.

Hot Pie opened his arms. The cabbages fell to the ground with soft thumps. "We have to *hide*."

Where? The burned cottage and its overgrown garden stood hard beside the banks of the Trident. There were a few willows growing along the river's edge and reed beds in the muddy shallows beyond, but most of the ground hereabouts was painfully open. *I knew we should never have left the woods*, she thought. They'd been so hungry, though, and the garden had been too much a temptation. The bread and cheese they had stolen from Harrenhal had given out six days ago, back in the thick of the woods. "Take Gendry and the horses behind the cottage," she decided. There was part of one wall still standing, big enough, maybe, to conceal two boys and three horses. *If the horses don't whinny, and that singer doesn't come poking around the garden*.

"What about you?"

"I'll hide by the tree. He's probably alone. If he bothers me, I'll kill him. *Go!*"

Hot Pie went, and Arya dropped her carrots and drew the stolen sword from over her shoulder. She had strapped the sheath across her back; the longsword was made for a man grown, and it bumped against the ground when she wore it on her hip. *It's too heavy besides,* she thought, missing Needle the way she did every time she took this clumsy thing in her hand. But it was a sword and she could kill with it, that was enough.

Lightfoot, she moved to the big old willow that grew beside the bend in the road and went to one knee in the grass and mud, within the veil of trailing branches. *You old gods,* she prayed as the singer's voice grew louder, *you tree gods, hide me, and make him go past*. Then a horse whickered, and the song broke off suddenly. *He's heard,* she knew, *but maybe he's alone, or if he's not, maybe they'll be as scared of us as we are of them.*

"Did you hear that?" a man's voice said. "There's something behind that wall, I would say."

"Aye," replied a second voice, deeper. "What do you think it might be, Archer?"

Two, then. Arya bit her lip. She could not see them from where she knelt, on account of the willow. But she could hear.

"A bear." A third voice, or the first one again?

"A lot of meat on a bear," the deep voice said. "A lot of fat as well, in fall. Good to eat, if it's cooked up right."

"Could be a wolf. Maybe a lion."

"With four feet, you think? Or two?"

"Makes no matter. Does it?"

"Not so I know. Archer, what do you mean to do with all them arrows?"

"Drop a few shafts over the wall. Whatever's hiding back there will come out quick enough, watch and see."

"What if it's some honest man back there, though? Or some poor woman with a little babe at her breast?"

"An honest man would come out and show us his face. Only an outlaw would skulk and hide."

"Aye, that's so. Go on and loose your shafts, then."

Arya sprang to her feet. "*Don't!*" She showed them her sword. There were three, she saw. *Only three*. Syrio could fight more than three, and she had Hot Pie and Gendry to stand with her, maybe. *But they're boys, and these are men*.

They were men afoot, travel-stained and mud-specked. She knew the singer by the woodharp he cradled against his jerkin, as a mother might cradle a babe. A small man, fifty from the look of him, he had a big mouth, a sharp nose, and thinning brown hair. His faded greens were mended here and there with old leather patches, and he wore a brace of throwing knives on his hip and a woodman's axe slung across his back.

The man beside him stood a good foot taller, and had the look of a soldier. A longsword and dirk hung from his studded leather belt, rows of overlapping steel rings were sewn onto his shirt, and his head was covered by a black iron halfhelm shaped like a cone. He had bad teeth and a bushy brown beard, but it was his hooded yellow cloak that drew the eye. Thick and heavy, stained here with grass and there with blood, frayed along the bottom and patched with deerskin on the right shoulder, the greatcloak gave the big man the look of some huge yellow bird.

The last of the three was a youth as skinny as his longbow, if not quite as tall. Red-haired and freckled, he wore a studded brigantine, high boots, fingerless leather gloves, and a quiver on his back. His arrows were fletched with grey goose feathers, and six of them stood in the ground before him, like a little fence.

The three men looked at her, standing there in the road with her blade in hand. Then the singer idly plucked a string. "Boy," he said, "put up that sword now, unless you're wanting to be hurt. It's too big for you, lad, and besides, Anguy here could put three shafts through you before you could hope to reach us."

"He could not," Arya said, "and I'm a *girl*."

"So you are." The singer bowed. "My pardons."

"You go on down the road. Just walk right past here, and you keep on singing, so we'll know where you are. Go away and leave us be and I won't kill you."

The freckle-faced archer laughed. "Lem, she won't kill us, did you hear?"

"I heard," said Lem, the big soldier with the deep voice.

"Child," said the singer, "put up that sword, and we'll take you to a safe place and get some food in that belly. There are wolves in these parts, and lions, and worse things. No place for a little girl to be wandering alone."

"She's not alone." Gendry rode out from behind the cottage wall, and behind him Hot Pie, leading her horse. In his chainmail shirt with a sword in his hand, Gendry looked almost a man grown, and dangerous. Hot Pie looked like Hot Pie. "Do like she says, and leave us be," warned Gendry.

"Two and three," the singer counted, "and is that all of you? And horses too, lovely horses. Where did you steal them?"

"They're ours." Arya watched them carefully. The singer kept distracting her with his talk, but it was the archer who was the danger. *If he should pull an arrow from the ground …*

"Will you give us your names like honest men?" the singer asked the boys.

"I'm Hot Pie," Hot Pie said at once.

"Aye, and good for you." The man smiled. "It's not every day I meet a lad with such a tasty name. And what would your friends be called, Mutton Chop and Squab?"

Gendry scowled down from his saddle. "Why should I tell you my name? I haven't heard yours."

"Well, as to that, I'm Tom of Sevenstreams, but Tom Sevenstrings is what they call me, or Tom o' Sevens. This great lout with the brown teeth is Lem, short for Lemoncloak. It's yellow, you see, and Lem's a sour sort. And young fellow me lad over there is Anguy, or Archer as we like to call him."

"Now who are you?" demanded Lem, in the deep voice that Arya had heard through the branches of the willow.

She was not about to give up her true name as easy as that. "Squab, if you want," she said. "I don't care."

The big man laughed. "A squab with a sword," he said. "Now there's something you don't often see."

"I'm the Bull," said Gendry, taking his lead from Arya. She could not blame him for preferring Bull to Mutton Chop.

Tom Sevenstrings strummed his harp. "Hot Pie, Squab, and the Bull. Escaped from Lord Bolton's kitchen, did you?"

"How did you know?" Arya demanded, uneasy.

"You bear his sigil on your chest, little one."

She had forgotten that for an instant. Beneath her cloak, she still wore her fine page's doublet, with the flayed man of the Dreadfort sewn on her breast. "Don't call me little one!"

"Why not?" said Lem. "You're little enough."

"I'm bigger than I was. I'm not a *child*." Children didn't kill people, and she had.

"I can see that, Squab. You're none of you children, not if you were Bolton's."

"We never were." Hot Pie never knew when to keep quiet. "We were at Harrenhal before he came, that's all."

"So you're lion cubs, is that the way of it?" said Tom.

"Not that either. We're nobody's men. Whose men are you?"

Anguy the Archer said, "We're king's men."

Arya frowned. "Which king?"

"King Robert," said Lem, in his yellow cloak.

"That old drunk?" said Gendry scornfully. "He's dead, some boar killed him, everyone knows that."

"Aye, lad," said Tom Sevenstrings, "and more's the pity." He plucked a sad chord from his harp.

Arya didn't think they were king's men at all. They looked more like outlaws, all tattered and ragged. They didn't even have horses to ride. King's men would have had horses.

But Hot Pie piped up eagerly. "We're looking for Riverrun," he said. "How many days' ride is it, do you know?"

Arya could have killed him. "You be quiet, or I'll stuff rocks in your big stupid mouth."

"Riverrun is a long way upstream," said Tom. "A long hungry way. Might be you'd like a hot meal before you set out? There's an inn not far ahead kept by some friends of ours. We could share some ale and a bite of bread, instead of fighting one another."

"An inn?" The thought of hot food made Arya's belly rumble, but she didn't trust this Tom. Not everyone who spoke you friendly was really your friend. "It's near, you say?"

"Two miles upstream," said Tom. "A league at most."

Gendry looked as uncertain as she felt. "What do you mean, *friends*?" he asked warily.

"Friends. Have you forgotten what friends are?"

"Sharna is the innkeep's name," Tom put in. "She has a sharp tongue and a fierce eye, I'll grant you that, but her heart's a good one, and she's fond of little girls."

"I'm not a little girl," she said angrily. "Who else is there? You said *friends*."

"Sharna's husband, and an orphan boy they took in. They won't harm you. There's ale, if you think you're old enough. Fresh bread and maybe a bit of meat." Tom glanced toward the cottage. "And whatever you stole from Old Pate's garden besides."

"We never stole," said Arya.

"Are you Old Pate's daughter, then? A sister? A wife? Tell me no lies, Squab. I buried Old Pate myself, right there under that willow where you were hiding, and you don't have his look." He drew a sad sound from his harp. "We've buried many a good man this past year, but we've no wish to bury you, I swear it on my harp. Archer, show her."

The archer's hand moved quicker than Arya would have believed. His shaft went hissing past her head within an inch of her ear and buried itself in the trunk of the willow behind her. By then the bowman had a second arrow notched and drawn. She'd thought she understood what Syrio meant by *quick as a snake* and *smooth as summer silk*, but now she knew she hadn't. The arrow thrummed behind her like a bee. "You missed," she said.

"More fool you if you think so," said Anguy. "They go where I send them."

"That they do," agreed Lem Lemoncloak.

There were a dozen steps between the archer and the point of her sword. *We have no chance*, Arya realized, wishing she had a bow like his, and the skill to use it. Glumly, she lowered her heavy longsword till the point touched the ground. "We'll come see this inn," she conceded, trying to hide the doubt in her heart behind bold words. "You walk in front and we'll ride behind, so we can see what you're doing."

Tom Sevenstrings bowed deeply and said, "Before, behind, it makes no matter. Come along, lads, let's show them the way. Anguy, best pull up those arrows, we won't be needing them here."

Arya sheathed her sword and crossed the road to where her friends sat on their horses, keeping her distance from the three strangers. "Hot Pie, get those cabbages," she said as she vaulted into her saddle. "And the carrots too."

For once, he did not argue. They set off as she had wanted, walking their horses slowly down the rutted road a dozen paces behind the three on foot. But before very long, somehow they were riding right on top of them. Tom Sevenstrings walked slowly, and liked to strum his woodharp as he went. "Do you know any songs?" he asked them. "I'd dearly love someone to sing with, that I would. Lem can't carry a tune, and our longbow lad only knows marcher ballads, every one of them a hundred verses long."

"We sing real songs in the marches," Anguy said mildly.

"Singing is *stupid*," said Arya. "Singing makes noise. We heard you a long way off. We could have killed you."

Tom's smile said he did not think so. "There are worse things than dying with a song on your lips."

"If there were wolves hereabouts, we'd know it," groused Lem. "Or lions. These are our woods."

"You never knew we were there," said Gendry.

"Now, lad, you shouldn't be so certain of that," said Tom. "Sometimes a man knows more than he says."

Hot Pie shifted his seat. "I know the song about the bear," he said. "Some of it, anyhow."

Tom ran his fingers down his strings. "Then let's hear it, pie boy." He threw back his head and sang, "*A bear there was, a bear, a bear! All black and brown, and covered with hair …*"

Hot Pie joined in lustily, even bouncing in his saddle a little on the rhymes. Arya stared at him in astonishment. He had a good voice and he sang well. *He never did anything well, except bake*, she thought to herself.

A small brook flowed into the Trident a little farther on. As they waded across, their singing flushed a duck from among the reeds. Anguy stopped where he stood, unslung his bow, notched an

arrow, and brought it down. The bird fell in the shallows not far from the bank. Lem took off his yellow cloak and waded in knee-deep to retrieve it, complaining all the while. “Do you think Sharna might have lemons down in that cellar of hers?” said Anguy to Tom as they watched Lem splash around, cursing. “A Dornish girl once cooked me duck with lemons.” He sounded wistful.

Tom and Hot Pie resumed their song on the other side of the brook, with the duck hanging from Lem’s belt beneath his yellow cloak. Somehow the singing made the miles seem shorter. It was not very long at all until the inn appeared before them, rising from the riverbank where the Trident made a great bend to the north. Arya squinted at it suspiciously as they neared. It did not *look* like an outlaws’ lair, she had to admit; it looked friendly, even homey, with its whitewashed upper story and slate roof and the smoke curling up lazy from its chimney. Stables and other outbuildings surrounded it, and there was an arbor in back, and apple trees, a small garden. The inn even had its own dock, thrusting out into the river, and …

“Gendry,” she called, her voice low and urgent. “They have a boat. We could sail the rest of the way up to Riverrun. It would be faster than riding, I think.”

He looked dubious. “Did you ever sail a boat?”

“You put up the sail,” she said, “and the wind pushes it.”

“What if the wind is blowing the wrong way?”

“Then there’s oars to row.”

“Against the current?” Gendry frowned. “Wouldn’t that be slow? And what if the boat tips over and we fall into the water? It’s not our boat anyway, it’s the inn’s.”

We could take it. Arya chewed her lip and said nothing. They dismounted in front of stables. There were no other horses to be seen, but Arya noticed fresh manure in many of the stalls. “One of us should watch the horses,” she said, wary.

Tom overheard her. “There’s no need for that, Squab. Come eat, they’ll be safe enough.”

“I’ll stay,” Gendry said, ignoring the singer. “You can come get me after you’ve had some food.”

Nodding, Arya set off after Hot Pie and Lem. Her sword was still in its sheath across her back, and she kept a hand close to the hilt of the dagger she had stolen from Roose Bolton, in case she didn’t like whatever they found within.

The painted sign above the door showed a picture of some old king on his knees. Inside was the common room, where a very tall ugly woman with a knobby chin stood with her hands on her hips, glaring. “Don’t just stand there, boy,” she snapped. “Or are you a girl? Either one, you’re blocking my door. Get in or get out. Lem, what did I tell you about my floor? You’re all mud.”

“We shot a duck.” Lem held it out like a peace banner.

The woman snatched it from his hand. “Anguy shot a duck, is what you’re meaning. Get your boots off, are you deaf or just stupid?” She turned away. “*Husband!*” she called loudly. “Get up here, the lads are back. *Husband!*”

Up the cellar steps came a man in a stained apron, grumbling. He was a head shorter than the woman, with a lumpy face and loose yellowish skin that still showed the marks of some pox. “I’m here, woman, quit your bellowing. What is it now?”

“Hang this,” she said, handing him the duck.

Anguy shuffled his feet. “We were thinking we might eat it, Sharna. With lemons. If you had some.”

“Lemons. And where would we get lemons? Does this look like Dorne to you, you freckled fool? Why don’t you hop out back to the lemon trees and pick us a bushel, and some nice olives and pomegranates too.” She shook a finger at him. “Now, I suppose I could cook it with Lem’s cloak, if you like, but not till it’s hung for a few days. You’ll eat rabbit, or you won’t eat. Roast rabbit on a spit would be quickest, if you’ve got a hunger. Or might be you’d like it stewed, with ale and onions.”

Arya could almost taste the rabbit. “We have no coin, but we brought some carrots and cabbages we could trade you.”

"Did you now? And where would they be?"

"Hot Pie, give her the cabbages," Arya said, and he did, though he approached the old woman as gingerly as if she were Rorge or Biter or Vargo Hoat.

The woman gave the vegetables a close inspection, and the boy a closer one. "Where is this *hot pie*?"

"Here. Me. It's my name. And she's … ah … Squab."

"Not under my roof. I give my diners and my dishes different names, so as to tell them apart. *Husband!*"

Husband had stepped outside, but at her shout he hurried back. "The duck's hung. What is it now, woman?"

"Wash these vegetables," she commanded. "The rest of you, sit down while I start the rabbits. The boy will bring you drink." She looked down her long nose at Arya and Hot Pie. "I am not in the habit of serving ale to children, but the cider's run out, there's no cows for milk, and the river water tastes of war, with all the dead men drifting downstream. If I served you a cup of soup full of dead flies, would you drink it?"

"Arry would," said Hot Pie. "I mean, Squab."

"So would Lem," offered Anguy with a sly smile.

"Never you mind about Lem," Sharna said. "It's ale for all." She swept off toward the kitchen.

Anguy and Tom Sevenstrings took the table near the hearth while Lem was hanging his big yellow cloak on a peg. Hot Pie plopped down heavily on a bench at the table by the door, and Arya wedged herself in beside him.

Tom unslung his harp. "*A lonely inn on a forest road*," he sang, slowly picking out a tune to go with the words. "*The innkeep's wife was plain as a toad.*"

"Shut up with that now or we won't be getting no rabbit," Lem warned him. "You know how she is."

Arya leaned close to Hot Pie. "Can you sail a boat?" she asked. Before he could answer, a thickset boy of fifteen or sixteen appeared with tankards of ale. Hot Pie took his reverently in both hands, and when he sipped he smiled wider than Arya had ever seen him smile. "Ale," he whispered, "and *rabbit*."

"Well, here's to His Grace," Anguy the Archer called out cheerfully, lifting a toast. "Seven save the king!"

"All twelve o' them," Lem Lemoncloak muttered. He drank, and wiped the foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.

Husband came bustling in through the front door, with an apron full of washed vegetables. "There's strange horses in the stable," he announced, as if they hadn't known.

"Aye," said Tom, setting the woodharp aside, "and better horses than the three you gave away."

Husband dropped the vegetables on a table, annoyed. "I never gave them away. I *sold* them for a good price, and got us a skiff as well. Anyways, you lot were supposed to get them back."

I knew they were outlaws, Arya thought, listening. Her hand went under the table to touch the hilt of her dagger, and make sure it was still there. *If they try to rob us, they'll be sorry.*

"They never came our way," said Lem.

"Well, I sent them. You must have been drunk, or asleep."

"Us? Drunk?" Tom drank a long draught of ale. "Never."

"You could have taken them yourself," Lem told Husband.

"What, with only the boy here? I told you twice, the old woman was up to Lambswold helping that Fern birth her babe. And like as not it was one o' you planted the bastard in the poor girl's belly." He gave Tom a sour look. "You, I'd wager, with that harp o' yours, singing all them sad songs just to get poor Fern out of her smallclothes."

"If a song makes a maid want to slip off her clothes and feel the good warm sun kiss her skin, why, is that the singer's fault?" asked Tom. "And 'twas Anguy she fancied, besides. 'Can I touch your bow?' I heard her ask him. 'Ooohh, it feels so smooth and hard. Could I give it a little pull, do you think?'"

Husband snorted. "You and Anguy, makes no matter which. You're as much to blame as me for them horses. They was three, you know. What can one man do against three?"

"Three," said Lem scornfully, "but one a woman and t'other in chains, you said so yourself."

Husband made a face. "A *big* woman, dressed like a man. And the one in chains … I didn't fancy the look of his eyes."

Anguy smiled over his ale. "When I don't fancy a man's eyes, I put an arrow through one."

Arya remembered the shaft that had brushed by her ear. She wished she knew how to shoot arrows.

Husband was not impressed. "You be quiet when your elders are talking. Drink your ale and mind your tongue, or I'll have the old woman take a spoon to you."

"My elders talk too much, and I don't need you to tell me to drink my ale." He took a big swallow, to show that it was so.

Arya did the same. After days of drinking from brooks and puddles, and then the muddy Trident, the ale tasted as good as the little sips of wine her father used to allow her. A smell was drifting out from the kitchen that made her mouth water, but her thoughts were still full of that boat. *Sailing it will be harder than stealing it. If we wait until they're all asleep …*

The serving boy reappeared with big round loaves of bread. Arya broke off a chunk hungrily and tore into it. It was hard to chew, though, sort of thick and lumpy, and burned on the bottom.

Hot Pie made a face as soon as he tasted it. "That's bad bread," he said. "It's burned, and tough besides."

"It's better when there's stew to sop up," said Lem.

"No, it isn't," said Anguy, "but you're less like to break your teeth."

"You can eat it or go hungry," said Husband. "Do I look like some bloody baker? I'd like to see you make better."

"I could," said Hot Pie. "It's easy. You kneaded the dough too much, that's why it's so hard to chew." He took another sip of ale, and began talking lovingly of breads and pies and tarts, all the things he loved. Arya rolled her eyes.

Tom sat down across from her. "Squab," he said, "or Arry, or whatever your true name might be, this is for you." He placed a dirty scrap of parchment on the wooden tabletop between them.

She looked at it suspiciously. "What is it?"

"Three golden dragons. We need to buy those horses."

Arya looked at him warily. "They're *our* horses."

"Meaning you stole them yourselves, is that it? No shame in that, girl. War makes thieves of many honest folk." Tom tapped the folded parchment with his finger. "I'm paying you a handsome price. More than any horse is worth, if truth be told."

Hot Pie grabbed the parchment and unfolded it. "There's no gold," he complained loudly. "It's only writing."

"Aye," said Tom, "and I'm sorry for that. But after the war, we mean to make that good, you have my word as a king's man."

Arya pushed back from the table and got to her feet. "You're no king's men, you're robbers."

"If you'd ever met a true robber, you'd know they do not pay, not even in paper. It's not for us we take your horses, child, it's for the good of the realm, so we can get about more quickly and fight the fights that need fighting. The king's fights. Would you deny the king?"

They were all watching her; the Archer, big Lem, Husband with his sallow face and shifty eyes. Even Sharna, who stood in the door to the kitchen squinting. *They are going to take our horses no*

matter what I say, she realized. *We'll need to walk to Riverrun, unless …* "We don't want paper." Arya slapped the parchment out of Hot Pie's hand. "You can have our horses for that boat outside. But only if you show us how to work it."

Tom Sevenstrings stared at her a moment, and then his wide homely mouth quirked into a rueful grin. He laughed aloud. Anguy joined in, and then they were all laughing, Lem Lemoncloak, Sharna and Husband, even the serving boy, who had stepped out from behind the casks with a crossbow under one arm. Arya wanted to scream at them, but instead she started to smile …

"*Riders!*" Gendry's shout was shrill with alarm. The door burst open and there he was. "*Soldiers*," he panted. "Coming down the river road, a dozen of them."

Hot Pie leapt up, knocking over his tankard, but Tom and the others were unperturbed. "There's no cause for spilling good ale on my floor," said Sharna. "Sit back down and calm yourself, boy, there's rabbit coming. You too, girl. Whatever harm's been done you, it's over and it's done and you're with king's men now. We'll keep you safe as best we can."

Arya's only answer was to reach over her shoulder for her sword, but, before she had it halfway drawn, Lem grabbed her wrist. "We'll have no more of that, now." He twisted her arm until her hand opened. His fingers were hard with callus and fearsomely strong. *Again!* Arya thought. *It's happening again, like it happened in the village, with Chiswyck and Raff and the Mountain That Rides.* They were going to steal her sword and turn her back into a mouse. Her free hand closed around her tankard, and she swung it at Lem's face. The ale sloshed over the rim and splashed into his eyes, and she heard his nose break and saw the spurt of blood. When he roared his hands went to his face, and she was free. "*Run!*" she screamed, bolting.

But Lem was on her again at once, with his long legs that made one of his steps equal to three of hers. She twisted and kicked, but he yanked her off her feet effortlessly and held her dangling while the blood ran down his face.

"*Stop it*, you little fool," he shouted, shaking her back and forth. "Stop it now!" Gendry moved to help her, until Tom Sevenstrings stepped in front of him with a dagger.

By then it was too late to flee. She could hear horses outside, and the sound of men's voices. A moment later a man came swaggering through the open door, a Tyroshi even bigger than Lem with a great thick beard, bright green at the ends but growing out grey. Behind came a pair of crossbowmen helping a wounded man between them, and then others …

A more ragged band Arya had never seen, but there was nothing ragged about the swords, axes, and bows they carried. One or two gave her curious glances as they entered, but no one said a word. A one-eyed man in a rusty pothelm sniffed the air and grinned, while an archer with a head of stiff yellow hair was shouting for ale. After them came a spearman in a lion-crested helm, an older man with a limp, a Braavosi sellsword, a …

"Harwin?" Arya whispered. *It was!* Under the beard and the tangled hair was the face of Hullen's son, who used to lead her pony around the yard, ride at quintain with Jon and Robb, and drink too much on feast days. He was thinner, harder somehow, and at Winterfell he had never worn a beard, but it was him—her father's man. "*Harwin!*" Squirming, she threw herself forward, trying to wrench free of Lem's iron grip. "It's me," she shouted, "Harwin, it's me, don't you know me, don't you?" The tears came, and she found herself weeping like a baby, just like some stupid little girl. "Harwin, *it's me*!"

Harwin's eyes went from her face to the flayed man on her doublet. "How do you know me?" he said, frowning suspiciously. "The flayed man … who are you, some serving boy to Lord Leech?"

For a moment, she did not know how to answer. She'd had so many names. Had she only dreamed Arya Stark? "I'm a girl," she sniffed. "I was Lord Bolton's cupbearer but he was going to leave me for the goat, so I ran off with Gendry and Hot Pie. You *have* to know me! You used to lead my pony, when I was little."

His eyes went wide. “Gods be good,” he said in a choked voice. “Arya Underfoot? Lem, let go of her.”

“She broke my nose.” Lem dumped her unceremoniously to the floor. “Who in seven hells is she supposed to be?”

“The Hand’s daughter.” Harwin went to one knee before her. “Arya Stark, of Winterfell.”

CATELYN

Robb, she knew, the moment she heard the kennels erupt. Her son had returned to Riverrun, and Grey Wind with him. Only the scent of the great grey direwolf could send the hounds into such a frenzy of baying and barking. *He will come to me*, she knew. Edmure had not returned after his first visit, preferring to spend his days with Marq Piper and Patrek Mallister, listening to Rymund the Rhymer's verses about the battle at the Stone Mill. *Robb is not Edmure, though. Robb will see me.*

It had been raining for days now, a cold grey downpour that well suited Catelyn's mood. Her father was growing weaker and more delirious with every passing day, waking only to mutter, "Tansy," and beg forgiveness. Edmure shunned her, and Ser Desmond Grell still denied her freedom of the castle, however unhappy it seemed to make him. Only the return of Ser Robin Ryger and his men, footweary and drenched to the bone, served to lighten her spirits. They had walked back, it seemed. Somehow, the Kingslayer had contrived to sink their galley and escape, Maester Vyman confided. Catelyn asked if she might speak with Ser Robin to learn more of what had happened, but that was refused her.

Something else was wrong as well. On the day her brother returned, a few hours after their argument, she had heard angry voices from the yard below. When she climbed to the roof to see, there were knots of men gathered across the castle beside the main gate. Horses were being led from the stables, saddled and bridled, and there was shouting, though Catelyn was too far away to make out the words. One of Robb's white banners lay on the ground, and one of the knights turned his horse and trampled over the direwolf as he spurred toward the gate. Several others did the same. *Those are men who fought with Edmure on the fords*, she thought. *What could have made them so angry? Has my brother slighted them somehow, given them some insult?* She thought she recognized Ser Perwyn Frey, who had traveled with her to Bitterbridge and Storm's End and back, and his bastard half brother Martyn Rivers as well, but from this vantage it was hard to be certain. Close to forty men poured out through the castle gates, to what end she did not know.

They did not come back. Nor would Maester Vyman tell her who they had been, where they had gone, or what had made them so angry. "I am here to see to your father, and only that, my lady," he said. "Your brother will soon be Lord of Riverrun. What he wishes you to know, he must tell you."

But now Robb was returned from the west, returned in triumph. *He will forgive me*, Catelyn told herself. *He must forgive me, he is my own son, and Arya and Sansa are as much his blood as mine. He will free me from these rooms and then I will know what has happened.*

By the time Ser Desmond came for her, she had bathed and dressed and combed out her auburn hair. "King Robb has returned from the west, my lady," the knight said, "and commands that you attend him in the Great Hall."

It was the moment she had dreamt of and dreaded. *Have I lost two sons, or three?* She would know soon enough.

The hall was crowded when they entered. Every eye was on the dais, but Catelyn knew their backs: Lady Mormont's patched ringmail, the Greatjon and his son looming above every other head in the hall, Lord Jason Mallister white-haired with his winged helm in the crook of his arm, Tytos Blackwood in his magnificent raven-feather cloak … *Half of them will want to hang me now. The other half may only turn their eyes away.* She had the uneasy feeling that someone was missing, too.

Robb stood on the dais. *He is a boy no longer*, she realized with a pang. *He is sixteen now, a man grown. Just look at him.* War had melted all the softness from his face and left him hard and lean. He had shaved his beard away, but his auburn hair fell uncut to his shoulders. The recent rains had rusted his mail and left brown stains on the white of his cloak and surcoat. Or perhaps the stains were blood. On his head was the sword crown they had fashioned him of bronze and iron. *He bears it more comfortably now. He bears it like a king.*

Edmure stood below the crowded dais, head bowed modestly as Robb praised his victory. "… fell at the Stone Mill shall never be forgotten. Small wonder Lord Tywin ran off to fight Stannis. He'd had his fill of northmen and rivermen both." That brought laughter and approving shouts, but Robb raised a hand for quiet. "Make no mistake, though. The Lannisters will march again, and there will be other battles to win before the kingdom is secure."

The Greatjon roared out, "*King in the North!*" and thrust a mailed fist into the air. The river lords answered with a shout of "*King of the Trident!*" The hall grew thunderous with pounding fists and stamping feet.

Only a few noted Catelyn and Ser Desmond amidst the tumult, but they elbowed their fellows, and slowly a hush grew around her. She held her head high and ignored the eyes. *Let them think what they will. It is Robb's judgment that matters.*

The sight of Ser Brynden Tully's craggy face on the dais gave her comfort. A boy she did not know seemed to be acting as Robb's squire. Behind him stood a young knight in a sand-colored surcoat blazoned with seashells, and an older one who wore three black pepperpots on a saffron bend, across a field of green and silver stripes. Between them were a handsome older lady and a pretty maid who looked to be her daughter. There was another girl as well, near Sansa's age. The seashells were the sigil of some lesser house, Catelyn knew; the older man's she did not recognize. *Prisoners?* Why would Robb bring captives onto the dais?

Utherydes Wayn banged his staff on the floor as Ser Desmond escorted her forward. *If Robb looks at me as Edmure did, I do not know what I will do*. But it seemed to her that it was not anger she saw in her son's eyes, but something else … apprehension, perhaps? No, that made no sense. What should *he* fear? He was the Young Wolf, King of the Trident and the North.

Her uncle was the first to greet her. As black a fish as ever, Ser Brynden had no care for what others might think. He leapt off the dais and pulled Catelyn into his arms. When he said, "It is good to see you home, Cat," she had to struggle to keep her composure. "And you," she whispered.

"Mother."

Catelyn looked up at her tall kingly son. "Your Grace, I have prayed for your safe return. I had heard you were wounded."

"I took an arrow through the arm while storming the Crag," he said. "It's healed well, though. I had the best of care."

"The gods are good, then." Catelyn took a deep breath. *Say it. It cannot be avoided.* "They will have told you what I did. Did they tell you my reasons?"

"For the girls."

"I had five children. Now I have three."

"Aye, my lady." Lord Rickard Karstark pushed past the Greatjon, like some grim specter with his black mail and long ragged grey beard, his narrow face pinched and cold. "And I have one son, who once had three. You have robbed me of my vengeance."

Catelyn faced him calmly. "Lord Rickard, the Kingslayer's dying would not have bought life for your children. His living may buy life for mine."

The lord was unappeased. "Jaime Lannister has played you for a fool. You've bought a bag of empty words, no more. My Torrhen and my Eddard deserved better of you."

"Leave off, Karstark," rumbled the Greatjon, crossing his huge arms against his chest. "It was a mother's folly. Women are made that way."

"A mother's folly?" Lord Karstark rounded on Lord Umber. "I name it treason."

"*Enough.*" For just an instant, Robb sounded more like Brandon than his father. "No man calls my lady of Winterfell a traitor in my hearing, Lord Rickard." When he turned to Catelyn, his voice softened. "If I could wish the Kingslayer back in chains I would. You freed him without my knowledge or consent … but what you did, I know you did for love. For Arya and Sansa, and out of grief for

Bran and Rickon. Love's not always wise, I've learned. It can lead us to great folly, but we follow our hearts … wherever they take us. Don't we, Mother?"

Is that what I did? "If my heart led me into folly, I would gladly make whatever amends I can to Lord Karstark and yourself."

Lord Rickard's face was implacable. "Will your *amends* warm Torrhen and Eddard in the cold graves where the Kingslayer laid them?" He shouldered between the Greatjon and Maege Mormont and left the hall.

Robb made no move to detain him. "Forgive him, Mother."

"If you will forgive me."

"I have. I know what it is to love so greatly you can think of nothing else."

Catelyn bowed her head. "Thank you." *I have not lost this child, at least.*

"We must talk," Robb went on. "You and my uncles. Of this and … other things. Steward, call an end."

Utherydes Wayn slammed his staff on the floor and shouted the dismissal, and river lords and northerners alike moved toward the doors. It was only then that Catelyn realized what was amiss. *The wolf. The wolf is not here. Where is Grey Wind?* She knew the direwolf had returned with Robb, she had heard the dogs, but he was not in the hall, not at her son's side where he belonged.

Before she could think to question Robb, however, she found herself surrounded by a circle of well-wishers. Lady Mormont took her hand and said, "My lady, if Cersei Lannister held two of my daughters, I would have done the same." The Greatjon, no respecter of proprieties, lifted her off her feet and squeezed her arms with his huge hairy hands. "Your wolf pup mauled the Kingslayer once, he'll do it again if need be." Galbart Glover and Lord Jason Mallister were cooler, and Jonos Bracken almost icy, but their words were courteous enough. Her brother was the last to approach her. "I pray for your girls as well, Cat. I hope you do not doubt that."

"Of course not." She kissed him. "I love you for it."

When all the words were done, the Great Hall of Riverrun was empty save for Robb, the three Tullys, and the six strangers Catelyn could not place. She eyed them curiously. "My lady, sers, are you new to my son's cause?"

"New," said the younger knight, him of the seashells, "but fierce in our courage and firm in our loyalties, as I hope to prove to you, my lady."

Robb looked uncomfortable. "Mother," he said, "may I present the Lady Sybell, the wife of Lord Gawen Westerling of the Crag." The older woman came forward with solemn mien. "Her husband was one of those we took captive in the Whispering Wood."

Westerling, yes, Catelyn thought. *Their banner is six seashells, white on sand. A minor house sworn to the Lannisters.*

Robb beckoned the other strangers forward, each in turn. "Ser Rolph Spicer, Lady Sybell's brother. He was castellan at the Crag when we took it." The pepperpot knight inclined his head. A square-built man with a broken nose and a close-cropped grey beard, he looked doughty enough. "The children of Lord Gawen and Lady Sybell. Ser Raynald Westerling." The seashell knight smiled beneath a bushy mustache. Young, lean, rough-hewn, he had good teeth and a thick mop of chestnut hair. "Elenya." The little girl did a quick curtsy. "Rollam Westerling, my squire." The boy started to kneel, saw no one else was kneeling, and bowed instead.

"The honor is mine," Catelyn said. *Can Robb have won the Crag's allegiance?* If so, it was no wonder the Westerlings were with him. Casterly Rock did not suffer such betrayals gently. Not since Tywin Lannister had been old enough to go to war …

The maid came forward last, and very shy. Robb took her hand. "Mother," he said, "I have the great honor to present you the Lady Jeyne Westerling. Lord Gawen's elder daughter, and my … ah … my lady wife."

The first thought that flew across Catelyn's mind was, *No, that cannot be, you are only a child.*

The second was, *And besides, you have pledged another.*

The third was, *Mother have mercy, Robb, what have you done?*

Only then came her belated remembrance. *Follies done for love? He has bagged me neat as a hare in a snare. I seem to have already forgiven him.* Mixed with her annoyance was a rueful admiration; the scene had been staged with the cunning worthy of a master mummer … or a king. Catelyn saw no choice but to take Jeyne Westerling's hands. "I have a new daughter," she said, more stiffly than she'd intended. She kissed the terrified girl on both cheeks. "Be welcome to our hall and hearth."

"Thank you, my lady. I shall be a good and true wife to Robb, I swear. And as wise a queen as I can."

Queen. Yes, this pretty little girl is a queen, I must remember that. She *was* pretty, undeniably, with her chestnut curls and heart-shaped face, and that shy smile. Slender, but with good hips, Catelyn noted. *She should have no trouble bearing children, at least.*

Lady Sybell took a hand before any more was said. "We are honored to be joined to House Stark, my lady, but we are also very weary. We have come a long way in a short time. Perhaps we might retire to our chambers, so you may visit with your son?"

"That would be best." Robb kissed his Jeyne. "The steward will find you suitable accommodations."

"I'll take you to him," Ser Edmure Tully volunteered.

"You are most kind," said Lady Sybell.

"Must I go too?" asked the boy, Rollam. "I'm your squire."

Robb laughed. "But I'm not in need of squiring just now."

"Oh."

"His Grace has gotten along for sixteen years without you, Rollam," said Ser Raynald of the seashells. "He will survive a few hours more, I think." Taking his little brother firmly by the hand, he walked him from the hall.

"Your wife is lovely," Catelyn said when they were out of earshot, "and the Westerlings seem worthy … though Lord Gawen is Tywin Lannister's sworn man, is he not?"

"Yes. Jason Mallister captured him in the Whispering Wood and has been holding him at Seagard for ransom. Of course I'll free him now, though he may not wish to join me. We wed without his consent, I fear, and this marriage puts him in dire peril. The Crag is not strong. For love of me, Jeyne may lose all."

"And you," she said softly, "have lost the Freys."

His wince told all. She understood the angry voices now, why Perwyn Frey and Martyn Rivers had left in such haste, trampling Robb's banner into the ground as they went.

"Dare I ask how many swords come with your bride, Robb?"

"Fifty. A dozen knights." His voice was glum, as well it might be. When the marriage contract had been made at the Twins, old Lord Walder Frey had sent Robb off with a thousand mounted knights and near three thousand foot. "Jeyne is bright as well as beautiful. And kind as well. She has a gentle heart."

It is swords you need, not gentle hearts. How could you do this, Robb? How could you be so heedless, so stupid? How could you be so … so very … young. Reproaches would not serve here, however. All she said was, "Tell me how this came to be."

"I took her castle and she took my heart." Robb smiled. "The Crag was weakly garrisoned, so we took it by storm one night. Black Walder and the Smalljon led scaling parties over the walls, while I broke the main gate with a ram. I took an arrow in the arm just before Ser Rolph yielded us the castle. It seemed nothing at first, but it festered. Jeyne had me taken to her own bed, and she nursed me until the fever passed. And she was with me when the Greatjon brought me the news of … of

Winterfell. Bran and Rickon." He seemed to have trouble saying his brothers' names. "That night, she … she comforted me, Mother."

Catelyn did not need to be told what sort of comfort Jeyne Westerling had offered her son. "And you wed her the next day."

He looked her in the eyes, proud and miserable all at once. "It was the only honorable thing to do. She's gentle and sweet, Mother, she will make me a good wife."

"Perhaps. That will not appease Lord Frey."

"I know," her son said, stricken. "I've made a botch of everything but the battles, haven't I? I thought the battles would be the hard part, but … if I had listened to you and kept Theon as my hostage, I'd still rule the north, and Bran and Rickon would be alive and safe in Winterfell."

"Perhaps. Or not. Lord Balon might still have chanced war. The last time he reached for a crown, it cost him two sons. He might have thought it a bargain to lose only one this time." She touched his arm. "What happened with the Freys, after you wed?"

Robb shook his head. "With Ser Stevron, I might have been able to make amends, but Ser Ryman is dull-witted as a stone, and Black Walder … that one was not named for the color of his beard, I promise you. He went so far as to say that his sisters would not be loath to wed a widower. I would have killed him for that if Jeyne had not begged me to be merciful."

"You have done House Frey a grievous insult, Robb."

"I never meant to. Ser Stevron died for me, and Olyvar was as loyal a squire as any king could want. He asked to stay with me, but Ser Ryman took him with the rest. All their strength. The Greatjon urged me to attack them …"

"Fighting your own in the midst of your enemies?" she said. "It would have been the end of you."

"Yes. I thought perhaps we could arrange other matches for Lord Walder's daughters. Ser Wendel Manderly has offered to take one, and the Greatjon tells me his uncles wish to wed again. If Lord Walder will be reasonable—"

"He is *not* reasonable," said Catelyn. "He is proud, and prickly to a fault. You know that. He wanted to be grandfather to a king. You will not appease him with the offer of two hoary old brigands and the second son of the fattest man in the Seven Kingdoms. Not only have you broken your oath, but you've slighted the honor of the Twins by choosing a bride from a lesser house."

Robb bristled at that. "The Westerlings are better blood than the Freys. They're an ancient line, descended from the First Men. The Kings of the Rock sometimes wed Westerlings before the Conquest, and there was another Jeyne Westerling who was queen to King Maegor three hundred years ago."

"All of which will only salt Lord Walder's wounds. It has always rankled him that older houses look down on the Freys as upstarts. This insult is not the first he's borne, to hear him tell it. Jon Arryn was disinclined to foster his grandsons, and my father refused the offer of one of his daughters for Edmure." She inclined her head toward her brother as he rejoined them.

"Your Grace," Brynden Blackfish said, "perhaps we had best continue this in private."

"Yes." Robb sounded tired. "I would kill for a cup of wine. The audience chamber, I think."

As they started up the steps, Catelyn asked the question that had been troubling her since she entered the hall. "Robb, where is Grey Wind?"

"In the yard, with a haunch of mutton. I told the kennelmaster to see that he was fed."

"You always kept him with you before."

"A hall is no place for a wolf. He gets restless, you've seen. Growling and snapping. I should never have taken him into battle with me. He's killed too many men to fear them now. Jeyne's anxious around him, and he terrifies her mother."

And there's the heart of it, Catelyn thought. "He is part of you, Robb. To fear him is to fear you."

"I am not a wolf, no matter what they call me." Robb sounded cross. "Grey Wind killed a man at the Crag, another at Ashemark, and six or seven at Oxcross. If you had seen—"

"I saw Bran's wolf tear out a man's throat at Winterfell," she said sharply, "and loved him for it."

"That's different. The man at the Crag was a knight Jeyne had known all her life. You can't blame her for being afraid. Grey Wind doesn't like her uncle either. He bares his teeth every time Ser Rolph comes near him."

A chill went through her. "Send Ser Rolph away. At once."

"Where? Back to the Crag, so the Lannisters can mount his head on a spike? Jeyne loves him. He's her uncle, and a fair knight besides. I need more men like Rolph Spicer, not fewer. I am not going to banish him just because my wolf doesn't seem to like the way he smells."

"Robb." She stopped and held his arm. "I told you once to keep Theon Greyjoy close, and you did not listen. Listen now. *Send this man away.* I am not saying you must banish him. Find some task that requires a man of courage, some honorable duty, what it is matters not … but *do not keep him near you.*"

He frowned. "Should I have Grey Wind sniff all my knights? There might be others whose smell he mislikes."

"Any man Grey Wind mislikes is a man I do not want close to you. These wolves are more than wolves, Robb. You *must* know that. I think perhaps the gods sent them to us. Your father's gods, the old gods of the north. Five wolf pups, Robb, five for five Stark children."

"Six," said Robb. "There was a wolf for Jon as well. I found them, remember? I know how many there were and where they came from. I used to think the same as you, that the wolves were our guardians, our protectors, until …"

"Until?" she prompted.

Robb's mouth tightened. "… until they told me that Theon had murdered Bran and Rickon. Small good their wolves did them. I am no longer a boy, Mother. I'm a king, and I can protect myself." He sighed. "I will find some duty for Ser Rolph, some pretext to send him away. Not because of his smell, but to ease your mind. You have suffered enough."

Relieved, Catelyn kissed him lightly on the cheek before the others could come around the turn of the stair, and for a moment he was her boy again, and not her king.

Lord Hoster's private audience chamber was a small room above the Great Hall, better suited to intimate discussions. Robb took the high seat, removed his crown, and set it on the floor beside him as Catelyn rang for wine. Edmure was filling his uncle's ear with the whole story of the fight at the Stone Mill. It was only after the servants had come and gone that the Blackfish cleared his throat and said, "I think we've all heard sufficient of your boasting, Nephew."

Edmure was taken aback. "Boasting? What do you mean?"

"I *mean*," said the Blackfish, "that you owe His Grace your thanks for his forbearance. He played out that mummer's farce in the Great Hall so as not to shame you before your own people. Had it been me I would have flayed you for your stupidity rather than praising this folly of the fords."

"Good men died to defend those fords, Uncle." Edmure sounded outraged. "What, is no one to win victories but the Young Wolf? Did I steal some glory meant for you, Robb?"

"*Your Grace*," Robb corrected, icy. "You took me for your king, Uncle. Or have you forgotten that as well?"

The Blackfish said, "You were commanded to hold Riverrun, Edmure, no more."

"I held Riverrun, *and* I bloodied Lord Tywin's nose—"

"So you did," said Robb. "But a bloody nose won't win the war, will it? Did you ever think to ask yourself why we remained in the west so long after Oxcross? You knew I did not have enough men to threaten Lannisport or Casterly Rock."

"Why … there were other castles … gold, cattle …"

"You think we stayed for *plunder*?" Robb was incredulous. "Uncle, I wanted Lord Tywin to come west."

"We were all horsed," Ser Brynden said. "The Lannister host was mainly foot. We planned to run Lord Tywin a merry chase up and down the coast, then slip behind him to take up a strong defensive position athwart the gold road, at a place my scouts had found where the ground would have been greatly in our favor. If he had come at us there, he would have paid a grievous price. But if he did not attack, he would have been trapped in the west, a thousand leagues from where he needed to be. All the while we would have lived off his land, instead of him living off ours."

"Lord Stannis was about to fall upon King's Landing," Robb said. "He might have rid us of Joffrey, the queen, and the Imp in one red stroke. Then we might have been able to make a peace."

Edmure looked from uncle to nephew. "You never told me."

"I *told* you to hold Riverrun," said Robb. "What part of that command did you fail to comprehend?"

"When you stopped Lord Tywin on the Red Fork," said the Blackfish, "you delayed him just long enough for riders out of Bitterbridge to reach him with word of what was happening to the east. Lord Tywin turned his host at once, joined up with Matthis Rowan and Randyll Tarly near the headwaters of the Blackwater, and made a forced march to Tumbler's Falls, where he found Mace Tyrell and two of his sons waiting with a huge host and a fleet of barges. They floated down the river, disembarked half a day's ride from the city, and took Stannis in the rear."

Catelyn remembered King Renly's court, as she had seen it at Bitterbridge. A thousand golden roses streaming in the wind, Queen Margaery's shy smile and soft words, her brother the Knight of Flowers with the bloody linen around his temples. *If you had to fall into a woman's arms, my son, why couldn't they have been Margaery Tyrell's?* The wealth and power of Highgarden could have made all the difference in the fighting yet to come. *And perhaps Grey Wind would have liked the smell of her as well.*

Edmure looked ill. "I never meant … *never,* Robb, you must let me make amends. I will lead the van in the next battle!"

For amends, Brother? Or for glory? Catelyn wondered.

"The next battle," Robb said. "Well, that will be soon enough. Once Joffrey is wed, the Lannisters will take the field against me once more, I don't doubt, and this time the Tyrells will march beside them. And I may need to fight the Freys as well, if Black Walder has his way …"

"So long as Theon Greyjoy sits in your father's seat with your brothers' blood on his hands, these other foes must wait," Catelyn told her son. "Your first duty is to defend your own people, win back Winterfell, and hang Theon in a crow's cage to die slowly. Or else put off that crown for good, Robb, for men will know that you are no true king at all."

From the way Robb looked at her, she could tell that it had been a long while since anyone had dared speak to him so bluntly. "When they told me Winterfell had fallen, I wanted to go north at once," he said, with a hint of defensiveness. "I wanted to free Bran and Rickon, but I thought … I never dreamed that Theon could harm them, truly. If I had …"

"It is too late for *if*s, and too late for rescues," Catelyn said. "All that remains is vengeance."

"The last word we had from the north, Ser Rodrik had defeated a force of ironmen near Torrhen's Square, and was assembling a host at Castle Cerwyn to retake Winterfell," said Robb. "By now he may have done it. There has been no news for a long while. And what of the Trident, if I turn north? I can't ask the river lords to abandon their own people."

"No," said Catelyn. "Leave them to guard their own, and win back the north with northmen."

"How will you get the northmen to the north?" her brother Edmure asked. "The ironmen control the sunset sea. The Greyjoys hold Moat Cailin as well. No army has ever taken Moat Cailin from the south. Even to march against it is madness. We could be trapped on the causeway, with the ironborn before us and angry Freys at our backs."

"We must win back the Freys," said Robb. "With them, we still have some chance of success, however small. Without them, I see no hope. I am willing to give Lord Walder whatever he requires … apologies, honors, lands, gold … there must be *something* that would soothe his pride …"

"Not something," said Catelyn. "Some*one*."

JON

"Big enough for you?" Snowflakes speckled Tormund's broad face, melting in his hair and beard.

The giants swayed slowly atop the mammoths as they rode past two by two. Jon's garron shied, frightened by such strangeness, but whether it was the mammoths or their riders that scared him it was hard to say. Even Ghost backed off a step, baring his teeth in a silent snarl. The direwolf was big, but the mammoths were a deal bigger, and there were many and more of them.

Jon took the horse in hand and held him still, so he could count the giants emerging from the blowing snow and pale mists that swirled along the Milkwater. He was well beyond fifty when Tormund said something and he lost the count. *There must be hundreds.* No matter how many went past, they just seemed to keep coming.

In Old Nan's stories, giants were outsized men who lived in colossal castles, fought with huge swords, and walked about in boots a boy could hide in. These were something else, more bearlike than human, and as wooly as the mammoths they rode. Seated, it was hard to say how big they truly were. *Ten feet tall maybe, or twelve*, Jon thought. *Maybe fourteen, but no taller.* Their sloping chests might have passed for those of men, but their arms hung down too far, and their lower torsos looked half again as wide as their upper. Their legs were shorter than their arms, but very thick, and they wore no boots at all; their feet were broad splayed things, hard and horny and black. Neckless, their huge heavy heads thrust forward from between their shoulder blades, and their faces were squashed and brutal. Rats' eyes no larger than beads were almost lost within folds of horny flesh, but they snuffled constantly, smelling as much as they saw.

They're not wearing skins, Jon realized. *That's hair.* Shaggy pelts covered their bodies, thick below the waist, sparser above. The stink that came off them was choking, but perhaps that was the mammoths. *And Joramun blew the Horn of Winter, and woke giants from the earth.* He looked for great swords ten feet long, but saw only clubs. Most were just the limbs of dead trees, some still trailing shattered branches. A few had stone balls lashed to the ends to make colossal mauls. *The song never says if the horn can put them back to sleep.*

One of the giants coming up on them looked older than the rest. His pelt was grey and streaked with white, and the mammoth he rode, larger than any of the others, was grey and white as well. Tormund shouted something up to him as he passed, harsh clanging words in a tongue that Jon did not comprehend. The giant's lips split apart to reveal a mouth full of huge square teeth, and he made a sound half belch and half rumble. After a moment, Jon realized he was laughing. The mammoth turned its massive head to regard the two of them briefly, one huge tusk passing over the top of Jon's head as the beast lumbered by, leaving huge footprints in the soft mud and fresh snow along the river. The giant shouted down something in the same coarse tongue that Tormund had used.

"Was that their king?" asked Jon.

"Giants have no kings, no more'n mammoths do, nor snow bears, nor the great whales o' the grey sea. That was Mag Mar Tun Doh Weg. Mag the Mighty. You can kneel to him if you like, he won't mind. I know your kneeler's knees must be itching, for want of some king to bend to. Watch out he don't step on you, though. Giants have bad eyes, and might be he wouldn't see some little crow all the way down there by his feet."

"What did you say to him? Was that the Old Tongue?"

"Aye. I asked him if that was his father he was forking, they looked so much alike, except his father had a better smell."

"And what did he say to you?"

Tormund Thunderfist cracked a gap-toothed smile. "He asked me if that was my daughter riding there beside me, with her smooth pink cheeks." The wildling shook snow from his arm and

turned his horse about. “It may be he never saw a man without a beard before. Come, we start back. Mance grows sore wroth when I’m not found in my accustomed place.”

Jon wheeled and followed Tormund back toward the head of the column, his new cloak hanging heavy from his shoulders. It was made of unwashed sheepskins, worn fleece side in, as the wildlings suggested. It kept the snow off well enough, and at night it was good and warm, but he kept his black cloak as well, folded up beneath his saddle. “Is it true you killed a giant once?” he asked Tormund as they rode. Ghost loped silently beside them, leaving paw prints in the new-fallen snow.

“Now why would you doubt a mighty man like me? It was winter and I was half a boy, and stupid the way boys are. I went too far and my horse died and then a storm caught me. A *true* storm, not no little dusting such as this. Har! I knew I’d freeze to death before it broke. So I found me a sleeping giant, cut open her belly, and crawled up right inside her. Kept me warm enough, she did, but the stink near did for me. The worst thing was, she woke up when the spring come and took me for her babe. Suckled me for three whole moons before I could get away. Har! There’s times I miss the taste o’ giant’s milk, though.”

“If she nursed you, you couldn’t have killed her.”

“I never did, but see you don’t go spreading that about. Tormund Giantsbane has a better ring to it than Tormund Giantsbabe, and that’s the honest truth o’ it.”

“So how did you come by your other names?” Jon asked. “Mance called you the Horn-Blower, didn’t he? Mead-king of Ruddy Hall, Husband to Bears, Father to Hosts?” It was the horn blowing he particularly wanted to hear about, but he dared not ask too plainly. *And Joramun blew the Horn of Winter, and woke giants from the earth.* Is that where they had come from, them and their mammoths? Had Mance Rayder found the Horn of Joramun, and given it to Tormund Thunderfist to blow?

“Are all crows so curious?” asked Tormund. “Well, here’s a tale for you. It were another winter, colder even than the one I spent inside that giant, and snowing day and night, snowflakes as big as your head, not these little things. It snowed so hard the whole village was half buried. I was in me Ruddy Hall, with only a cask o’ mead to keep me company and nothing to do but drink it. The more I drank the more I got to thinking about this woman lived close by, a fine strong woman with the biggest pair of teats you ever saw. She had a temper on her, that one, but oh, she could be warm too, and in the deep of winter a man needs his warmth.

“The more I drank the more I thought about her, and the more I thought the harder me member got, till I couldn’t suffer it no more. Fool that I was, I bundled meself up in furs from head to heels, wrapped a winding wool around me face, and set off to find her. The snow was coming down so hard I got turned around once or twice, and the wind blew right through me and froze me bones, but finally I come on her, all bundled up like I was.

“The woman had a terrible temper, and she put up quite the fight when I laid hands on her. It was all I could do to carry her home and get her out o’ them furs, but when I did, oh, she was hotter even than I remembered, and we had a fine old time, and then I went to sleep. Next morning when I woke the snow had stopped and the sun was shining, but I was in no fit state to enjoy it. All ripped and torn I was, and half me member bit right off, and there on me floor was a she-bear’s pelt. And soon enough the free folk were telling tales o’ this bald bear seen in the woods, with the queerest pair o’ cubs behind her. Har!” He slapped a meaty thigh. “Would that I could find her again. She was fine to lay with, that bear. Never was a woman gave me such a fight, nor such strong sons neither.”

“What could you do if you *did* find her?” Jon asked, smiling. “You said she bit your member off.”

“Only half. And half me member is twice as long as any other man’s.” Tormund snorted. “Now as to you … is it true they cut your members off when they take you for the Wall?”

“No,” Jon said, affronted.

“I think it must be true. Else why refuse Ygritte? She’d hardly give you any fight at all, seems to me. The girl wants you in her, that’s plain enough to see.”

Too bloody plain, thought Jon, *and it seems that half the column has seen it*. He studied the falling snow so Tormund might not see him redden. *I am a man of the Night's Watch*, he reminded himself. So why did he feel like some blushing maid?

He spent most of his days in Ygritte's company, and most nights as well. Mance Rayder had not been blind to Rattleshirt's mistrust of the "crow-come-over," so after he had given Jon his new sheepskin cloak he had suggested that he might want to ride with Tormund Giantsbane instead. Jon had happily agreed, and the very next day Ygritte and Longspear Ryk left Rattleshirt's band for Tormund's as well. "Free folk ride with who they want," the girl told him, "and we had a bellyful of Bag o' Bones."

Every night when they made camp, Ygritte threw her sleeping skins down beside his own, no matter if he was near the fire or well away from it. Once he woke to find her nestled against him, her arm across his chest. He lay listening to her breathe for a long time, trying to ignore the tension in his groin. Rangers often shared skins for warmth, but warmth was not all Ygritte wanted, he suspected. After that he had taken to using Ghost to keep her away. Old Nan used to tell stories about knights and their ladies who would sleep in a single bed with a blade between them for honor's sake, but he thought this must be the first time where a direwolf took the place of the sword.

Even then, Ygritte persisted. The day before last, Jon had made the mistake of wishing he had hot water for a bath. "Cold is better," she had said at once, "if you've got someone to warm you up after. The river's only part ice yet, go on."

Jon laughed. "You'd freeze me to death."

"Are all crows afraid of gooseprickles? A little ice won't kill you. I'll jump in with you t'prove it so."

"And ride the rest of the day with wet clothes frozen to our skins?" he objected.

"Jon Snow, you know nothing. You don't go in with clothes."

"I don't go in at all," he said firmly, just before he heard Tormund Thunderfist bellowing for him (he hadn't, but never mind).

The wildlings seemed to think Ygritte a great beauty because of her hair; red hair was rare among the free folk, and those who had it were said to be kissed by fire, which was supposed to be lucky. Lucky it might be, and red it certainly was, but Ygritte's hair was such a tangle that Jon was tempted to ask her if she only brushed it at the changing of the seasons.

At a lord's court, the girl would never have been considered anything but common, he knew. She had a round peasant face, a pug nose, and slightly crooked teeth, and her eyes were too far apart. Jon had noticed all that the first time he'd seen her, when his dirk had been at her throat. Lately, though, he was noticing some other things. When she grinned, the crooked teeth didn't seem to matter. And maybe her eyes were too far apart, but they were a pretty blue-grey color, and lively as any eyes he knew. Sometimes she sang in a low husky voice that stirred him. And sometimes by the cookfire when she sat hugging her knees with the flames waking echoes in her red hair, and looked at him, just smiling … well, *that* stirred some things as well.

But he was a man of the Night's Watch, he had taken a vow. I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. He had said the words before the weirwood, before his father's gods. He could not unsay them … no more than he could admit the reason for his reluctance to Tormund Thunderfist, Father to Bears.

"Do you mislike the girl?" Tormund asked him as they passed another twenty mammoths, these bearing wildlings in tall wooden towers instead of giants.

"No, but I …" *What can I say that he will believe?* "I am still too young to wed."

"Wed?" Tormund laughed. "Who spoke of wedding? In the south, must a man wed every girl he beds?"

Jon could feel himself turning red again. "She spoke for me when Rattleshirt would have killed me. I would not dishonor her."

"You are a free man now, and Ygritte is a free woman. What dishonor if you lay together?"

"I might get her with child."

"Aye, I'd hope so. A strong son or a lively laughing girl kissed by fire, and where's the harm in that?"

Words failed him for a moment. "The boy … the child would be a bastard."

"Are bastards weaker than other children? More sickly, more like to fail?"

"No, but—"

"You're bastard-born yourself. And if Ygritte does not want a child, she will go to some woods witch and drink a cup o' moon tea. You do not come into it, once the seed is planted."

"I will *not* father a bastard."

Tormund shook his shaggy head. "What fools you kneelers be. Why did you steal the girl if you don't want her?"

"*Steal?* I never …"

"You did," said Tormund. "You slew the two she was with and carried her off, what do you call it?"

"I took her prisoner."

"You made her yield to you."

"Yes, but … Tormund, I swear, I've never touched her."

"Are you *certain* they never cut your member off?" Tormund gave a shrug, as if to say he would never understand such madness. "Well, you are a free man now, but if you will not have the girl, best find yourself a she-bear. If a man does not use his member it grows smaller and smaller, until one day he wants to piss and cannot find it."

Jon had no answer for that. Small wonder that the Seven Kingdoms thought the free folk scarcely human. *They have no laws, no honor, not even simple decency. They steal endlessly from each other, breed like beasts, prefer rape to marriage, and fill the world with baseborn children.* Yet he was growing fond of Tormund Giantsbane, great bag of wind and lies though he was. Longspear as well. *And Ygritte … no, I will not think about Ygritte.*

Along with the Tormunds and the Longspears rode other sorts of wildlings, though; men like Rattleshirt and the Weeper who would as soon slit you as spit on you. There was Harma Dogshead, a squat keg of a woman with cheeks like slabs of white meat, who hated dogs and killed one every fortnight to make a fresh head for her banner; earless Styr, Magnar of Thenn, whose own people thought him more god than lord; Varamyr Sixskins, a small mouse of a man whose steed was a savage white snow bear that stood thirteen feet tall on its hind legs. And wherever the bear and Varamyr went, three wolves and a shadowcat came following. Jon had been in his presence only once, and once had been enough; the mere sight of the man had made him bristle, even as the fur on the back of Ghost's neck had bristled at the sight of the bear and that long black-and-white 'cat.

And there were folks fiercer even than Varamyr, from the northernmost reaches of the haunted forest, the hidden valleys of the Frostfangs, and even queerer places: the men of the Frozen Shore who rode in chariots made of walrus bones pulled along by packs of savage dogs, the terrible ice-river clans who were said to feast on human flesh, the cave dwellers with their faces dyed blue and purple and green. With his own eyes Jon had beheld the Hornfoot men trotting along in column on bare soles as hard as boiled leather. He had not seen any snarks or grumpkins, but for all he knew Tormund would be having some to supper.

Half the wildling host had lived all their lives without so much as a glimpse of the Wall, Jon judged, and most of those spoke no word of the Common Tongue. It did not matter. Mance Rayder spoke the Old Tongue, even sang in it, fingering his lute and filling the night with strange wild music.

Mance had spent years assembling this vast plodding host, talking to this clan mother and that magnar, winning one village with sweet words and another with a song and a third with the edge of his sword, making peace between Harma Dogshead and the Lord o' Bones, between the Hornfoots

and the Nightrunners, between the walrus men of the Frozen Shore and the cannibal clans of the great ice rivers, hammering a hundred different daggers into one great spear, aimed at the heart of the Seven Kingdoms. He had no crown nor scepter, no robes of silk and velvet, but it was plain to Jon that Mance Rayder *was* a king in more than name.

Jon had joined the wildlings at Qhorin Halfhand's command. "Ride with them, eat with them, fight with them," the ranger had told him, the night before he died. "And *watch.*" But all his watching had learned him little. The Halfhand had suspected that the wildlings had gone up into the bleak and barren Frostfangs in search of some weapon, some power, some fell sorcery with which to break the Wall … but if they had found any such, no one was boasting of it openly, or showing it to Jon. Nor had Mance Rayder confided any of his plans or strategies. Since that first night, he had hardly seen the man save at a distance.

I will kill him if I must. The prospect gave Jon no joy; there would be no honor in such a killing, and it would mean his own death as well. Yet he could not let the wildlings breach the Wall, to threaten Winterfell and the north, the barrowlands and the Rills, White Harbor and the Stony Shore, even the Neck. For eight thousand years the men of House Stark had lived and died to protect their people against such ravagers and reavers … and bastard-born or no, the same blood ran in his veins. *Bran and Rickon are still at Winterfell besides. Maester Luwin, Ser Rodrik, Old Nan, Farlen the kennelmaster, Mikken at his forge and Gage by his ovens … everyone I ever knew, everyone I ever loved.* If Jon must slay a man he half admired and almost liked to save them from the mercies of Rattleshirt and Harma Dogshead and the earless Magnar of Thenn, that was what he meant to do.

Still, he prayed his father's gods might spare him that bleak task. The host moved but slowly, burdened as it was by all the wildlings' herds and children and mean little treasures, and the snows had slowed its progress even more. Most of the column was out of the foothills now, oozing down along the west bank of the Milkwater like honey on a cold winter's morning, following the course of the river into the heart of the haunted forest.

And somewhere close ahead, Jon knew, the Fist of the First Men loomed above the trees, home to three hundred black brothers of the Night's Watch, armed, mounted, and waiting. The Old Bear had sent out other scouts besides the Halfhand, and surely Jarman Buckwell or Thoren Smallwood would have returned by now with word of what was coming down out of the mountains.

Mormont will not run, Jon thought. *He is too old and he has come too far. He will strike, and damn the numbers.* One day soon he would hear the sound of warhorns, and see a column of riders pounding down on them with black cloaks flapping and cold steel in their hands. Three hundred men could not hope to kill a hundred times their number, of course, but Jon did not think they would need to. *He need not slay a thousand, only one. Mance is all that keeps them together.*

The King-beyond-the-Wall was doing all he could, yet the wildlings remained hopelessly undisciplined, and that made them vulnerable. Here and there within the leagues-long snake that was their line of march were warriors as fierce as any in the Watch, but a good third of them were grouped at either end of the column, in Harma Dogshead's van and the savage rearguard with its giants, aurochs, and fire flingers. Another third rode with Mance himself near the center, guarding the wayns and sledges and dog carts that held the great bulk of the host's provisions and supplies, all that remained of the last summer harvest. The rest, divided into small bands under the likes of Rattleshirt, Jarl, Tormund Giantsbane, and the Weeper, served as outriders, foragers, and whips, galloping up and down the column endlessly to keep it moving in a more or less orderly fashion.

And even more telling, only one in a hundred wildlings was mounted. *The Old Bear will go through them like an axe through porridge.* And when that happened, Mance must give chase with his center, to try and blunt the threat. If he should fall in the fight that must follow, the Wall would be safe for another hundred years, Jon judged. *And if not …*

He flexed the burned fingers of his sword hand. Longclaw was slung to his saddle, the carved stone wolf's-head pommel and soft leather grip of the great bastard sword within easy reach.

The snow was falling heavily by the time they caught Tormund's band, several hours later. Ghost departed along the way, melting into the forest at the scent of prey. The direwolf would return when they made camp for the night, by dawn at the latest. However far he prowled, Ghost always came back … and so, it seemed, did Ygritte.

"So," the girl called when she saw him, "d'you believe us now, Jon Snow? Did you see the giants on their mammoths?"

"Har!" shouted Tormund, before Jon could reply. "The crow's in love! He means to marry one!"

"A giantess?" Longspear Ryk laughed.

"No, a *mammoth*!" Tormund bellowed. "Har!"

Ygritte trotted beside Jon as he slowed his garron to a walk. She claimed to be three years older than him, though she stood half a foot shorter; however old she might be, the girl was a tough little thing. Stonesnake had called her a "spearwife" when they'd captured her in the Skirling Pass. She wasn't wed and her weapon of choice was a short curved bow of horn and weirwood, but "spearwife" fit her all the same. She reminded him a little of his sister Arya, though Arya was younger and probably skinnier. It was hard to tell how plump or thin Ygritte might be, with all the furs and skins she wore.

"Do you know 'The Last of the Giants'?" Without waiting for an answer Ygritte said, "You need a deeper voice than mine to do it proper." Then she sang, "*Oooooh, I am the last of the giants, my people are gone from the earth.*"

Tormund Giantsbane heard the words and grinned. "*The last of the great mountain giants, who ruled all the world at my birth*," he bellowed back through the snow.

Longspear Ryk joined in, singing, "*Oh, the smallfolk have stolen my forests, they've stolen my rivers and hills.*"

"*And they've built a great wall through my valleys, and fished all the fish from my rills*," Ygritte and Tormund sang back at him in turn, in suitably gigantic voices.

Tormund's sons Toregg and Dormund added their deep voices as well, then his daughter Munda and all the rest. Others began to bang their spears on leathern shields to keep rough time, until the whole war band was singing as they rode.

In stone halls they burn their great fires,
in stone halls they forge their sharp spears.
Whilst I walk alone in the mountains,
with no true companion but tears.
They hunt me with dogs in the daylight,
they hunt me with torches by night.
For these men who are small can never stand tall,
whilst giants still walk in the light.
Oooooooh, I am the LAST of the giants,
so learn well the words of my song.
For when I am gone the singing will fade,
and the silence shall last long and long.

There were tears on Ygritte's cheeks when the song ended.

"Why are you weeping?" Jon asked. "It was only a song. There are hundreds of giants, I've just seen them."

"Oh, hundreds," she said furiously. "You know nothing, Jon Snow. You—*JON!*"

Jon turned at the sudden sound of wings. Blue-grey feathers filled his eyes, as sharp talons buried themselves in his face. Red pain lanced through him sudden and fierce as pinions beat round his head. He saw the beak, but there was no time to get a hand up or reach for a weapon. Jon reeled backward, his foot lost the stirrup, his garron broke in panic, and then he was falling. And still the eagle clung to his face, its talons tearing at him as it flapped and shrieked and pecked. The world

turned upside down in a chaos of feathers and horseflesh and blood, and then the ground came up to smash him.

The next he knew, he was on his face with the taste of mud and blood in his mouth and Ygritte kneeling over him protectively, a bone dagger in her hand. He could still hear wings, though the eagle was not in sight. Half his world was black. "My eye," he said in sudden panic, raising a hand to his face.

"It's only blood, Jon Snow. He missed the eye, just ripped your skin up some."

His face was throbbing. Tormund stood over them bellowing, he saw from his right eye as he rubbed blood from his left. Then there were hoofbeats, shouts, and the clacking of old dry bones.

"Bag o' Bones," roared Tormund, "call off your hellcrow!"

"There's your hellcrow!" Rattleshirt pointed at Jon. "Bleeding in the mud like a faithless dog!" The eagle came flapping down to land atop the broken giant's skull that served him for his helm. "I'm here for him."

"Come take him then," said Tormund, "but best come with sword in hand, for that's where you'll find mine. Might be I'll boil *your* bones, and use your skull to piss in. Har!"

"Once I prick you and let the air out, you'll shrink down smaller'n that girl. Stand aside, or Mance will hear o' this."

Ygritte stood. "What, is it *Mance* who wants him?"

"I said so, didn't I? Get him up on those black feet."

Tormund frowned down at Jon. "Best go, if it's the Mance who's wanting you."

Ygritte helped pull him up. "He's bleeding like a butchered boar. Look what Orell did t' his sweet face."

Can a bird hate? Jon had slain the wildling Orell, but some part of the man remained within the eagle. The golden eyes looked out on him with cold malevolence. "I'll come," he said. The blood kept running down into his right eye, and his cheek was a blaze of pain. When he touched it his black gloves came away stained with red. "Let me catch my garron." It was not the horse he wanted so much as Ghost, but the direwolf was nowhere to be seen. *He could be leagues away by now, ripping out the throat of some elk*. Perhaps that was just as well.

The garron shied away from him when he approached, no doubt frightened by the blood on his face, but Jon calmed him with a few quiet words and finally got close enough to take the reins. As he swung back into the saddle his head whirled. *I will need to get this tended,* he thought, *but not just now. Let the King-beyond-the-Wall see what his eagle did to me*. His right hand opened and closed, and he reached down for Longclaw and slung the bastard sword over a shoulder before he wheeled to trot back to where the Lord of Bones and his band were waiting.

Ygritte was waiting too, sitting on her horse with a fierce look on her face. "I am coming too."

"Be gone." The bones of Rattleshirt's breastplate clattered together. "I was sent for the crow-come-down, none other."

"A free woman rides where she will," Ygritte said.

The wind was blowing snow into Jon's eyes. He could feel the blood freezing on his face. "Are we talking or riding?"

"Riding," said the Lord of Bones.

It was a grim gallop. They rode two miles down the column through swirling snows, then cut through a tangle of baggage wayns to splash across the Milkwater where it took a great loop toward the east. A crust of thin ice covered the river shallows; with every step their horses' hooves crashed through, until they reached the deeper water ten yards out. The snow seemed be falling even faster on the eastern bank, and the drifts were deeper too. *Even the wind is colder.* And night was falling too.

But even through the blowing snow, the shape of the great white hill that loomed above the trees was unmistakable. *The Fist of the First Men.* Jon heard the scream of the eagle overhead. A raven looked down from a soldier pine and *quork*ed as he went past. *Had the Old Bear made his attack?*

Instead of the clash of steel and the thrum of arrows taking flight, Jon heard only the soft crunch of frozen crust beneath his garron's hooves.

In silence they circled round to the south slope, where the approach was easiest. It was there at the bottom that Jon saw the dead horse, sprawled at the base of the hill, half buried in the snow. Entrails spilled from the belly of the animal like frozen snakes, and one of its legs was gone. *Wolves,* was Jon's first thought, but that was wrong. Wolves eat their kill.

More garrons were strewn across the slope, legs twisted grotesquely, blind eyes staring in death. The wildlings crawled over them like flies, stripping them of saddles, bridles, packs, and armor, and hacking them apart with stone axes.

"Up," Rattleshirt told Jon. "Mance is up top."

Outside the ringwall they dismounted to squeeze through a crooked gap in the stones. The carcass of a shaggy brown garron was impaled upon the sharpened stakes the Old Bear had placed inside every entrance. *He was trying to get out, not in.* There was no sign of a rider.

Inside was more, and worse. Jon had never seen pink snow before. The wind gusted around him, pulling at his heavy sheepskin cloak. Ravens flapped from one dead horse to the next. *Are those wild ravens, or our own?* Jon could not tell. He wondered where poor Sam was now. And *what* he was.

A crust of frozen blood crunched beneath the heel of his boot. The wildlings were stripping the dead horses of every scrap of steel and leather, even prying the horseshoes off their hooves. A few were going through packs they'd turned up, looking for weapons and food. Jon passed one of Chett's dogs, or what remained of him, lying in a sludgy pool of half-frozen blood.

A few tents were still standing on the far side of the camp, and it was there they found Mance Rayder. Beneath his slashed cloak of black wool and red silk he wore black ringmail and shaggy fur breeches, and on his head was a great bronze-and-iron helm with raven wings at either temple. Jarl was with him, and Harma the Dogshead; Styr as well, and Varamyr Sixskins with his wolves and his shadowcat.

The look Mance gave Jon was grim and cold. "What happened to your face?"

Ygritte said, "Orell tried to take his eye out."

"It was him I asked. Has he lost his tongue? Perhaps he should, to spare us further lies."

Styr the Magnar drew a long knife. "The boy might see more clear with one eye, instead of two."

"Would you like to keep your eye, Jon?" asked the King-beyond-the-Wall. "If so, tell me how many they were. And try and speak the truth this time, Bastard of Winterfell."

Jon's throat was dry. "My lord … what …"

"I am not your lord," said Mance. "And the *what* is plain enough. Your brothers died. The question is, how many?"

Jon's face was throbbing, the snow kept coming down, and it was hard to think. *You must not balk, whatever is asked of you,* Qhorin had told him. The words stuck in his throat, but he made himself say, "There were three hundred of us."

"Us?" Mance said sharply.

"Them. Three hundred of them." *Whatever is asked, the Halfhand said. So why do I feel so craven?* "Two hundred from Castle Black, and one hundred from the Shadow Tower."

"There's a truer song than the one you sang in my tent." Mance looked to Harma Dogshead. "How many horses have we found?"

"More'n a hundred," that huge woman replied, "less than two. There's more dead to the east, under the snow, hard t' know how many." Behind her stood her banner bearer, holding a pole with a dog's head on it, fresh enough to still be leaking blood.

"You should never have lied to me, Jon Snow," said Mance.

"I … I know that." *What could he say?*

The wildling king studied his face. "Who had the command here? And tell me true. Was it Rykker? Smallwood? Not Wythers, he's too feeble. Whose tent was this?"

I have said too much. "You did not find his body?"

Harma snorted, her disdain frosting from her nostrils. "What fools these black crows be."

"The next time you answer me with a question, I will give you to my Lord of Bones," Mance Rayder promised Jon. He stepped closer. "Who led here?"

One more step, thought Jon. *Another foot*. He moved his hand closer to Longclaw's hilt. *If I hold my tongue …*

"Reach up for that bastard sword and I'll have your bastard head off before it clears the scabbard," said Mance. "I am fast losing patience with you, crow."

"Say it," Ygritte urged. "He's dead, whoever he was."

His frown cracked the blood on his cheek. *This is too hard*, Jon thought in despair. *How do I play the turncloak without becoming one?* Qhorin had not told him that. But the second step is always easier than the first. "The Old Bear."

"That old man?" Harma's tone said she did not believe it. "He came himself? Then who commands at Castle Black?"

"Bowen Marsh." This time Jon answered at once. *You must not balk, whatever is asked of you.*

Mance laughed. "If so, our war is won. Bowen knows a deal more about counting swords than he's ever known about using them."

"The Old Bear commanded," said Jon. "This place was high and strong, and he made it stronger. He dug pits and planted stakes, laid up food and water. He was ready for …"

"… me?" finished Mance Rayder. "Aye, he was. Had I been fool enough to storm this hill, I might have lost five men for every crow I slew and still counted myself lucky." His mouth grew hard. "But when the dead walk, walls and stakes and swords mean nothing. You cannot fight the dead, Jon Snow. No man knows that half so well as me." He gazed up at the darkening sky and said, "The crows may have helped us more than they know. I'd wondered why we'd suffered no attacks. But there's still a hundred leagues to go, and the cold is rising. Varamyr, send your wolves sniffing after the wights, I won't have them taking us unawares. My Lord of Bones, double all the patrols, and make certain every man has torch and flint. Styr, Jarl, you ride at first light."

"Mance," Rattleshirt said, "I want me some crow bones."

Ygritte stepped in front of Jon. "You can't kill a man for lying to protect them as was his brothers."

"They are still his brothers," declared Styr.

"They're *not*," insisted Ygritte. "He never killed me, like they told him. And he slew the Halfhand, we all saw."

Jon's breath misted the air. *If I lie to him, he'll know.* He looked Mance Rayder in the eyes, opened and closed his burned hand. "I wear the cloak you gave me, Your Grace."

"A sheepskin cloak!" said Ygritte. "And there's many a night we dance beneath it, too!"

Jarl laughed, and even Harma Dogshead smirked. "Is that the way of it, Jon Snow?" asked Mance Rayder, mildly. "Her and you?"

It was easy to lose your way beyond the Wall. Jon did not know that he could tell honor from shame anymore, or right from wrong. *Father forgive me.* "Yes," he said.

Mance nodded. "Good. You'll go with Jarl and Styr on the morrow, then. Both of you. Far be it from me to separate two hearts that beat as one."

"Go where?" said Jon.

"Over the Wall. It's past time you proved your faith with something more than words, Jon Snow."

The Magnar was not pleased. "What do I want with a crow?"

"He knows the Watch and he knows the Wall," said Mance, "and he knows Castle Black better than any raider ever could. You'll find a use for him, or you're a fool."

Styr scowled. "His heart may still be black."

"Then cut it out." Mance turned to Rattleshirt. "My Lord of Bones, keep the column moving at all costs. If we reach the Wall before Mormont, we've won."

"They'll move." Rattleshirt's voice was thick and angry.

Mance nodded, and walked away, Harma and Sixskins beside him.

Varamyr's wolves and shadowcat followed behind. Jon and Ygritte were left with Jarl, Rattleshirt, and the Magnar. The two older wildlings looked at Jon with ill-concealed rancor as Jarl said, "You heard, we ride at daybreak. Bring all the food you can, there'll be no time to hunt. And have your face seen to, crow. You look a bloody mess."

"I will," said Jon.

"You best not be lying, girl," Rattleshirt said to Ygritte, his eyes shiny behind the giant's skull.

Jon drew Longclaw. "Get away from us, unless you want what Qhorin got."

"You got no wolf to help you here, boy." Rattleshirt reached for his own sword.

"Sure o' that, are you?" Ygritte laughed.

Atop the stones of the ringwall, Ghost hunched with white fur bristling. He made no sound, but his dark red eyes spoke blood. The Lord of Bones moved his hand slowly away from his sword, backed off a step, and left them with a curse.

Ghost padded beside their garrons as Jon and Ygritte descended the Fist. It was not until they were halfway across the Milkwater that Jon felt safe enough to say, "I never asked you to lie for me."

"I never did," she said. "I left out part, is all."

"You said—"

"—that we fuck beneath your cloak many a night. I never said when we started, though." The smile she gave him was almost shy. "Find another place for Ghost to sleep tonight, Jon Snow. It's like Mance said. Deeds is truer than words."

SANSA

"A new gown?" she said, as wary as she was astonished.

"More lovely than any you have worn, my lady," the old woman promised. She measured Sansa's hips with a length of knotted string. "All silk and Myrish lace, with satin linings. You will be very beautiful. The queen herself has commanded it."

"Which queen?" Margaery was not yet Joff's queen, but she had been Renly's. Or did she mean the Queen of Thorns? Or …

"The Queen Regent, to be sure."

"Queen *Cersei*?"

"None other. She has honored me with her custom for many a year." The old woman laid her string along the inside of Sansa's leg. "Her Grace said to me that you are a woman now, and should not dress like a little girl. Hold out your arm."

Sansa lifted her arm. She needed a new gown, that was true. She had grown three inches in the past year, and most of her old wardrobe had been ruined by the smoke when she'd tried to burn her mattress on the day of her first flowering.

"Your bosom will be as lovely as the queen's," the old woman said as she looped her string around Sansa's chest. "You should not hide it so."

The comment made her blush. Yet the last time she'd gone riding, she could not lace her jerkin all the way to the top, and the stableboy gaped at her as he helped her mount. Sometimes she caught grown men looking at her chest as well, and some of her tunics were so tight she could scarce breathe in them.

"What color will it be?" she asked the seamstress.

"Leave the colors to me, my lady. You will be pleased, I know you will. You shall have smallclothes and hose as well, kirtles and mantles and cloaks, and all else befitting a … a lovely young lady of noble birth."

"Will they be ready in time for the king's wedding?"

"Oh, sooner, much sooner, Her Grace insists. I have six seamstresses and twelve apprentice girls, and we have set all our other work aside for this. Many ladies will be cross with us, but it was the queen's command."

"Thank Her Grace kindly for her thoughtfulness," Sansa said politely. "She is too good to me."

"Her Grace is most generous," the seamstress agreed, as she gathered up her things and took her leave.

But why? Sansa wondered when she was alone. It made her uneasy. *I'll wager this gown is Margaery's doing somehow, or her grandmother's.*

Margaery's kindness had been unfailing, and her presence changed everything. Her ladies welcomed Sansa as well. It had been so long since she had enjoyed the company of other women, she had almost forgotten how pleasant it could be. Lady Leonette gave her lessons on the high harp, and Lady Janna shared all the choice gossip. Merry Crane always had an amusing story, and little Lady Bulwer reminded her of Arya, though not so fierce.

Closest to Sansa's own age were the cousins Elinor, Alla, and Megga, Tyrells from junior branches of the House. "Roses from lower on the bush," quipped Elinor, who was witty and willowy. Megga was round and loud, Alla shy and pretty, but Elinor ruled the three by right of womanhood; she was a maiden flowered, whereas Megga and Alla were mere girls.

The cousins took Sansa into their company as if they had known her all their lives. They spent long afternoons doing needlework and talking over lemon cakes and honeyed wine, played at tiles of an evening, sang together in the castle sept … and often one or two of them would be chosen to share Margaery's bed, where they would whisper half the night away. Alla had a lovely voice, and when

coaxed would play the woodharp and sing songs of chivalry and lost loves. Megga couldn't sing, but she was mad to be kissed. She and Alla played a kissing game sometimes, she confessed, but it wasn't the same as kissing a man, much less a king. Sansa wondered what Megga would think about kissing the Hound, as she had. He'd come to her the night of the battle stinking of wine and blood. *He kissed me and threatened to kill me, and made me sing him a song.*

"King Joffrey has such beautiful lips," Megga gushed, oblivious. "Oh, poor Sansa, how your heart must have broken when you lost him. Oh, how you must have wept!"

Joffrey made me weep more often than you know, she wanted to say, but Butterbumps was not on hand to drown out her voice, so she pressed her lips together and held her tongue.

As for Elinor, she was promised to a young squire, a son of Lord Ambrose; they would be wed as soon as he won his spurs. He had worn her favor in the Battle of the Blackwater, where he'd slain a Myrish crossbowman and a Mullendore man-at-arms. "Alyn said her favor made him fearless," said Megga. "He says he shouted her name for his battle cry, isn't that ever so gallant? Someday, I want some champion to wear my favor, and kill a hundred men." Elinor told her to hush, but looked pleased all the same.

They are children, Sansa thought. *They are silly little girls, even Elinor. They've never seen a battle, they've never seen a man die, they know nothing.* Their dreams were full of songs and stories, the way hers had been before Joffrey cut her father's head off. Sansa pitied them. Sansa envied them.

Margaery was different, though. Sweet and gentle, yet there was a little of her grandmother in her, too. The day before last she'd taken Sansa hawking. It was the first time she had been outside the city since the battle. The dead had been burned or buried, but the Mud Gate was scarred and splintered where Lord Stannis's rams had battered it, and the hulls of smashed ships could be seen along both sides of the Blackwater, charred masts poking from the shallows like gaunt black fingers. The only traffic was the flat-bottomed ferry that took them across the river, and when they reached the kingswood they found a wilderness of ash and charcoal and dead trees. But the waterfowl teemed in the marshes along the bay, and Sansa's merlin brought down three ducks while Margaery's peregrine took a heron in full flight.

"Willas has the best birds in the Seven Kingdoms," Margaery said when the two of them were briefly alone. "He flies an eagle sometimes. You will see, Sansa." She took her by the hand and gave it a squeeze. "Sister."

Sister. Sansa had once dreamt of having a sister like Margaery; beautiful and gentle, with all the world's graces at her command. Arya had been entirely unsatisfactory as sisters went. *How can I let my sister marry Joffrey?* she thought, and suddenly her eyes were full of tears. "Margaery, please," she said, "you mustn't." It was hard to get the words out. "You *mustn't* marry him. He's not like he seems, he's not. He'll hurt you."

"I shouldn't think so." Margaery smiled confidently. "It's brave of you to warn me, but you need not fear. Joff's spoiled and vain and I don't doubt that he's as cruel as you say, but Father forced him to name Loras to his Kingsguard before he would agree to the match. I shall have the finest knight in the Seven Kingdoms protecting me night and day, as Prince Aemon protected Naerys. So our little lion had best behave, hadn't he?" She laughed, and said, "Come, sweet sister, let's race back to the river. It will drive our guards quite mad." And without waiting for an answer, she put her heels into her horse and flew.

She is so brave, Sansa thought, galloping after her … and yet, her doubts still gnawed at her. Ser Loras was a great knight, all agreed. But Joffrey had other Kingsguard, and gold cloaks and red cloaks besides, and when he was older he would command armies of his own. Aegon the Unworthy had never harmed Queen Naerys, perhaps for fear of their brother the Dragonknight … but when another of his Kingsguard fell in love with one of his mistresses, the king had taken both their heads.

Ser Loras is a Tyrell, Sansa reminded herself. *That other knight was only a Toyne. His brothers had no armies, no way to avenge him but with swords.* Yet the more she thought about it all, the more

she wondered. *Joff might restrain himself for a few turns, perhaps as long as a year, but soon or late he will show his claws, and when he does …* The realm might have a second Kingslayer, and there would be war *inside* the city, as the men of the lion and the men of the rose made the gutters run red.

Sansa was surprised that Margaery did not see it too. *She is older than me, she must be wiser. And her father, Lord Tyrell, he knows what he is doing, surely. I am just being silly.*

When she told Ser Dontos that she was going to Highgarden to marry Willas Tyrell, she thought he would be relieved and pleased for her. Instead he had grabbed her arm and said, "You *cannot*!" in a voice as thick with horror as with wine. "I tell you, these Tyrells are only Lannisters with flowers. I beg of you, forget this folly, give your Florian a kiss, and promise you'll go ahead as we have planned. The night of Joffrey's wedding, that's not so long, wear the silver hair net and do as I told you, and afterward we make our escape." He tried to plant a kiss on her cheek.

Sansa slipped from his grasp and stepped away from him. "I won't. I can't. Something would go wrong. When I *wanted* to escape you wouldn't take me, and now I don't need to."

Dontos stared at her stupidly. "But the arrangements are made, sweetling. The ship to take you home, the boat to take you to the ship, your Florian did it all for his sweet Jonquil."

"I am sorry for all the trouble I put you to," she said, "but I have no need of boats and ships now."

"But it's all to see you *safe*."

"I will be safe in Highgarden. Willas will keep me safe."

"But he does not know you," Dontos insisted, "and he will not love you. Jonquil, Jonquil, open your sweet eyes, these Tyrells care nothing for you. It's your *claim* they mean to wed."

"My claim?" She was lost for a moment.

"Sweetling," he told her, "you are heir to Winterfell." He grabbed her again, pleading that she must not do this thing, and Sansa wrenched free and left him swaying beneath the heart tree. She had not visited the godswood since.

But she had not forgotten his words, either. *The heir to Winterfell*, she would think as she lay abed at night. *It's your claim they mean to wed.* Sansa had grown up with three brothers. She never thought to have a claim, but with Bran and Rickon dead … *It doesn't matter, there's still Robb, he's a man grown now, and soon he'll wed and have a son. Anyway, Willas Tyrell will have Highgarden, what would he want with Winterfell?*

Sometimes she would whisper his name into her pillow just to hear the sound of it. "Willas, Willas, Willas." Willas was as good a name as Loras, she supposed. They even sounded the same, a little. What did it matter about his leg? Willas would be Lord of Highgarden and she would be his lady.

She pictured the two of them sitting together in a garden with puppies in their laps, or listening to a singer strum upon a lute while they floated down the Mander on a pleasure barge. *If I give him sons, he may come to love me.* She would name them Eddard and Brandon and Rickon, and raise them all to be as valiant as Ser Loras. *And to hate Lannisters, too.* In Sansa's dreams, her children looked just like the brothers she had lost. Sometimes there was even a girl who looked like Arya.

She could never hold a picture of Willas long in her head, though; her imaginings kept turning him back into Ser Loras, young and graceful and beautiful. *You must not think of him like that*, she told herself. *Or else he may see the disappointment in your eyes when you meet, and how could he marry you then, knowing it was his brother you loved?* Willas Tyrell was twice her age, she reminded herself constantly, and lame as well, and perhaps even plump and red-faced like his father. But comely or no, he might be the only champion she would ever have.

Once, she dreamed it was still her marrying Joff, not Margaery, and on their wedding night he turned into the headsman Ilyn Payne. She woke trembling. She did not want Margaery to suffer as she had, but she dreaded the thought that the Tyrells might refuse to go ahead with the wedding. *I warned her, I did, I told her the truth of him.* Perhaps Margaery did not believe her. Joff always played the perfect knight with her, as once he had with Sansa. *She will see his true nature soon enough. After the wedding if not before.* Sansa decided that she would light a candle to the Mother Above the

next time she visited the sept, and ask her to protect Margaery from Joffrey's cruelty. And perhaps a candle to the Warrior as well, for Loras.

She would wear her new gown for the ceremony at the Great Sept of Baelor, she decided as the seamstress took her last measurement. *That must be why Cersei is having it made for me, so I will not look shabby at the wedding.* She really ought to have a different gown for the feast afterward but she supposed one of her old ones would do. She did not want to risk getting food or wine on the new one. *I must take it with me to Highgarden.* She wanted to look beautiful for Willas Tyrell. *Even if Dontos was right, and it is Winterfell he wants and not me, he still may come to love me for myself.* Sansa hugged herself tightly, wondering how long it would be before the gown was ready. She could scarcely wait to wear it.

ARYA

The rains came and went, but there was more grey sky than blue, and all the streams were running high. On the morning of the third day, Arya noticed that the moss was growing mostly on the wrong side of the trees. “We’re going the wrong way,” she said to Gendry, as they rode past an especially mossy elm. “We’re going south. See how the moss is growing on the trunk?”

He pushed thick black hair from eyes and said, “We’re following the road, that’s all. The road goes south here.”

We’ve been going south all day, she wanted to tell him. *And yesterday too, when we were riding along that streambed.* But she hadn’t been paying close attention yesterday, so she couldn’t be certain. “I think we’re lost,” she said in a low voice. “We shouldn’t have left the river. All we had to do was follow it.”

“The river bends and loops,” said Gendry. “This is just a shorter way, I bet. Some secret outlaw way. Lem and Tom and them have been living here for years.”

That was true. Arya bit her lip. “But the moss …”

“The way it’s raining, we’ll have moss growing from our ears before long,” Gendry complained.

“Only from our *south* ear,” Arya declared stubbornly. There was no use trying to convince the Bull of anything. Still, he was the only true friend she had, now that Hot Pie had left them.

“Sharna says she needs me to bake bread,” he’d told her, the day they rode. “Anyhow I’m tired of rain and saddlesores and being scared all the time. There’s ale here, and rabbit to eat, and the bread will be better when I make it. You’ll see, when you come back. You will come back, won’t you? When the war’s done?” He remembered who she was then, and added, “My lady,” reddening.

Arya didn’t know if the war would ever be done, but she had nodded. “I’m sorry I beat you that time,” she said. Hot Pie was stupid and craven, but he’d been with her all the way from King’s Landing and she’d gotten used to him. “I broke your nose.”

“You broke Lem’s too.” Hot Pie grinned. “That was good.”

“Lem didn’t think so,” Arya said glumly. Then it was time to go. When Hot Pie asked if he might kiss milady’s hand, she punched his shoulder. “Don’t call me that. You’re Hot Pie, and I’m Arry.”

“I’m not Hot Pie here. Sharna just calls me Boy. The same as she calls the other boy. It’s going to be confusing.”

She missed him more than she thought she would, but Harwin made up for it some. She had told him about his father Hullen, and how she’d found him dying by the stables in the Red Keep, the day she fled. “He always said he’d die in a stable,” Harwin said, “but we all thought some bad-tempered stallion would be his death, not a pack of lions.” Arya told of Yoren and their escape from King’s Landing as well, and much that had happened since, but she left out the stableboy she’d stabbed with Needle, and the guard whose throat she’d cut to get out of Harrenhal. Telling Harwin would be almost like telling her father, and there were some things that she could not bear having her father know.

Nor did she speak of Jaqen H’ghar and the three deaths he’d owed and paid. The iron coin he’d given her Arya kept tucked away beneath her belt, but sometimes at night she would take it out and remember how his face had melted and changed when he ran his hand across it. “*Valar morghulis*,” she would say under her breath. “Ser Gregor, Dunsen, Polliver, Raff the Sweetling. The Tickler and the Hound. Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei, King Joffrey.”

Only six Winterfell men remained of the twenty her father had sent west with Beric Dondarrion, Harwin told her, and they were scattered. “It was a trap, milady. Lord Tywin sent his Mountain across the Red Fork with fire and sword, hoping to draw your lord father. He planned for Lord Eddard to come west himself to deal with Gregor Clegane. If he had he would have been killed, or taken prisoner and traded for the Imp, who was your lady mother’s captive at the time. Only the Kingslayer

never knew Lord Tywin's plan, and when he heard about his brother's capture he attacked your father in the streets of King's Landing."

"I remember," said Arya. "He killed Jory." Jory had always smiled at her, when he wasn't telling her to get from underfoot.

"He killed Jory," Harwin agreed, "and your father's leg was broken when his horse fell on him. So Lord Eddard *couldn't* go west. He sent Lord Beric instead, with twenty of his own men and twenty from Winterfell, me among them. There were others besides. Thoros and Ser Raymun Darry and their men, Ser Gladden Wylde, a lord named Lothar Mallery. But Gregor was waiting for us at the Mummer's Ford, with men concealed on both banks. As we crossed, he fell upon us from front and rear.

"I saw the Mountain slay Raymun Darry with a single blow so terrible that it took Darry's arm off at the elbow and killed the horse beneath him too. Gladden Wylde died there with him, and Lord Mallery was ridden down and drowned. We had lions on every side, and I thought I was doomed with the rest, but Alyn shouted commands and restored order to our ranks, and those still ahorse rallied around Thoros and cut our way free. Six score we'd been that morning. By dark no more than two score were left, and Lord Beric was gravely wounded. Thoros drew a foot of lance from his chest that night, and poured boiling wine into the hole it left.

"Every man of us was certain his lordship would be dead by daybreak. But Thoros prayed with him all night beside the fire, and when dawn came, he was still alive, and stronger than he'd been. It was a fortnight before he could mount a horse, but his courage kept us strong. He told us that our war had not ended at the Mummer's Ford, but only begun there, and that every man of ours who'd fallen would be avenged tenfold.

"By then the fighting had passed by us. The Mountain's men were only the van of Lord Tywin's host. They crossed the Red Fork in strength and swept up into the riverlands, burning everything in their path. We were so few that all we could do was harry their rear, but we told each other that we'd join up with King Robert when he marched west to crush Lord Tywin's rebellion. Only then we heard that Robert was dead, and Lord Eddard as well, and Cersei Lannister's whelp had ascended the Iron Throne.

"That turned the whole world on its head. We'd been sent out by the King's Hand to deal with outlaws, you see, but now we *were* the outlaws, and Lord Tywin was the Hand of the King. There was some wanted to yield then, but Lord Beric wouldn't hear of it. We were still king's men, he said, and these were the king's people the lions were savaging. If we could not fight for Robert, we would fight for them, until every man of us was dead. And so we did, but as we fought something queer happened. For every man we lost, two showed up to take his place. A few were knights or squires, of gentle birth, but most were common men—fieldhands and fiddlers and innkeeps, servants and shoemakers, even two septons. Men of all sorts, and women too, children, dogs …"

"*Dogs?*" said Arya.

"Aye." Harwin grinned. "One of our lads keeps the meanest dogs you'd ever want to see."

"I wish I had a good mean dog," said Arya wistfully. "A lion-killing dog." She'd had a direwolf once, Nymeria, but she'd thrown rocks at her until she fled, to keep the queen from killing her. *Could a direwolf kill a lion?* she wondered.

It rained again that afternoon, and long into the evening. Thankfully the outlaws had secret friends all over, so they did not need to camp out in the open or seek shelter beneath some leaky bower, as she and Hot Pie and Gendry had done so often.

That night they sheltered in a burned, abandoned village. At least it *seemed* to be abandoned, until Jack-Be-Lucky blew two short blasts and two long ones on his hunting horn. Then all sorts of people came crawling out of the ruins and up from secret cellars. They had ale and dried apples and some stale barley bread, and the outlaws had a goose that Anguy had brought down on the ride, so supper that night was almost a feast.

Arya was sucking the last bit of meat off a wing when one of the villagers turned to Lem Lemoncloak and said, “There were men through here not two days past, looking for the Kingslayer.”

Lem snorted. “They’d do better looking in Riverrun. Down in the deepest dungeons, where it’s nice and damp.” His nose looked like a squashed apple, red and raw and swollen, and his mood was foul.

“No,” another villager said. “He’s escaped.”

The Kingslayer. Arya could feel the hair on the back of her neck prickling. She held her breath to listen.

“Could that be true?” Tom o’ Sevens said.

“I’ll not believe it,” said the one-eyed man in the rusty pothelm. The other outlaws called him Jack-Be-Lucky, though losing an eye didn’t seem very lucky to Arya. “I’ve had me a taste o’ them dungeons. How could he escape?”

The villagers could only shrug at that. Greenbeard stroked his thick grey-and-green whiskers and said, “The wolves will drown in blood if the Kingslayer’s loose again. Thoros must be told. The Lord of Light will show him Lannister in the flames.”

“There’s a fine fire burning here,” said Anguy, smiling.

Greenbeard laughed, and cuffed the archer’s ear. “Do I look a priest to you, Archer? When Pello of Tyrosh peers into the fire, the cinders singe his beard.”

Lem cracked his knuckles and said, “Wouldn’t Lord Beric love to capture Jaime Lannister, though …”

“Would he hang him, Lem?” one of the village women asked. “It’d be half a shame to hang a man as pretty as that one.”

“A trial first!” said Anguy. “Lord Beric always gives them a trial, you know that.” He smiled. “*Then* he hangs them.”

There was laughter all around. Then Tom drew his fingers across the strings of his woodharp and broke into soft song.

The brothers of the Kingswood,
they were an outlaw band.
The forest was their castle,
but they roamed across the land.
No man’s gold was safe from them,
nor any maiden’s hand.
Oh, the brothers of the Kingswood,
that fearsome outlaw band …

Warm and dry in a corner between Gendry and Harwin, Arya listened to the singing for a time, then closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. She dreamt of home; not Riverrun, but Winterfell. It was not a good dream, though. She was alone outside the castle, up to her knees in mud. She could see the grey walls ahead of her, but when she tried to reach the gates every step seemed harder than the one before, and the castle faded before her, until it looked more like smoke than granite. And there were wolves as well, gaunt grey shapes stalking through the trees all around her, their eyes shining. Whenever she looked at them, she remembered the taste of blood.

The next morning, they left the road to cut across the fields. The wind was gusting, sending dry brown leaves swirling around the hooves of their horses, but for once it did not rain. When the sun came out from behind a cloud, it was so bright Arya had to pull her hood forward to keep it out of her eyes.

She reined up very suddenly. “We *are* going the wrong way!”

Gendry groaned. “What is it, moss again?”

"Look at the *sun*," she said. "We're going *south*!" Arya rummaged in her saddlebag for the map, so she could show them. "We should never have left the Trident. See." She unrolled the map on her leg. All of them were looking at her now. "See, there's Riverrun, between the rivers."

"As it happens," said Jack-Be-Lucky, "we know where Riverrun is. Every man o' us."

"You're not going to Riverrun," Lem told her bluntly.

I was almost there, Arya thought. *I should have let them take our horses. I could have walked the rest of the way.* She remembered her dream then, and bit her lip.

"Ah, don't look so hurt, child," said Tom Sevenstrings. "No harm will come to you, you have my word on that."

"The word of a *liar*!"

"No one lied," said Lem. "We made no promises. It's not for us to say what's to be done with you."

Lem was not the leader, though, no more than Tom; that was Greenbeard, the Tyroshi. Arya turned to face him. "Take me to Riverrun and you'll be rewarded," she said desperately.

"Little one," Greenbeard answered, "a peasant may skin a common squirrel for his pot, but if he finds a gold squirrel in his tree he takes it to his lord, or he will wish he did."

"I'm not a squirrel," Arya insisted.

"You are." Greenbeard laughed. "A little gold squirrel who's off to see the lightning lord, whether she wills it or not. He'll know what's to be done with you. I'll wager he sends you back to your lady mother, just as you wish."

Tom Sevenstrings nodded. "Aye, that's like Lord Beric. He'll do right by you, see if he don't."

Lord Beric Dondarrion. Arya remembered all she'd heard at Harrenhal, from the Lannisters and the Bloody Mummers alike. Lord Beric the wisp o' the wood. Lord Beric who'd been killed by Vargo Hoat and before that by Ser Amory Lorch, and twice by the Mountain That Rides. *If he won't send me home maybe I'll kill him too.* "Why do I have to see Lord Beric?" she asked quietly.

"We bring him all our highborn captives," said Anguy.

Captive. Arya took a breath to still her soul. *Calm as still water.* She glanced at the outlaws on their horses, and turned her horse's head. *Now, quick as a snake*, she thought, as she slammed her heels into the courser's flank. Right between Greenbeard and Jack-Be-Lucky she flew, and caught one glimpse of Gendry's startled face as his mare moved out of her way. And then she was in the open field, and running.

North or south, east or west, that made no matter now. She could find the way to Riverrun later, once she'd lost them. Arya leaned forward in the saddle and urged the horse to a gallop. Behind her the outlaws were cursing and shouting at her to come back. She shut her ears to the calls, but when she glanced back over her shoulder four of them were coming after her, Anguy and Harwin and Greenbeard racing side by side with Lem farther back, his big yellow cloak flapping behind him as he rode. "Swift as a deer," she told her mount. "Run, now, *run.*"

Arya dashed across brown weedy fields, through waist-high grass and piles of dry leaves that flurried and flew when her horse galloped past. There were woods to her left, she saw. *I can lose them there.* A dry ditch ran along one side of the field, but she leapt it without breaking stride, and plunged in among the stand of elm and yew and birch trees. A quick peek back showed Anguy and Harwin still hard on her heels. Greenbeard had fallen behind, though, and she could not see Lem at all. "Faster," she told her horse, "you can, you *can.*"

Between two elms she rode, and never paused to see which side the moss was growing on. She leapt a rotten log and swung wide around a monstrous deadfall, jagged with broken branches. Then up a gentle slope and down the other side, slowing and speeding up again, her horse's shoes striking sparks off the flintstones underfoot. At the top of the hill she glanced back. Harwin had pushed ahead of Anguy, but both were coming hard. Greenbeard had fallen further back and seemed to be flagging.

A stream barred her way. She splashed down into it, through water choked with wet brown leaves. Some clung to her horse's legs as they climbed the other side. The undergrowth was thicker here, the ground so full of roots and rocks that she had to slow, but she kept as good a pace as she dared. Another hill before her, this one steeper. Up she went, and down again. *How big are these woods?* she wondered. She had the faster horse, she knew that, she had stolen one of Roose Bolton's best from the stables at Harrenhal, but his speed was wasted here. *I need to find the fields again. I need to find a road.* Instead she found a game trail. It was narrow and uneven, but it was something. She raced along it, branches whipping at her face. One snagged her hood and yanked it back, and for half a heartbeat she feared they had caught her. A vixen burst from the brush as she passed, startled by the fury of her flight. The game trail brought her to another stream. Or was it the same one? Had she gotten turned around? There was no time to puzzle it out, she could hear their horses crashing through the trees behind her. Thorns scratched at her face like the cats she used to chase in King's Landing. Sparrows exploded from the branches of an alder. But the trees were thinning now, and suddenly she was out of them. Broad level fields stretched before her, all weeds and wild wheat, sodden and trampled. Arya kicked her horse back to a gallop. *Run*, she thought, *run for Riverrun, run for home.* Had she lost them? She took one quick look, and there was Harwin six yards back and gaining. *No,* she thought, *no, he can't, not him, it isn't fair.*

Both horses were lathered and flagging by the time he came up beside her, reached over, and grabbed her bridle. Arya was breathing hard herself then. She knew the fight was done. "You ride like a northman, milady," Harwin said when he'd drawn them to a halt. "Your aunt was the same. Lady Lyanna. But my father was master of horse, remember."

The look she gave him was full of hurt. "I thought you were my father's man."

"Lord Eddard's dead, milady. I belong to the lightning lord now, and to my brothers."

"What brothers?" Old Hullen had fathered no other sons that Arya could remember.

"Anguy, Lem, Tom o' Sevens, Jack and Greenbeard, all of them. We mean your brother Robb no ill, milady … but it's not him we fight for. He has an army all his own, and many a great lord to bend the knee. The smallfolk have only us." He gave her a searching look. "Can you understand what I am telling you?"

"Yes." That he was not Robb's man, she understood well enough. And that she was his captive. *I could have stayed with Hot Pie. We could have taken the little boat and sailed it up to Riverrun.* She had been better off as Squab. No one would take Squab captive, or Nan, or Weasel, or Arry the orphan boy. *I was a wolf,* she thought, *but now I'm just some stupid little lady again.*

"Will you ride back peaceful now," Harwin asked her, "or must I tie you up and throw you across your horse?"

"I'll ride peaceful," she said sullenly. *For now.*

SAMWELL

Sobbing, Sam took another step. *This is the last one, the very last, I can't go on, I can't.* But his feet moved again. One and then the other. They took a step, and then another, and he thought, *They're not my feet, they're someone else's, someone else is walking, it can't be me.*

When he looked down he could see them stumbling through the snow; shapeless things, and clumsy. His boots had been black, he seemed to remember, but the snow had caked around them, and now they were misshapen white balls. Like two clubfeet made of ice.

It would not stop, the snow. The drifts were up past his knees, and a crust covered his lower legs like a pair of white greaves. His steps were dragging, lurching. The heavy pack he carried made him look like some monstrous hunchback. And he was tired, so tired. *I can't go on. Mother have mercy, I can't.*

Every fourth or fifth step he had to reach down and tug up his swordbelt. He had lost the sword on the Fist, but the scabbard still weighed down the belt. He did have two knives; the dragonglass dagger Jon had given him and the steel one he cut his meat with. All that weight dragged heavy, and his belly was so big and round that if he forgot to tug the belt slipped right off and tangled round his ankles, no matter how tight he cinched it. He had tried belting it *above* his belly once, but then it came almost to his armpits. Grenn had laughed himself sick at the sight of it, and Dolorous Edd had said, "I knew a man once who wore his sword on a chain around his neck like that. One day he stumbled, and the hilt went up his nose."

Sam was stumbling himself. There were rocks beneath the snow, and the roots of trees, and sometimes deep holes in the frozen ground. Black Bernarr had stepped in one and broken his ankle three days past, or maybe four, or … he did not know how long it had been, truly. The Lord Commander had put Bernarr on a horse after that.

Sobbing, Sam took another step. It felt more like he was falling down than walking, falling endlessly but never hitting the ground, just falling forward and forward. *I have to stop, it hurts too much. I'm so cold and tired, I need to sleep, just a little sleep beside a fire, and a bite to eat that isn't frozen.*

But if he stopped he died. He knew that. They all knew that, the few who were left. They had been fifty when they fled the Fist, maybe more, but some had wandered off in the snow, a few wounded had bled to death … and sometimes Sam heard shouts behind him, from the rear guard, and once an *awful* scream. When he heard that he had run, twenty yards or thirty, as fast and as far as he could, his half-frozen feet kicking up the snow. He would be running still if his legs were stronger. *They are behind us, they are still behind us, they are taking us one by one.*

Sobbing, Sam took another step. He had been cold so long he was forgetting what it was like to feel warm. He wore three pairs of hose, two layers of smallclothes beneath a double lambswool tunic, and over that a thick quilted coat that padded him against the cold steel of his chainmail. Over the hauberk he had a loose surcoat, over *that* a triple-thick cloak with a bone button that fastened tight under his chins. Its hood flopped forward over his forehead. Heavy fur mitts covered his hands over thin wool-and-leather gloves, a scarf was wrapped snugly about the lower half of his face, and he had a tight-fitting fleece-lined cap to pull down over his ears beneath the hood. And still the cold was in him. His feet especially. He couldn't even feel them now, but only yesterday they had hurt so bad he could hardly bear to stand on them, let alone walk. Every step made him want to scream. Was that yesterday? He could not remember. He had not slept since the Fist, not once since the horn had blown. Unless it was while he was walking. Could a man walk while he was sleeping? Sam did not know, or else he had forgotten.

Sobbing, he took another step. The snow swirled down around him. Sometimes it fell from a white sky, and sometimes from a black, but that was all that remained of day and night. He wore it

on his shoulders like a second cloak, and it piled up high atop the pack he carried and made it even heavier and harder to bear. The small of his back hurt abominably, as if someone had shoved a knife in there and was wiggling it back and forth with every step. His shoulders were in agony from the weight of the mail. He would have given most anything to take it off, but he was afraid to. Anyway he would have needed to remove his cloak and surcoat to get at it, and then the cold would have him.

If only I was stronger … He wasn't, though, and it was no good wishing. Sam was weak, and fat, so very fat, he could hardly bear his own weight, the mail was much too much for him. It felt as though it was rubbing his shoulders raw, despite the layers of cloth and quilt between the steel and skin. The only thing he could do was cry, and when he cried the tears froze on his cheeks.

Sobbing, he took another step. The crust was broken where he set his feet, otherwise he did not think he could have moved at all. Off to the left and right, half-seen through the silent trees, torches turned to vague orange haloes in the falling snow. When he turned his head he could see them, slipping silent through the wood, bobbing up and down and back and forth. *The Old Bear's ring of fire,* he reminded himself, *and woe to him who leaves it.* As he walked, it seemed as if he were chasing the torches ahead of him, but they had legs as well, longer and stronger than his, so he could never catch them.

Yesterday, he begged for them to let him be one of the torchbearers, even if it meant walking outside of the column with the darkness pressing close. He wanted the fire, dreamed of the fire. *If I had the fire, I would not be cold.* But someone reminded him that he'd *had* a torch at the start, but he'd dropped it in the snow and snuffed the fire out. Sam didn't remember dropping any torch, but he supposed it was true. He was too weak to hold his arm up for long. Was it Edd who reminded him about the torch, or Grenn? He couldn't remember that either. *Fat and weak and useless, even my wits are freezing now.* He took another step.

He had wrapped his scarf over his nose and mouth, but it was covered with snot now, and so stiff he feared it must be frozen to his face. Even breathing was hard, and the air was so cold it hurt to swallow it. "Mother have mercy," he muttered in a hushed husky voice beneath the frozen mask. "Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy." With each prayer he took another step, dragging his legs through the snow. "Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy."

His own mother was a thousand leagues south, safe with his sisters and his little brother Dickon in the keep at Horn Hill. *She can't hear me, no more than the Mother Above.* The Mother was merciful, all the septons agreed, but the Seven had no power beyond the Wall. This was where the old gods ruled, the nameless gods of the trees and the wolves and the snows. "Mercy," he whispered then, to whatever might be listening, old gods or new, or demons too, "oh, mercy, mercy me, mercy me."

Maslyn screamed for mercy. Why had he suddenly remembered that? It was nothing he wanted to remember. The man had stumbled backward, dropping his sword, pleading, yielding, even yanking off his thick black glove and thrusting it up before him as if it were a gauntlet. He was still shrieking for quarter as the wight lifted him in the air by the throat and near ripped the head off him. *The dead have no mercy left in them, and the Others … no, I mustn't think of that, don't think, don't remember, just walk, just walk, just walk.*

Sobbing, he took another step.

A root beneath the crust caught his toe, and Sam tripped and fell heavily to one knee, so hard he bit his tongue. He could taste the blood in his mouth, warmer than anything he had tasted since the Fist. *This is the end*, he thought. Now that he had fallen he could not seem to find the strength to rise again. He groped for a tree branch and clutched it tight, trying to pull himself back to his feet, but his stiff legs would not support him. The mail was too heavy, and he was too fat besides, and too weak, and too tired.

"Back on your feet, Piggy," someone growled as he went past, but Sam paid him no mind. *I'll just lie down in the snow and close my eyes.* It wouldn't be so bad, dying here. He couldn't possibly

be any colder, and after a little while he wouldn't be able to feel the ache in his lower back or the terrible pain in his shoulders, no more than he could feel his feet. *I won't be the first to die, they can't say I was.* Hundreds had died on the Fist, they had died all around him, and more had died after, he'd seen them. Shivering, Sam released his grip on the tree and eased himself down in the snow. It was cold and wet, he knew, but he could scarcely feel it through all his clothing. He stared upward at the pale white sky as snowflakes drifted down upon his stomach and his chest and his eyelids. *The snow will cover me like a thick white blanket. It will be warm under the snow, and if they speak of me they'll have to say I died a man of the Night's Watch. I did. I did. I did my duty. No one can say I forswore myself. I'm fat and I'm weak and I'm craven, but I did my duty.*

The ravens had been his responsibility. That was why they had brought him along. He hadn't wanted to go, he'd told them so, he'd told them all what a big coward he was. But Maester Aemon was very old and blind besides, so they had to send Sam to tend to the ravens. The Lord Commander had given him his orders when they made their camp on the Fist. "You're no fighter. We both know that, boy. If it happens that we're attacked, don't go trying to prove otherwise, you'll just get in the way. You're to send a message. And don't come running to ask what the letter should say. Write it out yourself, and send one bird to Castle Black and another to the Shadow Tower." The Old Bear pointed a gloved finger right in Sam's face. "I don't care if you're so scared you foul your breeches, and I don't care if a thousand wildlings are coming over the walls howling for your blood, *you get those birds off*, or I swear I'll hunt you through all seven hells and make you damn sorry that you didn't." And Mormont's own raven had bobbed its head up and down and croaked, "*Sorry, sorry, sorry*."

Sam *was* sorry; sorry he hadn't been braver, or stronger, or good with swords, that he hadn't been a better son to his father and a better brother to Dickon and the girls. He was sorry to die too, but better men had died on the Fist, good men and true, not squeaking fat boys like him. At least he would not have the Old Bear hunting him through hell, though. *I got the birds off. I did that right, at least.* He had written out the messages ahead of time, short messages and simple, telling of an attack on the Fist of the First Men, and then he had tucked them away safe in his parchment pouch, hoping he would never need to send them.

When the horns blew, Sam had been sleeping. He thought he was dreaming them at first, but when he opened his eyes snow was falling on the camp and the black brothers were all grabbing bows and spears and running toward the ringwall. Chett was the only one nearby, Maester Aemon's old steward with the face full of boils and the big wen on his neck. Sam had never seen so much fear on a man's face as he saw on Chett's when that third blast came moaning through the trees. "Help me get the birds off," he pleaded, but the other steward had turned and run off, dagger in hand. *He has the dogs to care for*, Sam remembered. Probably, the Lord Commander had given him some orders as well.

His fingers had been so stiff and clumsy in the gloves, and he was shaking from fear and cold, but he found the parchment pouch and dug out the messages he'd written. The ravens were shrieking furiously, and when he opened the Castle Black cage one of them flew right in his face. Two more escaped before Sam could catch one, and when he did it pecked him through his glove, drawing blood. Yet somehow he held on long enough to attach the little roll of parchment. The warhorn had fallen silent by then, but the Fist rang with shouted commands and the clatter of steel. "*Fly!*" Sam called as he tossed the raven into the air.

The birds in the Shadow Tower cage were screaming and fluttering about so madly that he was afraid to open the door, but he made himself do it anyway. This time he caught the first raven that tried to escape. A moment later, it was clawing its way up through the falling snow, bearing word of the attack.

His duty done, he finished dressing with clumsy, frightened fingers, donning his cap and surcoat and hooded cloak and buckling on his sword-belt, buckling it real tight so it wouldn't fall down. Then he found his pack and stuffed all his things inside, spare smallclothes and dry socks, the dragonglass

arrowheads and spearhead Jon had given him and the old horn too, his parchments, inks, and quills, the maps he'd been drawing, and a rock-hard garlic sausage he'd been saving since the Wall. He tied it all up and shouldered the pack onto his back. *The Lord Commander said I wasn't to rush to the ringwall,* he recalled, *but he said I shouldn't come running to him either.* Sam took a deep breath and realized that he did not know what to do next.

He remembered turning in a circle, lost, the fear growing inside him as it always did. There were dogs barking and horses trumpeting, but the snow muffled the sounds and made them seem far away. Sam could see nothing beyond three yards, not even the torches burning along the low stone wall that ringed the crown of the hill. *Could the torches have gone out?* That was too scary to think about. *The horn blew thrice long, three long blasts means Others.* The white walkers of the wood, the cold shadows, the monsters of the tales that made him squeak and tremble as a boy, riding their giant ice-spiders, hungry for blood …

Awkwardly, he drew his sword, and plodded heavily through the snow holding it. A dog ran past barking, and he saw some of the men from the Shadow Tower, big bearded men with longaxes and eight-foot spears. He felt safer for their company, so he followed them to the wall. When he saw the torches still burning atop the ring of stones a shudder of relief went through him.

The black brothers stood with swords and spears in hand, watching the snow fall, waiting. Ser Mallador Locke went by on his horse, wearing a snow-speckled helm. Sam stood well back behind the others, looking for Grenn or Dolorous Edd. *If I have to die, let me die beside my friends*, he remembered thinking. But all the men around him were strangers, Shadow Tower men under the command of the ranger named Blane.

"Here they come," he heard a brother say.

"Notch," said Blane, and twenty black arrows were pulled from as many quivers, and notched to as many bowstrings.

"Gods be good, there's hundreds," a voice said softly.

"Draw," Blane said, and then, "hold." Sam could not see and did not want to see. The men of the Night's Watch stood behind their torches, waiting with arrows pulled back to their ears, as *something* came up that dark, slippery slope through the snow. "Hold," Blane said again, "hold, hold." And then, "Loose."

The arrows whispered as they flew.

A ragged cheer went up from the men along the ringwall, but it died quickly. "They're not stopping, m'lord," a man said to Blane, and another shouted, "*More!* Look there, coming from the trees," and yet another said, "Gods ha' mercy, they's crawling. They's almost here, *they's on us*!" Sam had been backing away by then, shaking like the last leaf on the tree when the wind kicks up, as much from cold as from fear. It had been very cold that night. *Even colder than now. The snow feels almost warm. I feel better now. A little rest was all I needed. Maybe in a little while I'll be strong enough to walk again. In a little while.*

A horse stepped past his head, a shaggy grey beast with snow in its mane and hooves crusted with ice. Sam watched it come and watched it go. Another appeared from out of the falling snow, with a man in black leading it. When he saw Sam in his path he cursed him and led the horse around. *I wish I had a horse*, he thought. *If I had a horse I could keep going. I could sit, and even sleep some in the saddle*. Most of their mounts had been lost at the Fist, though, and those that remained carried their food, their torches, and their wounded. Sam wasn't wounded. *Only fat and weak, and the greatest craven in the Seven Kingdoms.*

He was *such* a coward. Lord Randyll, his father, had always said so, and he had been right. Sam was his heir, but he had never been worthy, so his father had sent him away to the Wall. His little brother Dickon would inherit the Tarly lands and castle, and the greatsword Heartsbane that the lords of Horn Hill had borne so proudly for centuries. He wondered whether Dickon would shed a tear for his brother who died in the snow, somewhere off beyond the edge of the world. *Why should he? A*

coward's not worth weeping over. He had heard his father tell his mother as much, half a hundred times. The Old Bear knew it too.

"Fire arrows," the Lord Commander roared that night on the Fist, when he appeared suddenly astride his horse, "give them flame." It was then he noticed Sam there quaking. "*Tarly!* Get out of here! Your place is with the ravens."

"I … I … I got the messages away."

"Good." On Mormont's shoulder his own raven echoed, "*Good, good.*" The Lord Commander looked huge in fur and mail. Behind his black iron visor, his eyes were fierce. "You're in the way here. Go back to your cages. If I need to send another message, I don't want to have to find you first. See that the birds are ready." He did not wait for a response, but turned his horse and trotted around the ring, shouting, "Fire! Give them fire!"

Sam did not need to be told twice. He went back to the birds, as fast as his fat legs could carry him. *I should write the message ahead of time*, he thought, *so we can get the birds away as fast as need be*. It took him longer than it should have to light his little fire, to warm the frozen ink. He sat beside it on a rock with quill and parchment, and wrote his messages.

Attacked amidst snow and cold, but we've thrown them back with fire arrows, he wrote, as he heard Thoren Smallwood's voice ring out with a command of, "Notch, draw … loose." The flight of arrows made a sound as sweet as a mother's prayer. "Burn, you dead bastards, burn," Dywen sang out, cackling. The brothers cheered and cursed. *All safe,* he wrote. *We remain on the Fist of the First Men.* Sam hoped they were better archers than him.

He put that note aside and found another blank parchment. *Still fighting on the Fist, amidst heavy snow*, he wrote when someone shouted, "They're still coming." *Result uncertain.* "Spears," someone said. It might have been Ser Mallador, but Sam could not swear to it. *Wights attacked us on the Fist, in snow,* he wrote, *but we drove them off with fire*. He turned his head. Through the drifting snow, all he could see was the huge fire at the center of the camp, with mounted men moving restlessly around it. The reserve, he knew, ready to ride down anything that breached the ringwall. They had armed themselves with torches in place of swords, and were lighting them in the flames.

Wights all around us, he wrote, when he heard the shouts from the north face. *Coming up from north and south at once. Spears and swords don't stop them, only fire.* "Loose, loose, loose," a voice screamed in the night, and another shouted, "Bloody huge," and a third voice said, "A giant!" and a fourth insisted, "A bear, a *bear*!" A horse shrieked and the hounds began to bay, and there was so much shouting that Sam couldn't make out the voices anymore. He wrote faster, note after note. *Dead wildlings, and a giant, or maybe a bear, on us, all around.* He heard the crash of steel on wood, which could only mean one thing. *Wights over the ringwall. Fighting inside the camp.* A dozen mounted brothers pounded past him toward the east wall, burning brands streaming flames in each rider's hand. *Lord Commander Mormont is meeting them with fire. We've won. We're winning. We're holding our own. We're cutting our way free and retreating for the Wall. We're trapped on the Fist, hard pressed.*

One of the Shadow Tower men came staggering out of the darkness to fall at Sam's feet. He crawled within a foot of the fire before he died. *Lost,* Sam wrote, *the battle's lost. We're all lost.*

Why must he remember the fight at the Fist? He didn't want to remember. Not *that*. He tried to make himself remember his mother, or his little sister Talla, or that girl Gilly at Craster's Keep. Someone was shaking him by the shoulder. "Get up," a voice said. "Sam, you can't go to sleep here. Get up and keep walking."

I wasn't asleep, I was remembering. "Go away," he said, his words frosting in the cold air. "I'm well. I want to rest."

"Get up." Grenn's voice, harsh and husky. He loomed over Sam, his blacks crusty with snow. "There's no resting, the Old Bear said. You'll die."

"Grenn." He smiled. "No, truly, I'm good here. You just go on. I'll catch you after I've rested a bit longer."

"You won't." Grenn's thick brown beard was frozen all around his mouth. It made him look like some old man. "You'll freeze, or the Others will get you. Sam, *get up*!"

The night before they left the Wall, Pyp had teased Grenn the way he did, Sam remembered, smiling and saying how Grenn was a good choice for the ranging, since he was too stupid to be terrified. Grenn hotly denied it until he realized what he was saying. He was stocky and thick-necked and strong—Ser Alliser Thorne had called him "Aurochs," the same way he called Sam "Ser Piggy" and Jon "Lord Snow"—but he had always treated Sam nice enough. *That was only because of Jon, though. If it weren't for Jon, none of them would have liked me.* And now Jon was gone, lost in the Skirling Pass with Qhorin Halfhand, most likely dead. Sam would have cried for him, but those tears would only freeze as well, and he could scarcely keep his eyes open now.

A tall brother with a torch stopped beside them, and for a wonderful moment Sam felt the warmth on his face. "Leave him," the man said to Grenn. "If they can't walk, they're done. Save your strength for yourself, Grenn."

"He'll get up," Grenn replied. "He only needs a hand."

The man moved on, taking the blessed warmth with him. Grenn tried to pull Sam to his feet. "That hurts," he complained. "Stop it. Grenn, you're hurting my arm. Stop it."

"You're too bloody heavy." Grenn jammed his hands into Sam's armpits, gave a grunt, and hauled him upright. But the moment he let go, the fat boy sat back down in the snow. Grenn kicked him, a solid thump that cracked the crust of snow around his boot and sent it flying everywhere. "Get *up*!" He kicked him again. "Get up and walk. You have to walk."

Sam fell over sideways, curling up into a tight ball to protect himself from the kicks. He hardly felt them through all his wool and leather and mail, but even so, they hurt. *I thought Grenn was my friend. You shouldn't kick your friends. Why won't they let me be? I just need to rest, that's all, to rest and sleep some, and maybe die a little.*

"If you take the torch, I can take the fat boy."

Suddenly he was jerked up into the cold air, away from his sweet soft snow; he was floating. There was an arm under his knees, and another one under his back. Sam raised his head and blinked. A face loomed close, a broad brutal face with a flat nose and small dark eyes and a thicket of coarse brown beard. He had seen the face before, but it took him a moment to remember. *Paul. Small Paul.* Melting ice ran down into his eyes from the heat of the torch. "Can you carry him?" he heard Grenn ask.

"I carried a calf once was heavier than him. I carried him down to his mother so he could get a drink of milk."

Sam's head bobbed up and down with every step that Small Paul took. "Stop it," he muttered, "put me down, I'm not a baby. I'm a man of the Night's Watch." He sobbed. "Just let me die."

"Be quiet, Sam," said Grenn. "Save your strength. Think about your sisters and brother. Maester Aemon. Your favorite foods. Sing a song if you like."

"Aloud?"

"In your head."

Sam knew a hundred songs, but when he tried to think of one he couldn't. The words had all gone from his head. He sobbed again and said, "I don't know any songs, Grenn. I did know some, but now I don't."

"Yes you do," said Grenn. "How about 'The Bear and the Maiden Fair,' everybody knows that one. *A bear there was, a bear, a bear! All black and brown and covered with hair!*"

"No, not that one," Sam pleaded. The bear that had come up the Fist had no hair left on its rotted flesh. He didn't want to think about bears. "No songs. Please, Grenn."

"Think about your ravens, then."

"They were never mine." *They were the Lord Commander's ravens, the ravens of the Night's Watch.* "They belonged to Castle Black and the Shadow Tower."

Small Paul frowned. “Chett said I could have the Old Bear’s raven, the one that talks. I saved food for it and everything.” He shook his head. “I forgot, though. I left the food where I hid it.” He plodded onward, pale white breath coming from his mouth with every step, then suddenly said, “Could I have one of your ravens? Just the one. I’d never let Lark eat it.”

“They’re gone,” said Sam. “I’m sorry.” *So sorry.* “They’re flying back to the Wall now.” He had set the birds free when he’d heard the warhorns sound once more, calling the Watch to horse. *Two short blasts and a long one, that was the call to mount up.* But there was no reason to mount, unless to abandon the Fist, and that meant the battle was lost. The fear bit him so strong then that it was all Sam could do to open the cages. Only as he watched the last raven flap up into the snowstorm did he realize that he had forgotten to send any of the messages he’d written.

“No,” he’d squealed, “oh, no, oh, no.” The snow fell and the horns blew; *ahooo ahooo ahooooooooooooooooooo*, they cried, *to horse, to horse, to horse.* Sam saw two ravens perched on a rock and ran after them, but the birds flapped off lazily through the swirling snow, in opposite directions. He chased one, his breath puffing out his nose in thick white clouds, stumbled, and found himself ten feet from the ringwall.

After that … he remembered the dead coming over the stones with arrows in their faces and through their throats. Some were all in ringmail and some were almost naked … wildlings, most of them, but a few wore faded blacks. He remembered one of the Shadow Tower men shoving his spear through a wight’s pale soft belly and out his back, and how the thing staggered right up the shaft and reached out his black hands and twisted the brother’s head around until blood came out his mouth. That was when his bladder let go the first time, he was almost sure.

He did not remember running, but he must have, because the next he knew he was near the fire half a camp away, with old Ser Ottyn Wythers and some archers. Ser Ottyn was on his knees in the snow, staring at the chaos around them, until a riderless horse came by and kicked him in the face. The archers paid him no mind. They were loosing fire arrows at shadows in the dark. Sam saw one wight hit, saw the flames engulf it, but there were a dozen more behind it, and a huge pale shape that must have been the bear, and soon enough the bowmen had no arrows.

And then Sam found himself on a horse. It wasn’t his own horse, and he never recalled mounting up either. Maybe it was the horse that had smashed Ser Ottyn’s face in. The horns were still blowing, so he kicked the horse and turned him toward the sound.

In the midst of carnage and chaos and blowing snow, he found Dolorous Edd sitting on his garron with a plain black banner on a spear. “Sam,” Edd said when he saw him, “would you wake me, please? I am having this terrible nightmare.”

More men were mounting up every moment. The warhorns called them back. *Ahooo ahooo ahooooooooooooooooooo.* “They’re over the west wall, m’lord,” Thoren Smallwood screamed at the Old Bear, as he fought to control his horse. “I’ll send reserves …”

“*NO!*” Mormont had to bellow at the top of his lungs to be heard over the horns. “Call them back, we have to cut our way out.” He stood in his stirrups, his black cloak snapping in the wind, the fire shining off his armor. “*Spearhead!*” he roared. “Form wedge, we ride. Down the south face, then east!”

“My lord, the south slope’s crawling with them!”

“The others are too steep,” Mormont said. “We have—”

His garron screamed and reared and almost threw him as the bear came staggering through the snow. Sam pissed himself all over again. *I didn’t think I had any more left inside me*. The bear was dead, pale and rotting, its fur and skin all sloughed off and half its right arm burned to bone, yet still it came on. Only its eyes lived. *Bright blue, just as Jon said.* They shone like frozen stars. Thoren Smallwood charged, his longsword shining all orange and red from the light of the fire. His swing near took the bear’s head off. And then the bear took his.

“*RIDE!*” the Lord Commander shouted, wheeling.

They were at the gallop by the time they reached the ring. Sam had always been too frightened to jump a horse before, but when the low stone wall loomed up before him he knew he had no choice. He kicked and closed his eyes and whimpered, and the garron took him over, somehow, *somehow*, the garron took him over. The rider to his right came crashing down in a tangle of steel and leather and screaming horseflesh, and then the wights were swarming over him and the wedge was closing up. They plunged down the hillside at a run, through clutching black hands and burning blue eyes and blowing snow. Horses stumbled and rolled, men were swept from their saddles, torches spun through the air, axes and swords hacked at dead flesh, and Samwell Tarly sobbed, clutching desperately to his horse with a strength he never knew he had.

He was in the middle of the flying spearhead with brothers on either side, and before and behind him as well. A dog ran with them for a ways, bounding down the snowy slope and in and out among the horses, but it could not keep up. The wights stood their ground and were ridden down and trampled underhoof. Even as they fell they clutched at swords and stirrups and the legs of passing horses. Sam saw one claw open a garron's belly with its right hand while it clung to the saddle with its left.

Suddenly the trees were all about them, and Sam was splashing through a frozen stream with the sounds of slaughter dwindling behind. He turned, breathless with relief … until a man in black leapt from the brush and yanked him out of the saddle. Who he was, Sam never saw; he was up in an instant, and galloping away the next. When he tried to run after the horse, his feet tangled in a root and he fell hard on his face and lay weeping like a baby until Dolorous Edd found him there.

That was his last coherent memory of the Fist of the First Men. Later, hours later, he stood shivering among the other survivors, half mounted and half afoot. They were miles from the Fist by then, though Sam did not remember how. Dywen had led down five pack-horses, heavy laden with food and oil and torches, and three had made it this far. The Old Bear made them redistribute the loads, so the loss of any one horse and its provisions would not be such a catastrophe. He took garrons from the healthy men and gave them to the wounded, organized the walkers, and set torches to guard their flanks and rear. *All I need do is walk*, Sam told himself, as he took that first step toward home. But before an hour was gone he had begun to struggle, and to lag …

They were lagging now as well, he saw. He remembered Pyp saying once how Small Paul was the strongest man in the Watch. *He must be, to carry me.* Yet even so, the snow was growing deeper, the ground more treacherous, and Paul's strides had begun to shorten. More horsemen passed, wounded men who looked at Sam with dull incurious eyes. Some torch bearers went by as well. "You're falling behind," one told them. The next agreed. "No one's like to wait for you, Paul. Leave the pig for the dead men."

"He promised I could have a bird," Small Paul said, even though Sam hadn't, not truly. *They aren't mine to give.* "I want me a bird that talks, and eats corn from my hand."

"Bloody fool," the torch man said. Then he was gone.

It was a while after when Grenn stopped suddenly. "We're alone," he said in a hoarse voice. "I can't see the other torches. Was that the rear guard?"

Small Paul had no answer for him. The big man gave a grunt and sank to his knees. His arms trembled as he lay Sam gently in the snow. "I can't carry you no more. I would, but I can't." He shivered violently.

The wind sighed through the trees, driving a fine spray of snow into their faces. The cold was so bitter that Sam felt naked. He looked for the other torches, but they were gone, every one of them. There was only the one Grenn carried, the flames rising from it like pale orange silks. He could see through them, to the black beyond. *That torch will burn out soon,* he thought, *and we are all alone, without food or friends or fire.*

But that was wrong. They weren't alone at all.

The lower branches of the great green sentinel shed their burden of snow with a soft wet *plop*. Grenn spun, thrusting out his torch. "Who goes there?" A horse's head emerged from the darkness.

Sam felt a moment's relief, until he saw the horse. Hoarfrost covered it like a sheen of frozen sweat, and a nest of stiff black entrails dragged from its open belly. On its back was a rider pale as ice. Sam made a whimpery sound deep in his throat. He was so scared he might have pissed himself all over again, but the cold was in him, a cold so savage that his bladder felt frozen solid. The Other slid gracefully from the saddle to stand upon the snow. Sword-slim it was, and milky white. Its armor rippled and shifted as it moved, and its feet did not break the crust of the new-fallen snow.

Small Paul unslung the long-hafted axe strapped across his back. "Why'd you hurt that horse? That was Mawney's horse."

Sam groped for the hilt of his sword, but the scabbard was empty. He had lost it on the Fist, he remembered too late.

"Get away!" Grenn took a step, thrusting the torch out before him. "*Away*, or you burn." He poked at it with the flames.

The Other's sword gleamed with a faint blue glow. It moved toward Grenn, lightning quick, slashing. When the ice-blue blade brushed the flames, a screech stabbed Sam's ears sharp as a needle. The head of the torch tumbled sideways to vanish beneath a deep drift of snow, the fire snuffed out at once. And all Grenn held was a short wooden stick. He flung it at the Other, cursing, as Small Paul charged in with his axe.

The fear that filled Sam then was worse than any fear he had ever felt before, and Samwell Tarly knew every kind of fear. "Mother have mercy," he wept, forgetting the old gods in his terror. "Father protect me, oh oh …" His fingers found his dagger and he filled his hand with that.

The wights had been slow clumsy things, but the Other was light as snow on the wind. It slid away from Paul's axe, armor rippling, and its crystal sword twisted and spun and slipped between the iron rings of Paul's mail, through leather and wool and bone and flesh. It came out his back with a *hissssssssssss* and Sam heard Paul say, "Oh," as he lost the axe. Impaled, his blood smoking around the sword, the big man tried to reach his killer with his hands and almost had before he fell. The weight of him tore the strange pale sword from the Other's grip.

Do it now. Stop crying and fight, you baby. Fight, craven. It was his father he heard, it was Alliser Thorne, it was his brother Dickon and the boy Rast. *Craven, craven, craven*. He giggled hysterically, wondering if they would make a wight of him, a huge fat white wight always tripping over its own dead feet. *Do it, Sam.* Was that Jon, now? Jon was dead. *You can do it, you can, just do it.* And then he was stumbling forward, falling more than running, really, closing his eyes and shoving the dagger blindly out before him with both hands. He heard a *crack*, like the sound ice makes when it breaks beneath a man's foot, and then a screech so shrill and sharp that he went staggering backward with his hands over his muffled ears, and fell hard on his arse.

When he opened his eyes the Other's armor was running down its legs in rivulets as pale blue blood hissed and steamed around the black dragonglass dagger in its throat. It reached down with two bone-white hands to pull out the knife, but where its fingers touched the obsidian they *smoked*.

Sam rolled onto his side, eyes wide as the Other shrank and puddled, dissolving away. In twenty heartbeats its flesh was gone, swirling away in a fine white mist. Beneath were bones like milkglass, pale and shiny, and they were melting too. Finally, only the dragonglass dagger remained, wreathed in steam as if it were alive and sweating. Grenn bent to scoop it up and flung it down again at once. "Mother, that's *cold*."

"Obsidian." Sam struggled to his knees. "Dragonglass, they call it. Dragonglass. *Dragon* glass." He giggled, and cried, and doubled over to heave his courage out onto the snow.

Grenn pulled Sam to his feet, checked Small Paul for a pulse and closed his eyes, then snatched up the dagger again. This time he was able to hold it.

"You keep it," Sam said. "You're not craven like me."

"So craven you killed an Other." Grenn pointed with the knife. "Look there, through the trees. Pink light. Dawn, Sam. Dawn. That must be east. If we head that way, we should catch Mormont."

“If you say.” Sam kicked his left foot against a tree, to knock off all the snow. Then the right. “I’ll try.” Grimacing, he took a step. “I’ll try hard.” And then another.

TYRION

Lord Tywin's chain of hands made a golden glitter against the deep wine velvet of his tunic. The Lords Tyrell, Redwyne, and Rowan gathered round him as he entered. He greeted each in turn, spoke a quiet word to Varys, kissed the High Septon's ring and Cersei's cheek, clasped the hand of Grand Maester Pycelle, and seated himself in the king's place at the head of the long table, between his daughter and his brother.

Tyrion had claimed Pycelle's old place at the foot, propped up by cushions so he could gaze down the length of the table. Dispossessed, Pycelle had moved up next to Cersei, about as far from the dwarf as he could get without claiming the king's seat. The Grand Maester was a shambling skeleton, leaning heavily on a twisted cane and shaking as he walked, a few white hairs sprouting from his long chicken's neck in place of his once-luxuriant white beard. Tyrion gazed at him without remorse.

The others had to scramble for seats: Lord Mace Tyrell, a heavy, robust man with curling brown hair and a spade-shaped beard well salted with white; Paxter Redwyne of the Arbor, stoop-shouldered and thin, his bald head fringed by tufts of orange hair; Mathis Rowan, Lord of Goldengrove, clean-shaven, stout, and sweating; the High Septon, a frail man with wispy white chin hair. *Too many strange faces,* Tyrion thought, *too many new players. The game changed while I lay rotting in my bed, and no one will tell me the rules.*

Oh, the lords had been courteous enough, though he could tell how uncomfortable it made them to look at him. "That chain of yours, that was cunning," Mace Tyrell had said in a jolly tone, and Lord Redwyne nodded and said, "Quite so, quite so, my lord of Highgarden speaks for all of us," and very cheerfully too.

Tell it to the people of this city, Tyrion thought bitterly. *Tell it to the bloody singers, with their songs of Renly's ghost.*

His uncle Kevan had been the warmest, going so far as to kiss his cheek and say, "Lancel has told me how brave you were, Tyrion. He speaks very highly of you."

He'd better, or I'll have a few things to say of him. He made himself smile and say, "My good cousin is too kind. His wound is healing, I trust?"

Ser Kevan frowned. "One day he seems stronger, the next … it is worrisome. Your sister often visits his sickbed, to lift his spirits and pray for him."

But is she praying that he lives, or dies? Cersei had made shameless use of their cousin, both in and out of bed; a little secret she no doubt hoped Lancel would carry to his grave now that Father was here and she no longer had need of him. *Would she go so far as to murder him, though?* To look at her today, you would never suspect Cersei was capable of such ruthlessness. She was all charm, flirting with Lord Tyrell as they spoke of Joffrey's wedding feast, complimenting Lord Redwyne on the valor of his twins, softening gruff Lord Rowan with jests and smiles, making pious noises at the High Septon. "Shall we begin with the wedding arrangements?" she asked as Lord Tywin took his seat.

"No," their father said. "With the war. Varys."

The eunuch smiled a silken smile. "I have such *delicious* tidings for you all, my lords. Yesterday at dawn our brave Lord Randyll caught Robett Glover outside Duskendale and trapped him against the sea. Losses were heavy on both sides, but in the end our loyal men prevailed. Ser Helman Tallhart is reported dead, with a thousand others. Robett Glover leads the survivors back toward Harrenhal in bloody disarray, little dreaming he will find valiant Ser Gregor and his stalwarts athwart his path."

"Gods be praised!" said Paxter Redwyne. "A great victory for King Joffrey!"

What did Joffrey have to do with it? thought Tyrion.

"And a terrible defeat for the north, certainly," observed Littlefinger, "yet one in which Robb Stark played no part. The Young Wolf remains unbeaten in the field."

"What do we know of Stark's plans and movements?" asked Mathis Rowan, ever blunt and to the point.

"He has run back to Riverrun with his plunder, abandoning the castles he took in the west," announced Lord Tywin. "Our cousin Ser Daven is reforming the remnants of his late father's army at Lannisport. When they are ready he shall join Ser Forley Prester at the Golden Tooth. As soon as the Stark boy starts north, Ser Forley and Ser Daven will descend on Riverrun."

"You are certain Lord Stark means to go north?" Lord Rowan asked. "Even with the ironmen at Moat Cailin?"

Mace Tyrell spoke up. "Is there anything as pointless as a king without a kingdom? No, it's plain, the boy must abandon the riverlands, join his forces to Roose Bolton's once more, and throw all his strength against Moat Cailin. That is what *I* would do."

Tyrion had to bite his tongue at that. Robb Stark had won more battles in a year than the Lord of Highgarden had in twenty. Tyrell's reputation rested on one indecisive victory over Robert Baratheon at Ashford, in a battle largely won by Lord Tarly's van before the main host had even arrived. The siege of Storm's End, where Mace Tyrell actually did hold the command, had dragged on a year to no result, and after the Trident was fought, the Lord of Highgarden had meekly dipped his banners to Eddard Stark.

"I ought to write Robb Stark a stern letter," Littlefinger was saying. "I understand his man Bolton is stabling goats in *my* high hall, it's really quite unconscionable."

Ser Kevan Lannister cleared his throat. "As regards the Starks … Balon Greyjoy, who now styles himself King of the Isles and the North, has written to us offering terms of alliance."

"He ought to be offering fealty," snapped Cersei. "By what right does he call himself king?"

"By right of conquest," Lord Tywin said. "King Balon has strangler's fingers round the Neck. Robb Stark's heirs are dead, Winterfell is fallen, and the ironmen hold Moat Cailin, Deepwood Motte, and most of the Stony Shore. King Balon's longships command the sunset sea, and are well placed to menace Lannisport, Fair Isle, and even Highgarden, should we provoke him."

"And if we accept this alliance?" inquired Lord Mathis Rowan. "What terms does he propose?"

"That we recognize his kingship and grant him everything north of the Neck."

Lord Redwyne laughed. "What is there north of the Neck that any sane man would want? If Greyjoy will trade swords and sails for stone and snow, I say do it, and count ourselves lucky."

"Truly," agreed Mace Tyrell. "That's what I would do. Let King Balon finish the northmen whilst we finish Stannis."

Lord Tywin's face gave no hint as to his feelings. "There is Lysa Arryn to deal with as well. Jon Arryn's widow, Hoster Tully's daughter, Catelyn Stark's sister … whose husband was conspiring with Stannis Baratheon at the time of his death."

"Oh," said Mace Tyrell cheerfully, "women have no stomach for war. Let her be, I say, she's not like to trouble us."

"I agree," said Redwyne. "The Lady Lysa took no part in the fighting, nor has she committed any overt acts of treason."

Tyrion stirred. "She did throw me in a cell and put me on trial for my life," he pointed out, with a certain amount of rancor. "Nor has she returned to King's Landing to swear fealty to Joff, as she was commanded. My lords, grant me the men, and I will sort out Lysa Arryn." He could think of nothing he would enjoy more, except perhaps strangling Cersei. Sometimes he still dreamed of the Eyrie's sky cells, and woke drenched in cold sweat.

Mace Tyrell's smile was jovial, but behind it Tyrion sensed contempt. "Perhaps you'd best leave the fighting to fighters," said the Lord of Highgarden. "Better men than you have lost great armies in the Mountains of the Moon, or shattered them against the Bloody Gate. We know your worth, my lord, no need to tempt fate."

Tyrion pushed off his cushions, bristling, but his father spoke before he could lash back. “I have other tasks in mind for Tyrion. I believe Lord Petyr may hold the key to the Eyrie.”

“Oh, I do,” said Littlefinger, “I have it here between my legs.” There was mischief in his grey-green eyes. “My lords, with your leave, I propose to travel to the Vale and there woo and win Lady Lysa Arryn. Once I am her consort, I shall deliver you the Vale of Arryn without a drop of blood being spilled.”

Lord Rowan looked doubtful. “Would Lady Lysa have you?”

“She’s had me a few times before, Lord Mathis, and voiced no complaints.”

“Bedding,” said Cersei, “is not wedding. Even a cow like Lysa Arryn might be able to grasp the difference.”

“To be sure. It would not have been fitting for a daughter of Riverrun to marry one so far below her.” Littlefinger spread his hands. “Now, though … a match between the Lady of the Eyrie and the Lord of Harrenhal is not so unthinkable, is it?”

Tyrion noted the look that passed between Paxter Redwyne and Mace Tyrell. “It might serve,” Lord Rowan said, “if you are certain that you can keep the woman loyal to the King’s Grace.”

“My lords,” pronounced the High Septon, “autumn is upon us, and all men of good heart are weary of war. If Lord Baelish can bring the Vale back into the king’s peace without more shedding of blood, the gods will surely bless him.”

“But can he?” asked Lord Redwyne. “Jon Arryn’s son is Lord of the Eyrie now. The Lord Robert.”

“Only a boy,” said Littlefinger. “I will see that he grows to be Joffrey’s most loyal subject, and a fast friend to us all.”

Tyrion studied the slender man with the pointed beard and irreverent grey-green eyes. *Lord of Harrenhal an empty honor? Bugger that, Father. Even if he never sets foot in the castle, the title makes this match possible, as he’s known all along.*

“We have no lack of foes,” said Ser Kevan Lannister. “If the Eyrie can be kept out of the war, all to the good. I am of a mind to see what Lord Petyr can accomplish.”

Ser Kevan was his brother’s vanguard in council, Tyrion knew from long experience; he never had a thought that Lord Tywin had not had first. *It has all been settled beforehand*, he concluded, *and this discussion’s no more than show.*

The sheep were bleating their agreement, unaware of how neatly they’d been shorn, so it fell to Tyrion to object. “How will the crown pay its debts without Lord Petyr? He is our wizard of coin, and we have no one to replace him.”

Littlefinger smiled. “My little friend is too kind. All I do is count coppers, as King Robert used to say. Any clever tradesman could do as well … and a Lannister, blessed with the golden touch of Casterly Rock, will no doubt far surpass me.”

“A Lannister?” Tyrion had a bad feeling about this.

Lord Tywin’s gold-flecked eyes met his son’s mismatched ones. “You are admirably suited to the task, I believe.”

“Indeed!” Ser Kevan said heartily. “I’ve no doubt you’ll make a splendid master of coin, Tyrion.”

Lord Tywin turned back to Littlefinger. “If Lysa Arryn will take you for a husband and return to the king’s peace, we shall restore the Lord Robert to the honor of Warden of the East. How soon might you leave?”

“On the morrow, if the winds permit. There’s a Braavosi galley standing out past the chain, taking on cargo by boat. The *Merling King*. I’ll see her captain about a berth.”

“You will miss the king’s wedding,” said Mace Tyrell.

Petyr Baelish gave a shrug. “Tides and brides wait on no man, my lord. Once the autumn storms begin the voyage will be much more hazardous. Drowning would definitely diminish my charms as a bridegroom.”

Lord Tyrell chuckled. “True. Best you do not linger.”

“May the gods speed you on your way,” the High Septon said. “All King’s Landing shall pray for your success.”

Lord Redwyne pinched at his nose. “May we return to the matter of the Greyjoy alliance? In my view, there is much to be said for it. Greyjoy’s longships will augment my own fleet and give us sufficient strength at sea to assault Dragonstone and end Stannis Baratheon’s pretensions.”

“King Balon’s longships are occupied for the nonce,” Lord Tywin said politely, “as are we. Greyjoy demands half the kingdom as the price of alliance, but what will he do to earn it? Fight the Starks? He is doing that already. Why should we pay for what he has given us for free? The best thing to do about our lord of Pyke is nothing, in my view. Granted enough time, a better option may well present itself. One that does not require the king to give up half his kingdom.”

Tyrion watched his father closely. *There’s something he’s not saying.* He remembered those important letters Lord Tywin had been writing, the night Tyrion had demanded Casterly Rock. *What was it he said? Some battles are won with swords and spears, others with quills and ravens …* He wondered who the “better option” was, and what sort of price he was demanding.

“Perhaps we ought move on to the wedding,” Ser Kevan said.

The High Septon spoke of the preparations being made at the Great Sept of Baelor, and Cersei detailed the plans she had been making for the feast. They would feed a thousand in the throne room, but many more outside in the yards. The outer and middle wards would be tented in silk, with tables of food and casks of ale for all those who could not be accommodated within the hall.

“Your Grace,” said Grand Maester Pycelle, “in regard to the number of guests … we have had a raven from Sunspear. Three hundred Dornishmen are riding toward King’s Landing as we speak, and hope to arrive before the wedding.”

“How do they come?” asked Mace Tyrell gruffly. “They have not asked leave to cross *my* lands.” His thick neck had turned a dark red, Tyrion noted. Dornishmen and Highgardeners had never had great love for one another; over the centuries, they had fought border wars beyond count, and raided back and forth across mountains and marches even when at peace. The enmity had waned a bit after Dorne had become part of the Seven Kingdoms … until the Dornish prince they called the Red Viper had crippled the young heir of Highgarden in a tourney. *This could be ticklish*, the dwarf thought, waiting to see how his father would handle it.

“Prince Doran comes at my son’s invitation,” Lord Tywin said calmly, “not only to join in our celebration, but to claim his seat on this council, and the justice Robert denied him for the murder of his sister Elia and her children.”

Tyrion watched the faces of the Lords Tyrell, Redwyne, and Rowan, wondering if any of the three would be bold enough to say, “But Lord Tywin, wasn’t it *you* who presented the bodies to Robert, all wrapped up in Lannister cloaks?” None of them did, but it was there on their faces all the same. *Redwyne does not give a fig,* he thought, *but Rowan looks fit to gag*.

“When the king is wed to your Margaery and Myrcella to Prince Trystane, we shall all be one great House,” Ser Kevan reminded Mace Tyrell.

“The enmities of the past should remain there, would you not agree, my lord?”

“This is *my daughter’s wedding*—”

“—and my grandson’s,” said Lord Tywin firmly. “No place for old quarrels, surely?”

“I have no quarrel with *Doran* Martell,” insisted Lord Tyrell, though his tone was more than a little grudging. “If he wishes to cross the Reach in peace, he need only ask my leave.”

Small chance of that, thought Tyrion. *He’ll climb the Boneway, turn east near Summerhall, and come up the kingsroad*.

“Three hundred Dornishmen need not trouble our plans,” said Cersei. “We can feed the men-at-arms in the yard, squeeze some extra benches into the throne room for the lordlings and highborn knights, and find Prince Doran a place of honor on the dais.”

Not by me, was the message Tyrion saw in Mace Tyrell's eyes, but the Lord of Highgarden made no reply but a curt nod.

"Perhaps we can move to a more pleasant task," said Lord Tywin. "The fruits of victory await division."

"What could be sweeter?" said Littlefinger, who had already swallowed his own fruit, Harrenhal.

Each lord had his own demands; this castle and that village, tracts of lands, a small river, a forest, the wardship of certain minors left fatherless by the battle. Fortunately, these fruits were plentiful, and there were orphans and castles for all. Varys had lists. Forty-seven lesser lordlings and six hundred nineteen knights had lost their lives beneath the fiery heart of Stannis and his Lord of Light, along with several thousand common men-at-arms. Traitors all, their heirs were disinherited, their lands and castles granted to those who had proved more loyal.

Highgarden reaped the richest harvest. Tyrion eyed Mace Tyrell's broad belly and thought, *He has a prodigious appetite, this one.* Tyrell demanded the lands and castles of Lord Alester Florent, his own banner-man, who'd had the singular ill judgment to back first Renly and then Stannis. Lord Tywin was pleased to oblige. Brightwater Keep and all its lands and incomes were granted to Lord Tyrell's second son, Ser Garlan, transforming him into a great lord in the blink of an eye. His elder brother, of course, stood to inherit Highgarden itself.

Lesser tracts were granted to Lord Rowan, and set aside for Lord Tarly, Lady Oakheart, Lord Hightower, and other worthies not present. Lord Redwyne asked only for thirty years' remission of the taxes that Littlefinger and his wine factors had levied on certain of the Arbor's finest vintages. When that was granted, he pronounced himself well satisfied and suggested that they send for a cask of Arbor gold, to toast good King Joffrey and his wise and benevolent Hand. At that, Cersei lost patience.

"It's swords Joff needs, not toasts," she snapped. "His realm is still plagued with would-be usurpers and self-styled kings."

"But not for long, I think," said Varys unctuously.

"A few more items remain, my lords." Ser Kevan consulted his papers. "Ser Addam has found some crystals from the High Septon's crown. It appears certain now that the thieves broke up the crystals and melted down the gold."

"Our Father Above knows their guilt and will sit in judgment on them all," the High Septon said piously.

"No doubt he will," said Lord Tywin. "All the same, you must be crowned at the king's wedding. Cersei, summon your goldsmiths, we must see to a replacement." He did not wait for her reply, but turned at once to Varys. "You have reports?"

The eunuch drew a parchment from his sleeve. "A kraken has been seen off the Fingers." He giggled. "Not a *Greyjoy*, mind you, a true kraken. It attacked an Ibbenese whaler and pulled it under. There is fighting on the Stepstones, and a new war between Tyrosh and Lys seems likely. Both hope to win Myr as ally. Sailors back from the Jade Sea report that a three-headed dragon has hatched in Qarth, and is the wonder of that city—"

"Dragons and krakens do not interest me, regardless of the number of their heads," said Lord Tywin. "Have your whisperers perchance found some trace of my brother's son?"

"Alas, our beloved Tyrek has quite vanished, the poor brave lad." Varys sounded close to tears.

"Tywin," Ser Kevan said, before Lord Tywin could vent his obvious displeasure, "some of the gold cloaks who deserted during the battle have drifted back to barracks, thinking to take up duty once again. Ser Addam wishes to know what to do with them."

"They might have endangered Joff with their cowardice," Cersei said at once. "I want them put to death."

Varys sighed. “They have surely earned death, Your Grace, none can deny it. And yet, perhaps we might be wiser to send them to the Night’s Watch. We have had disturbing messages from the Wall of late. Of wildlings astir …”

“Wildlings, krakens, and dragons.” Mace Tyrell chuckled. “Why, is there anyone *not* stirring?”

Lord Tywin ignored that. “The deserters serve us best as a lesson. Break their knees with hammers. They will not run again. Nor will any man who sees them begging in the streets.” He glanced down the table to see if any of the other lords disagreed.

Tyrion remembered his own visit to the Wall, and the crabs he’d shared with old Lord Mormont and his officers. He remembered the Old Bear’s fears as well. “Perhaps we might break the knees of a few to make our point. Those who killed Ser Jacelyn, say. The rest we can send to Marsh. The Watch is grievously under strength. If the Wall should fail …”

“… the wildlings will flood the north,” his father finished, “and the Starks and Greyjoys will have another enemy to contend with. They no longer wish to be subject to the Iron Throne, it would seem, so by what right do they look to the Iron Throne for aid? King Robb and King Balon both claim the north. Let *them* defend it, if they can. And if not, this Mance Rayder might even prove a useful ally.” Lord Tywin looked to his brother. “Is there more?”

Ser Kevan shook his head. “We are done. My lords, His Grace King Joffrey would no doubt wish to thank you all for your wisdom and good counsel.”

“I should like private words with my children,” said Lord Tywin as the others rose to leave. “You as well, Kevan.”

Obediently, the other councillors made their farewells, Varys the first to depart and Tyrell and Redwyne the last. When the chamber was empty but for the four Lannisters, Ser Kevan closed the door.

“*Master of coin?*” said Tyrion in a thin strained voice. “Whose notion was that, pray?”

“Lord Petyr’s,” his father said, “but it serves us well to have the treasury in the hands of a Lannister. You have asked for important work. Do you fear you might be incapable of the task?”

“No,” said Tyrion, “I fear a trap. Littlefinger is subtle and ambitious. I do not trust him. Nor should you.”

“He won Highgarden to our side …” Cersei began.

“… and sold you Ned Stark, I know. He will sell us just as quick. A coin is as dangerous as a sword in the wrong hands.”

His uncle Kevan looked at him oddly. “Not to us, surely. The gold of Casterly Rock …”

“… is dug from the ground. Littlefinger’s gold is made from thin air, with a snap of his fingers.”

“A more useful skill than any of yours, sweet brother,” purred Cersei, in a voice sweet with malice.

“Littlefinger is a liar—”

“—and black as well, said the raven of the crow.”

Lord Tywin slammed his hand down on the table. “*Enough!* I will have no more of this unseemly squabbling. You are both Lannisters, and will comport yourselves as such.”

Ser Kevan cleared his throat. “I would sooner have Petyr Baelish ruling the Eyrie than any of Lady Lysa’s other suitors. Yohn Royce, Lyn Corbray, Horton Redfort … these are dangerous men, each in his own way. And proud. Littlefinger may be clever, but he has neither high birth nor skill at arms. The lords of the Vale will never accept such as their liege.” He looked to his brother. When Lord Tywin nodded, he continued. “And there is this—Lord Petyr continues to demonstrate his loyalty. Only yesterday he brought us word of a Tyrell plot to spirit Sansa Stark off to Highgarden for a ‘visit,’ and there marry her to Lord Mace’s eldest son, Willas.”

“*Littlefinger* brought you word?” Tyrion leaned against the table. “Not our master of whisperers? How interesting.”

Cersei looked at their uncle in disbelief. “Sansa is my hostage. She goes *nowhere* without my leave.”

“Leave you must perforce grant, should Lord Tyrell ask,” their father pointed out. “To refuse him would be tantamount to declaring that we did not trust him. He would take offense.”

“Let him. What do we care?”

Bloody fool, thought Tyrion. “Sweet sister,” he explained patiently, “offend Tyrell and you offend Redwyne, Tarly, Rowan, and Hightower as well, and perhaps start them wondering whether Robb Stark might not be more accommodating of their desires.”

“I will not have the rose and the direwolf in bed together,” declared Lord Tywin. “We must forestall him.”

“How?” asked Cersei.

“By marriage. Yours, to begin with.”

It came so suddenly that Cersei could only stare for a moment. Then her cheeks reddened as if she had been slapped. “No. Not again. I will not.”

“Your Grace,” said Ser Kevan, courteously, “you are a young woman, still fair and fertile. Surely you cannot wish to spend the rest of your days alone? And a new marriage would put to rest this talk of incest for good and all.”

“So long as you remain unwed, you allow Stannis to spread his disgusting slander,” Lord Tywin told his daughter. “You must have a new husband in your bed, to father children on you.”

“Three children is quite sufficient. I am Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, not a brood mare! The Queen *Regent*!”

“You are my daughter, and will do as I command.”

She stood. “I will not sit here and listen to this—”

“You will if you wish to have any voice in the choice of your next husband,” Lord Tywin said calmly.

When she hesitated, then sat, Tyrion knew she was lost, despite her loud declaration of, “I will *not* marry again!”

“You will marry and you will breed. Every child you birth makes Stannis more a liar.” Their father’s eyes seemed to pin her to her chair. “Mace Tyrell, Paxter Redwyne, and Doran Martell are wed to younger women likely to outlive them. Balon Greyjoy’s wife is elderly and failing, but such a match would commit us to an alliance with the Iron Islands, and I am still uncertain whether that would be our wisest course.”

“No,” Cersei said from between white lips. “No, no, no.”

Tyrion could not quite suppress the grin that came to his lips at the thought of packing his sister off to Pyke. *Just when I was about to give up praying, some sweet god gives me this.*

Lord Tywin went on. “Oberyn Martell might suit, but the Tyrells would take that very ill. So we must look to the sons. I assume you do not object to wedding a man younger than yourself?”

“I object to wedding *any*—”

“I have considered the Redwyne twins, Theon Greyjoy, Quentyn Martell, and a number of others. But our alliance with Highgarden was the sword that broke Stannis. It should be tempered and made stronger. Ser Loras has taken the white and Ser Garlan is wed to one of the Fossoways, but there remains the eldest son, the boy they scheme to wed to Sansa Stark.”

Willas Tyrell. Tyrion was taking a wicked pleasure in Cersei’s helpless fury. “That would be the cripple,” he said.

Their father chilled him with a look. “Willas is heir to Highgarden, and by all reports a mild and courtly young man, fond of reading books and looking at the stars. He has a passion for breeding animals as well, and owns the finest hounds, hawks, and horses in the Seven Kingdoms.”

A perfect match, mused Tyrion. *Cersei also has a passion for breeding.* He pitied poor Willas Tyrell, and did not know whether he wanted to laugh at his sister or weep for her.

"The Tyrell heir would be my choice," Lord Tywin concluded, "but if you would prefer another, I will hear your reasons."

"That is so very kind of you, Father," Cersei said with icy courtesy. "It is such a difficult choice you give me. Who would I sooner take to bed, the old squid or the crippled dog boy? I shall need a few days to consider. Do I have your leave to go?"

You are the queen, Tyrion wanted to tell her. *He ought to be begging leave of you*.

"Go," their father said. "We shall talk again after you have composed yourself. Remember your duty."

Cersei swept stiffly from the room, her rage plain to see. *Yet in the end she will do as Father bid*. She had proved that with Robert. *Though there is Jaime to consider.* Their brother had been much younger when Cersei wed the first time; he might not acquiesce to a second marriage quite so easily. The unfortunate Willas Tyrell was like to contract a sudden fatal case of sword-through-bowels, which could rather sour the alliance between Highgarden and Casterly Rock. *I should say something, but what? Pardon me, Father, but it's our brother she wants to marry?*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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