

Pyrat Pree conducted her little khalasar down the center of a great arcade where the city's ancient heroes stood thrice life-size on columns of white and green marble. They passed through a bazaar in a cavernous building whose latticework ceiling was home to a thousand gaily colored birds. Trees and flowers bloomed on the terraced walls above the stalls, while below it seemed as if everything the gods had put into the world was for sale.

Her silver shied as the merchant prince Xaro Xhoan Daxos rode up to her; the horses could not abide the close presence of camels, she had found. "If you see here anything that you would desire, O most beautiful of women, you have only to speak and it is yours," Xaro called down from his ornate horned saddle.

"Qarth itself is hers, she has no need of baubles," blue-lipped Pyat Pree sang out from her other side. "It shall be as I promised, Khaleesi. Come with me to the House of the Undying, and you shall drink of truth and wisdom."

"Why should she need your Palace of Dust, when I can give her sunlight and sweet water and silks to sleep in?" Xaro said to the warlock. "The Thirteen shall set a crown of black jade and fire opals upon her lovely head."

"The only palace I desire is the red castle at King's Landing, my lord Pyat." Dany was wary of the warlock; the maegi Mirri Maz Duur had soured her on those who played at sorcery. "And if the great of Qarth would give me gifts, Xaro, let them give me ships and swords to win back what is rightfully mine."

Pyat's blue lips curled upward in a gracious smile. "it shall be as you command, Khaleesi." He moved away, swaying with his camel's motion, his long beaded robes trailing behind.

"The young queen is wise beyond her years," Xaro Xhoan Daxos murmured down at her from his high saddle. "There is a saying in Qarth. A warlock's house is built of bones and lies."

"Then why do men lower their voices when they speak of the warlocks of Qarth? All across the east, their power and wisdom are revered."

"Once they were mighty," Xaro agreed, "but now they are as ludicrous as those feeble old soldiers who boast of their prowess long after strength and skill have left them. They read their crumbling scrolls, drink shade-of-the-evening until their lips turn blue, and hint of dread powers, but they are hollow husks compared to those who went before. Pyat Pree's gifts will turn to dust in your hands, I warn you." He gave his camel a lick of his whip and sped away.

"The crow calls the raven black," muttered Ser Jorah in the Common Tongue of Westeros. The exile knight rode at her right hand, as ever. For their entrance into Qarth, he had put away his Dothraki garb and donned again the plate and mail and wool of the Seven Kingdoms half a world away. "You would do well to avoid both those men, Your Grace."

"Those men will help me to my crown," she said. "Xaro has vast wealth, and Pyat Pree pretends to power," the knight said brusquely. On his dark green surcoat, the bear of House Mormont stood on its hind legs, black and fierce. Jorah looked no less ferocious as he scowled at the crowd that filled the bazaar. "I would not linger here long, my queen. I dislike the very smell of this place."

Dany smiled. "Perhaps it's the camels you're smelling. The Qartheen themselves seem sweet enough to my nose."

"Sweet smells are sometimes used to cover foul ones."

My great bear, Dany thought. I am his queen, but I will always be his cub as well, and he will always guard me. It made her feel safe, but sad as well. She wished she could love him better than she did.

Xaro Xhoan Daxos had offered Dany the hospitality of his home while she was in the city. She had expected something grand. She had not expected a palace larger than many a market town. It makes Magister Illyrio's manse in Pentos look like a swineherd's hovel, she thought. Xaro swore that his home could comfortably house all of her people and their horses besides; indeed, it swallowed them. An entire wing was given over to her. She would have her own gardens, a marble bathing pool, a scrying tower and warlock's maze. Slaves would tend her every need. In her private chambers, the floors were green marble, the walls draped with colorful silk hangings that shimmered with every breath of air. "You are too generous," she told Xaro Xhoan Daxos.

"For the Mother of Dragons, no gift is too great." Xaro was a languid, elegant man with a bald head and a great beak of a nose crusted with rubies, opals, and flakes of jade. "On the morrow, you shall feast upon peacock and lark's tongue, and hear music worthy of the most beautiful of women. The Thirteen will come to do you homage, and all the great of Qarth."

All the great of Qarth will come to see my dragons, Dany thought, yet she thanked Xaro for his kindness before she sent him on his way. Pyat Pree took his leave as well, vowing to petition the Undying Ones for an audience. "A honor rare as summer snows." Before he left he kissed her bare feet with his pale blue lips and pressed on her a gift, a jar of ointment that he swore would let her see the spirits of the air. Last of the three seekers to depart was Quaithe the shadowbinder. From her Dany received only a warning. "Beware," the woman in the red lacquer mask said.

"Of whom?"

"Of all. They shall come day and night to see the wonder that has been born again into the world, and when they see they shall lust. For dragons are fire made flesh, and fire is power."

When Quaithe too was gone, Ser Jorah said, "She speaks truly, my queen... though I like her no more than the others."

"I do not understand her." Pyat and Xaro had showered Dany with promises from the moment they first glimpsed her dragons, declaring themselves her loyal servants in all things, but from Quaithe she had gotten only the rare cryptic word. And it disturbed her that she had never seen the woman's face. Remember Mirri Maz Duur, she told herself. Remember treachery. She turned to her bloodriders. "We will keep our own watch so long as we are here. See that no one enters this wing of the palace without my leave, and take care that the dragons are always well guarded."

"It shall be done, Khaleesi," Aggo said.

"We have seen only the parts of Qarth that Pyat Pree wished us to see," she went on. "Rakharo, go forth and look on the rest, and tell me what you find. Take good men with you-and women, to go places where men are forbidden."

“As you say, I do, blood of my blood,” said Rakharo.

“Ser Jorah, find the docks and see what manner of ships lay at anchor. It has been half a year since I last heard tidings from the Seven Kingdoms. Perhaps the gods will have blown some good captain here from Westeros with a ship to carry us home.”

The knight frowned. “That would be no kindness. The Usurper will kill you, sure as sunrise.” Mormont hooked his thumbs through his swordbelt. “My place is here at your side.”

“Jhogo can guard me as well. You have more languages than my bloodriders, and the Dothraki mistrust the sea and those who sail her. Only you can serve me in this. Go among the ships and speak to the crews, learn where they are from and where they are bound and what manner of men command them.”

Reluctantly, the exile nodded. “As you say, my queen.”

When all the men had gone, her handmaids stripped off the travelstained silks she wore, and Dany padded out to where the marble pool sat in the shade of a portico. The water was deliciously cool, and the pool was stocked with tiny golden fish that nibbled curiously at her skin and made her giggle. It felt good to close her eyes and float, knowing she could rest as long as she liked. She wondered whether Aegon’s Red Keep had a pool like this, and fragrant gardens full of lavender and mint. It must, surely. Viserys always said the Seven Kingdoms were more beautiful than any other place in the world.

The thought of home disquieted her. If her sun-and-stars had lived, he would have led his khalasar across the poison water and swept away her enemies, but his strength had left the world. Her bloodriders remained, sworn to her for life and skilled in slaughter, but only in the ways of the horselords. The Dothraki sacked cities and plundered kingdoms, they did not rule them. Dany had no wish to reduce King’s Landing to a blackened ruin full of unquiet ghosts. She had supped enough on tears. I want to make my kingdom beautiful, to fill it with fat men and pretty maids and laughing children. I want my people to smile when they see me ride by, the way Viserys said they smiled for my father.

But before she could do that she must conquer.

The Usurper will kill you, sure as sunrise, Mormont had said. Robert had slain her gallant brother Rhaegar, and one of his creatures had crossed the Dothraki sea to poison her and her unborn son. They said Robert Baratheon was strong as a bull and fearless in battle, a man who loved nothing better than war. And with him stood the great lords her brother had named the Usurper’s dogs, cold-eyed Eddard Stark with his frozen heart, and the golden Lannisters, father and son, so rich, so powerful, so treacherous.

How could she hope to overthrow such men? When Khal Drogo had lived, men trembled and made him gifts to stay his wrath. If they did not, he took their cities, wealth and wives and all. But his khalasar had been vast, while hers was meager. Her people had followed her across the red waste as she chased her comet, and would follow her across the poison water too, but they would not be enough. Even her dragons might not be enough. Viserys had believed that the realm would rise for its rightful king... but Viserys had been a fool, and fools believe in foolish things.

Her doubts made her shiver. Suddenly the water felt cold to her, and the little fish prickling at her skin annoying. Dany stood and climbed from the pool. “Irri,” she called, “Jhiqui.

As the handmaids towed her dry and wrapped her in a sandsilk robe, Dany’s thoughts went to the three who had sought her out in the City of Bones. The Bleeding Star led me to Qarth for a purpose. Here I will find what I need, if I have the strength to take what is offered, and the wisdom to avoid the traps and snares. If the gods mean for me to conquer, they will provide, they will send me a sign, and if not... if not...

It was near evenfall and Dany was feeding her dragons when Irri stepped through the silken curtains to tell her that Ser Jorah had returned from the docks... and not alone. “Send him in, with whomever he has brought,” she said, curious.

When they entered, she was seated on a mound of cushions, her dragons all about her. The man he brought with him wore a cloak of green and yellow feathers and had skin as black as polished jet. “Your Grace,” the knight said, “I bring you Quhuru Mo, captain of the Cinnamon Wind out of Tall Trees Town.”

The black man knelt. “I am greatly honored, my queen,” he said; not in the tongue of the Summer Isles, which Dany did not know, but in the liquid Valyrian of the Nine Free Cities.

“The honor is mine, Quhuru Mo,” said Dany in the same language. “Have you come from the Summer Isles?”

“This is so, Your Grace, but before, not half a year past, we called at Oldtown. From there I bring you a wondrous gift.”

“A gift?”

“A gift of news. Dragonmother, Stormborn, I tell you true, Robert Baratheon is dead.”

Outside her walls, dusk was settling over Qarth, but a sun had risen in Dany’s heart. “Dead?” she repeated. In her lap, black Drogon hissed, and pale smoke rose before her face like a veil. “You are certain? The Usurper is dead?”

“So it is said in Oldtown, and Dorne, and Lys, and all the other ports where we have called.”

He sent me poisoned wine, yet I live and he is gone. “What was the manner of his death?” On her shoulder, pale Viserion flapped wings the color of cream, stirring the air.

“Torn by a monstrous boar whilst hunting in his kingswood, or so I heard in Oldtown. Others say his queen betrayed him, or his brother, or Lord Stark who was his Hand. Yet all the tales agree in this: King Robert is dead and in his grave.”

Dany had never looked upon the Usurper’s face, yet seldom a day had passed when she had not thought of him. His great shadow had lain across her since the hour of her birth, when she came forth amidst blood and storm into a world where she no longer had a place. And now this ebony stranger had lifted that shadow.

“The boy sits the Iron Throne now,” Ser Jorah said.

“King Joffrey reigns,” Quhuru Mo agreed, “but the Lannisters rule. Robert’s brothers have fled King’s Landing. The talk is, they mean to claim the crown. And the Hand has fallen, Lord Stark who was King Robert’s friend. He has been seized for treason.”

“Ned Stark a traitor?” Ser Jorah snorted. “Not bloody likely. The Long Summer will come again before that one would besmirch his precious honor.”

“What honor could he have?” Dany said. “He was a traitor to his true king, as were these Lannisters.” It pleased her to hear that the Usurper’s dogs were fighting amongst themselves, though she was unsurprised. The same thing happened when her Drogo died, and his great khalasar tore itself to pieces. “My brother is dead as well, Viserys who was the true king,” she told the Summer Islander. “Khal Drogo my lord husband killed him with a crown of molten gold.” Would her brother have been any wiser, had he known that the vengeance he had prayed for was so close at hand?

“Then I grieve for you, Dragonmother, and for bleeding Westeros, bereft of its rightful king.”

Beneath Dany’s gentle fingers, green Rhaegal stared at the stranger with eyes of molten gold. When his mouth opened, his teeth gleamed like black needles. “When does your ship return to Westeros, Captain?”

“Not for a year or more, I fear. From here the Cinnamon Wind sails east, to make the trader’s circle round the jade Sea.”

“I see,” said Dany, disappointed. “I wish you fair winds and good trading, then. You have brought me a precious gift.”

“I have been amply repaid, great queen.”

She puzzled at that. “How so?”

His eyes gleamed. “I have seen dragons.”

Dany laughed. “And will see more of them one day, I hope. Come to me in King’s Landing when I am on my father’s throne, and you shall have a great reward.”

The Summer Islander promised he would do so, and kissed her lightly on the fingers as he took his leave. Jhiqui showed him out, while Ser Jorah Mormont remained.

“Khaleesi,” the knight said when they were alone, “I should not speak so freely of your plans, if I were you. This man will spread the tale wherever he goes now.”

“Let him,” she said. “Let the whole world know my purpose. The Usurper is dead, what does it matter?”

“Not every sailor’s tale is true,” Ser Jorah cautioned, “and even if Robert be truly dead, his son rules in his place. This changes nothing, truly.”

“This changes everything.” Dany rose abruptly. Screeching, her dragons uncoiled and spread their wings. Drogon flapped and clawed up to the lintel over the archway. The others skittered across the floor, wingtips scrabbling on the marble. “Before, the Seven Kingdoms were like my Drogo’s khalasar, a hundred thousand made as one by his strength. Now they fly to pieces, even as the khalasar did after my khal lay dead.”

“The high lords have always fought. Tell me who’s won and I’ll tell you what it means. Khaleesi, the Seven Kingdoms are not going to fall into your hands like so many ripe peaches. You will need a fleet, gold, armies, alliances-”

“All this I know.” She took his hands in hers and looked up into his dark suspicious eyes. Sometimes he thinks of me as a child he must protect, and sometimes as a woman he would like

to bed, but does he ever truly see me as his queen? “I am not the frightened girl you met in Pentos. I have counted only fifteen name days, true... but I am as old as the crones in the dosh khaleen and as young as my dragons, Jorah. I have borne a child, burned a khal, and crossed the red waste and the Dothraki sea. Mine is the blood of the dragon.”

“As was your brother’s,” he said stubbornly.

“I am not Viserys.”

“No,” he admitted. “There is more of Rhaegar in you, I think, but even Rhaegar could be slain. Robert proved that on the Trident, with no more than a warhammer. Even dragons can die.”

“Dragons die.” She stood on her toes to kiss him lightly on an unshaven cheek. “But so do dragonslayers.”

BRAN

Meera moved in a wary circle, her net dangling loose in her left hand, the slender three-pronged frog spear poised in her right. Summer followed her with his golden eyes, turning, his tail held stiff and tall. Watching, watching...

“Yai!” the girl shouted, the spear darting out. The wolf slid to the left and leapt before she could draw back the spear. Meera cast her net, the tangles unfolding in the air before her. Summer’s leap carried him into it. He dragged it with him as he slammed into her chest and knocked her over backward. Her spear went spinning away. The damp grass cushioned her fall but the breath went out of her in an “Oof.” The wolf crouched atop her.

Bran hooted. “You lose.”

“She wins,” her brother Jojen said. “Summer’s snared.”

He was right, Bran saw. Thrashing and growling at the net, trying to rip free, Summer was only ensnaring himself worse. Nor could he bite through. “Let him out.”

Laughing, the Reed girl threw her arms around the tangled wolf and rolled them both. Summer gave a piteous whine, his legs kicking against the cords that bound them. Meera knelt, undid a twist, pulled at a corner, tugged deftly here and there, and suddenly the direwolf was bounding free.

“Summer, to me.” Bran spread his arms. “Watch,” he said, an instant before the wolf bowled into him. He clung with all his strength as the wolf dragged him bumping through the grass. They wrestled and rolled and clung to each other, one snarling and yapping, the other laughing. In the end it was Bran sprawled on top, the mud-spattered direwolf under him. “Good wolf,” he panted. Summer licked him across the ear.

Meera shook her head. “Does he never grow angry?”

“Not with me.” Bran grabbed the wolf by his ears and Summer snapped at him fiercely, but it was all in play. “Sometimes he tears my garb but he’s never drawn blood.”

“Your blood, you mean. If he’d gotten past my net...”

“He wouldn’t hurt you. He knows I like you.” All of the other lords and knights had departed within a day or two of the harvest feast, but the Reeds had stayed to become Bran’s constant companions. Jojen was so solemn that Old Nan called him “little grandfather,” but Meera reminded Bran of his sister Arya. She wasn’t scared to get dirty, and she could run and fight and throw as good as a boy. She was older than Arya, though; almost sixteen, a woman grown. They were both older than Bran, even though his ninth name day had finally come and gone, but they never treated him like a child.

“I wish you were our wards instead of the Walders.” He began to struggle toward the nearest tree. His dragging and wriggling was unseemly to watch, but when Meera moved to lift him he said, “No, don’t help me.” He rolled clumsily and pushed and squirmed backward, using the strength of his arms, until he was sitting with his back to the trunk of a tall ash. “See, I told you.” Summer lay down with his head in Bran’s lap. “I never knew anyone who fought with a net

before,” he told Meera while he scratched the direwolf between the ears. “Did your master-at-arms teach you net-fighting?”

“My father taught me. We have no knights at Greywater. No master-at-arms, and no maester.”

“Who keeps your ravens?”

She smiled. “Ravens can’t find Greywater Watch, no more than our enemies can.”

“Why not?”

“Because it moves,” she told him.

Bran had never heard of a moving castle before. He looked at her uncertainly, but he couldn’t tell whether she was teasing him or not. “I wish I could see it. Do you think your lord father would let me come visit when the war is over?”

“You would be most welcome, my prince. Then or now.”

“Now?” Bran had spent his whole life at Winterfell. He yearned to see far places. “I could ask Ser Rodrik when he returns.” The old knight was off east, trying to set to rights the trouble there. Roose Bolton’s bastard had started it by seizing Lady Hornwood as she returned from the harvest feast, marrying her that very night even though he was young enough to be her son. Then Lord Manderly had taken her castle. To protect the Hornwood holdings from the Boltons, he had written, but Ser Rodrik had been almost as angry with him as with the bastard. “Ser Rodrik might let me go. Maester Luwin never would.”

Sitting cross-legged under the weirwood, Jojen Reed regarded him solemnly. “It would be good if you left Winterfell, Bran.”

“It would?”

“Yes. And sooner rather than later.”

“My brother has the greensight,” said Meera. “He dreams things that haven’t happened, but sometimes they do.”

“There is no sometimes, Meera.” A look passed between them; him sad, her defiant.

“Tell me what’s going to happen,” Bran said.

“I will,” said Jojen, “if you’ll tell me about your dreams.”

The godswood grew quiet. Bran could hear leaves rustling, and Hodor’s distant splashing from the hot pools. He thought of the golden man and the three-eyed crow, remembered the crunch of bones between his jaws and the coppery taste of blood. “I don’t have dreams. Maester Luwin gives me sleeping draughts.”

“Do they help?”

“Sometimes.”

Meera said, “All of Winterfell knows you wake at night shouting and sweating, Bran. The women talk of it at the well, and the guards in their hall.”

“Tell us what frightens you so much,” said Jojen.

“I don’t want to. Anyway, it’s only dreams. Maester Luwin says dreams might mean anything or nothing.”

“My brother dreams as other boys do, and those dreams might mean anything,” Meera said, “but the green dreams are different.”

Jojen's eyes were the color of moss, and sometimes when he looked at you he seemed to be seeing something else. Like now. "I dreamed of a winged wolf bound to earth with grey stone chains," he said. "It was a green dream, so I knew it was true. A crow was trying to peck through the chains, but the stone was too hard and his beak could only chip at them."

"Did the crow have three eyes?"

Jojen nodded.

Summer raised his head from Bran's lap, and gazed at the mudman with his dark golden eyes.

"When I was little I almost died of greywater fever. That was when the crow came to me."

"He came to me after I fell," Bran blurted. "I was asleep for a long time. He said I had to fly or die, and I woke up, only I was broken and I couldn't fly after all."

"You can if you want to." Picking up her net, Meera shook out the last tangles and began arranging it in loose folds.

"You are the winged wolf, Bran," said Jojen. "I wasn't sure when we first came, but now I am. The crow sent us here to break your chains."

"Is the crow at Greywater?"

"No. The crow is in the north."

"At the Wall?" Bran had always wanted to see the Wall. His bastard brother Jon was there now, a man of the Night's Watch.

"Beyond the Wall." Meera Reed hung the net from her belt. "When Jojen told our lord father what he'd dreamed, he sent us to Winterfell."

"How would I break the chains, Jojen?" Bran asked.

"Open your eye."

"They are open Can't you see?"

"Two are open." Jojen pointed. "One, two."

"I only have two."

"You have three. The crow gave you the third, but you will not open it." He had a slow soft way of speaking. "With two eyes you see my face. With three you could see my heart. With two you can see that oak tree there. With three you could see the acorn the oak grew from and the stump that it will one day become. With two you see no farther than your walls. With three you would gaze south to the Summer Sea and north beyond the Wall."

Summer got to his feet. "I don't need to see so far." Bran made a nervous smile. "I'm tired of talking about crows. Let's talk about wolves. Or lizard-lions. Have you ever hunted one, Meera? We don't have them here."

Meera plucked her frog spear out of the bushes. "They live in the water. In slow streams and deep swamps-"

Her brother interrupted. "Did you dream of a lizard-lion?"

"No," said Bran. "I told you, I don't want-"

"Did you dream of a wolf?"

He was making Bran angry. "I don't have to tell you my dreams. I'm the prince. I'm the Stark in Winterfell."

“Was it Summer?”

“You be quiet.”

“The night of the harvest feast, you dreamed you were Summer in the godswood, didn’t you?”

“Stop it!” Bran shouted. Summer slid toward the weirwood, his white teeth bared.

Jojen Reed took no mind. “When I touched Summer, I felt you in him. just as you are in him now.”

“You couldn’t have. I was in bed. I was sleeping.”

“You were in the godswood, all in grey.”

“It was only a bad dream...”

Jojen stood. “I felt you. I felt you fall. Is that what scares you, the falling?”

The falling, Bran thought, and the golden man, the queen’s brother, he scares me too, but mostly the falling. He did not say it, though. How could he? He had not been able to tell Ser Rodrik or Maester Luwin, and he could not tell the Reeds either. If he didn’t talk about it, maybe he would forget. He had never wanted to remember. It might not even be a true remembering.

“Do you fall every night, Bran?” Jojen asked quietly.

A low rumbling growl rose from Summer’s throat, and there was no play in it. He stalked forward, all teeth and hot eyes. Meera stepped between the wolf and her brother, spear in hand.

“Keep him back, Bran.”

“Jojen is making him angry.”

Meera shook out her net.

“It’s your anger, Bran,” her brother said. “Your fear.”

“It isn’t. I’m not a wolf.” Yet he’d howled with them in the night, and tasted blood in his wolf dreams.

“Part of you is Summer, and part of Summer is you. You know that, Bran.”

Summer rushed forward, but Meera blocked him, jabbing with the three-pronged spear. The wolf twisted aside, circling, stalking. Meera turned to face him. “Call him back, Bran.”

“Summer!” Bran shouted. “To me, Summer!” He slapped an open palm down on the meat of his thigh. His hand tingled, though his dead leg felt nothing.

The direwolf lunged again, and again Meera’s spear darted out. Summer dodged, circled back. The bushes rustled, and a lean black shape came padding from behind the weirwood, teeth bared. The scent was strong; his brother had smelled his rage. Bran felt hairs rise on the back of his neck. Meera stood beside her brother, with wolves to either side. “Bran, call them off.”

“I can’t!”

“Jojen, up the tree.”

“There’s no need. Today is not the day I die.”

“Do it!” she screamed, and her brother scrambled up the trunk of the weirwood, using the face for his handholds. The direwolves closed. Meera abandoned spear and net, jumped up, and grabbed the branch above her head. Shaggy’s jaws snapped shut beneath her ankle as she swung up and over the limb. Summer sat back on his haunches and howled, while Shaggydog worried the net, shaking it in his teeth.

Only then did Bran remember that they were not alone. He cupped hands around his mouth. “Hodor!” he shouted. “Hodor! Hodor!” He was badly frightened and somehow ashamed. “They won’t hurt Hodor,” he assured his treed friends.

A few moments passed before they heard a tuneless humming. Hodor arrived half-dressed and mud-spattered from his visit to the hot pools, but Bran had never been so glad to see him.

“Hodor, help me. Chase off the wolves. Chase them off.”

Hodor went to it gleefully, waving his arms and stamping his huge feet, shouting “Hodor, Hodor,” running first at one wolf and then the other. Shaggydog was the first to flee, slinking back into the foliage with a final snarl. When Summer had enough, he came back to Bran and lay down beside him.

No sooner did Meera touch ground than she snatched up her spear and net again. Jojen never took his eyes off Summer. “We will talk again,” he promised Bran.

It was the wolves, it wasn’t me. He did not understand why they’d gotten so wild. Maybe Maester Luwin was right to lock them in the godswood. “Hodor,” he said, “bring me to Maester Luwin.”

The maester’s turret below the rookery was one of Bran’s favorite places. Luwin was hopelessly untidy, but his clutter of books and scrolls and bottles was as familiar and comforting to Bran as his bald spot and the flapping sleeves of his loose grey robes. He liked the ravens too.

He found Luwin perched on a high stool, writing. With Ser Rodrik gone, all of the governance of the castle had fallen on his shoulders. “My prince,” he said when Hodor entered, “you’re early for lessons today.” The maester spent several hours every afternoon tutoring Bran, Rickon, and the Walder Freys.

“Hodor, stand still.” Bran grasped a wall sconce with both hands and used it to pull himself up and out of the basket. He hung for a moment by his arms until Hodor carried him to a chair.

“Meera says her brother has the greensight.”

Maester Luwin scratched at the side of his nose with his writing quill. “Does she now?”

He nodded. “You told me that the children of the forest had the greensight. I remember.”

“Some claimed to have that power. Their wise men were called greenseers.”

“Was it magic?”

“Call it that for want of a better word, if you must. At heart it was only a different sort of knowledge.”

“What was it?”

Luwin set down his quill. “No one truly knows, Bran. The children are gone from the world, and their wisdom with them. It had to do with the faces in the trees, we think. The First Men believed that the greenseers could see through the eyes of the weirwoods. That was why they cut down the trees whenever they warred upon the children. Supposedly the greenseers also had power over the beasts of the wood and the birds in the trees. Even fish. Does the Reed boy claim such powers?”

“No. I don’t think. But he has dreams that come true sometimes, Meera says.”

“All of us have dreams that come true sometimes. You dreamed of your lord father in the crypts before we knew he was dead, remember?”

“Rickon did too. We dreamed the same dream.”

“Call it greensight, if you wish... but remember as well all those tens of thousands of dreams that you and Rickon have dreamed that did not come true. Do you perchance recall what I taught you about the chain collar that every maester wears?”

Bran thought for a moment, trying to remember. “A maester forges his chain in the Citadel of Oldtown. It’s a chain because you swear to serve, and it’s made of different metals because you serve the realm and the realm has different sorts of people. Every time you learn something you get another link. Black iron is for ravenry, silver for healing, gold for sums and numbers. I don’t remember them all.”

Luwin slid a finger up under his collar and began to turn it, inch by inch. He had a thick neck for a small man, and the chain was tight, but a few pulls had it all the way around. “This is Valyrian steel,” he said when the link of dark grey metal lay against the apple of his throat. “Only one maester in a hundred wears such a link. This signifies that I have studied what the Citadel calls the higher mysteries-magic, for want of a better word. A fascinating pursuit, but of small use, which is why so few maesters trouble themselves with it.

“All those who study the higher mysteries try their own hand at spells, soon or late. I yielded to the temptation too, I must confess it. Well, I was a boy, and what boy does not secretly wish to find hidden powers in himself? I got no more for my efforts than a thousand boys before me, and a thousand since. Sad to say, magic does not work.”

“Sometimes it does,” Bran protested. “I had that dream, and Rickon did too. And there are mages and warlocks in the east...”

“There are men who call themselves mages and warlocks,” Maester Luwin said. “I had a friend at the Citadel who could pull a rose out of your ear, but he was no more magical than I was. Oh, to be sure, there is much we do not understand. The years pass in their hundreds and their thousands, and what does any man see of life but a few summers, a few winters? We look at mountains and call them eternal, and so they seem... but in the course of time, mountains rise and fall, rivers change their courses, stars fall from the sky, and great cities sink beneath the sea. Even gods die, we think. Everything changes.

“Perhaps magic was once a mighty force in the world, but no longer. What little remains is no more than the wisp of smoke that lingers in the air after a great fire has burned out, and even that is fading. Valyria was the last ember, and Valyria is gone. The dragons are no more, the giants are dead, the children of the forest forgotten with all their lore.

“No, my prince. Jojen Reed may have had a dream or two that he believes came true, but he does not have the greensight. No living man has that power.”

Bran said as much to Meera Reed when she came to him at dusk as he sat in his window seat watching the lights flicker to life. “I’m sorry for what happened with the wolves. Summer shouldn’t have tried to hurt Jojen, but Jojen shouldn’t have said all that about my dreams. The crow lied when he said I could fly, and your brother lied too.”

“Or perhaps your maester is wrong.”

“He isn’t. Even my father relied on his counsel.”

“Your father listened, I have no doubt. But in the end, he decided for himself. Bran, will you let me tell you about a dream Jojen dreamed of you and your fosterling brothers?”

“The Walders aren’t my brothers.”

She paid that no heed. “You were sitting at supper, but instead of a servant, Maester Luwin brought you your food. He served you the king’s cut off the roast, the meat rare and bloody, but with a savory smell that made everyone’s mouth water. The meat he served the Freys was old and grey and dead. Yet they liked their supper better than you liked yours.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will, my brother says. When you do, we’ll talk again.”

Bran was almost afraid to sit to supper that night, but when he did, it was pigeon pie they set before him. Everyone else was served the same, and he couldn’t see that anything was wrong with the food they served the Walders. Maester Luwin has the truth of it, he told himself. Nothing bad was coming to Winterfell, no matter what Jojen said. Bran was relieved... but disappointed too. So long as there was magic, anything could happen. Ghosts could walk, trees could talk, and broken boys could grow up to be knights. “But there isn’t,” he said aloud in the darkness of his bed. “There’s no magic, and the stories are just stories.”

And he would never walk, nor fly, nor be a knight.

TYRION

The rushes were scratchy under the soles of his bare feet. "My cousin chooses a queer hour to come visiting," Tyrion told a sleep-befuddled Podrick Payne, who'd doubtless expected to be well roasted for waking him. "See him to my solar and tell him I'll be down shortly."

It was well past midnight, he judged from the black outside the window. Does Lancel think to find me drowsy and slow of wit at this hour? he wondered. No, Lancel scarce thinks at all, this is Cersei's doing. His sister would be disappointed. Even abed, he worked well into the morning-reading by the flickering light of a candle, scrutinizing the reports of Varys's whisperers, and poring over Littlefinger's books of accounts until the columns blurred and his eyes ached.

He splashed some tepid water on his face from the basin beside his bed and took his time squatting in the garderobe, the night air cold on his bare skin. Ser Lancel was sixteen, and not known for his patience. Let him wait, and grow more anxious in the waiting. When his bowels were empty, Tyrion slipped on a bedrobe and roughed his thin flaxen hair with his fingers, all the more to look as if he had wakened from sleep.

Lancel was pacing before the ashes of the hearth, garbed in slashed red velvet with black silk undersleeves, a jeweled dagger and a gilded scabbard hanging from his swordbelt. "Cousin," Tyrion greeted him. "Your visits are too few. To what do I owe this undeserved pleasure?"

"Her Grace the Queen Regent has sent me to command you to release Grand Maester Pycelle." Ser Lancel showed Tyrion a crimson ribbon, bearing Cersei's lion seal impressed in golden wax. "Here is her warrant."

"So it is." Tyrion waved it away. "I hope my sister is not overtaxing her strength, so soon after her illness. It would be a great pity if she were to suffer a relapse."

"Her Grace is quite recovered," Ser Lancel said curtly.

"Music to my ears." Though not a tune I'm fond of. I should have given her a larger dose. Tyrion had hoped for a few more days without Cersei's interference, but he was not too terribly surprised by her return to health. She was Jaime's twin, after all. He made himself smile pleasantly. "Pod, build us a fire, the air is too chilly for my taste. Will you take a cup with me, Lancel? I find that mulled wine helps me sleep."

"I need no help sleeping," Ser Lancel said. "I am come at Her Grace's behest, not to drink with you, Imp."

Knighthood had made the boy bolder, Tyrion reflected-that, and the sorry part he had played in murdering King Robert. "Wine does have its dangers." He smiled as he poured. "As to Grand Maester Pycelle... if my sweet sister is so concerned for him, I would have thought she'd come herself. Instead she sends you. What am I to make of that?"

"Make of it what you will, so long as you release your prisoner. The Grand Maester is a staunch friend to the Queen Regent, and under her personal protection." A hint of a sneer played about the lad's lips; he was enjoying this. He takes his lessons from Cersei. "Her Grace will never consent to this outrage. She reminds you that she is Joffrey's regent."

"As I am Joffrey's Hand."

“The Hand serves,” the young knight informed him airily. “The regent rules until the king is of age.”

“Perhaps you ought write that down so I’ll remember it better.” The fire was crackling merrily. “You may leave us, Pod,” Tyrion told his squire. Only when the boy was gone did he turn back to Lancel. “There is more?”

“Yes. Her Grace bids me inform you that Ser Jacelyn Bywater defied a command issued in the king’s own name.”

Which means that Cersei has already ordered Bywater to release Pycelle, and been rebuffed. “I see.”

“She insists that the man be removed from his office and placed under arrest for treason. I warn you-”

He set aside his wine cup. “I’ll hear no warnings from you, boy.”

“Ser,” Lancel said stiffly. He touched his sword, perhaps to remind Tyrion that he wore one. “Have a care how you speak to me, Imp.” Doubtless he meant to sound threatening, but that absurd wisp of a mustache ruined the effect.

“Oh, unhand your sword. One cry from me and Shagga will burst in and kill you. With an axe, not a wineskin.”

Lancel reddened; was he such a fool as to believe his part in Robert’s death had gone unnoted? “I am a knight-”

“So I’ve noted. Tell me—did Cersei have you knighted before or after she took you into her bed?”

The flicker in Lancel’s green eyes was all the admission Tyrion needed. So Varys told it true. Well, no one can ever claim that my sister does not love her family. “What, nothing to say? No more warnings for me, ser?”

“You will withdraw these filthy accusations or-”

“Please. Have you given any thought to what Joffrey will do when I tell him you murdered his father to bed his mother?”

“It was not like that!” Lancel protested, horrified.

“No? What was it like, pray?”

“The queen gave me the strongwine! Your own father Lord Tywin, when I was named the king’s squire, he told me to obey her in everything.”

“Did he tell you to fuck her too?” Look at him. Not quite so tall, his features not so fine, and his hair is sand instead of spun gold, yet still... even a poor copy of Jaime is sweeter than an empty bed, I suppose. “No, I thought not.”

“I never meant... I only did as I was bid, I...”

“... hated every instant of it, is that what you would have me believe? A high place at court, knighthood, my sister’s legs opening for you at night, oh, yes, it must have been terrible for you.” Tyrion pushed himself to his feet. “Wait here. His Grace will want to hear this.”

The defiance went from Lancel all at once. The young knight fell to his knees a frightened boy. “Mercy, my lord, I beg you.”

“Save it for Joffrey. He likes a good beg.”

“My lord, it was your sister’s bidding, the queen, as you said, but His Grace... he’d never understand...”

“Would you have me keep the truth from the king?”

“For my father’s sake! I’ll leave the city, it will be as if it never happened! I swear, I will end it...”

It was hard not to laugh. “I think not.”

Now the lad looked lost. “My lord?”

“You heard me. My father told you to obey my sister? Very well, obey her. Stay close to her side, keep her trust, pleasure her as often as she requires it. No one need ever know... so long as you keep faith with me. I want to know what Cersei is doing. Where she goes, who she sees, what they talk of, what plans she is hatching. All. And you will be the one to tell me, won’t you?”

“Yes, my lord.” Lancel spoke without a moment’s hesitation. Tyrion liked that. “I will. I swear it. As you command.”

“Rise.” Tyrion filled the second cup and pressed it on him. “Drink to our understanding. I promise, there are no boars in the castle that I know of.” Lancel lifted the cup and drank, albeit stiffly. “Smile, cousin. My sister is a beautiful woman, and it’s all for the good of the realm. You could do well out of this. Knighthood is nothing. If you’re clever, you’ll have a lordship from me before you’re done.” Tyrion swirled the wine in his cup. “We want Cersei to have every faith in you. Go back and tell her I beg her forgiveness. Tell her that you frightened me, that I want no conflict between us, that henceforth I shall do nothing without her consent.”

“But... her demands...”

“Oh, I’ll give her Pycelle.”

“You will?” Lancel seemed astonished.

Tyrion smiled. “I’ll release him on the morrow. I could swear that I hadn’t harmed a hair on his head, but it wouldn’t be strictly true. In any case, he’s well enough, though I won’t vouch for his vigor. The black cells are not a healthy place for a man his age. Cersei can keep him as a pet or send him to the Wall, I don’t care which, but I won’t have him on the council. “

“And Ser Jacelyn?”

“Tell my sister you believe you can win him away from me, given time. That ought to content her for a while.”

“As you say.” Lancel finished his wine.

“One last thing. With King Robert dead, it would be most embarrassing should his grieving widow suddenly grow great with child.”

“My lord, I... we... the queen has commanded me not to

His ears had turned Lannister crimson. “I spill my seed on her belly, my lord.”

“A lovely belly, I have no doubt. Moisten it as often as you wish... but see that your dew falls nowhere else. I want no more nephews, is that clear?”

Ser Lancel made a stiff bow and took his leave.

Tyrion allowed himself a moment to feel sorry for the boy. Another fool, and a weakling as well, but he does not deserve what Cersei and I are doing to him. It was a kindness that his uncle Kevan had two other sons; this one was unlikely to live out the year. Cersei would have him killed out of hand if she learned he was betraying her, and if by some grace of the gods she did not, Lancel would never survive the day Jaime Lannister returned to King's Landing. The only question would be whether Jaime cut him down in a jealous rage, or Cersei murdered him first to keep Jaime from finding out. Tyrion's silver was on Cersei.

A restlessness was on him, and Tyrion knew full well he would not get back to sleep tonight. Not here, in any case. He found Podrick Payne asleep in a chair outside the door of the solar, and shook him by the shoulder. "Summon Bronn, and then run down to the stables and have two horses saddled."

The squire's eyes were cloudy with sleep. "Horses."

"Those big brown animals that love apples, I'm sure you've seen them. Four legs and a tail. But Bronn first."

The sellsword was not long in appearing. "Who pissed in your soup?" he demanded.

"Cersei, as ever. You'd think I'd be used to the taste by now, but never mind. My gentle sister seems to have mistaken me for Ned Stark."

"I hear he was taller."

"Not after Joff took off his head. You ought to have dressed more warmly, the night is chill."

"Are we going somewhere?"

"Are all sellswords as clever as you?"

The city streets were dangerous, but with Bronn beside him Tyrion felt safe enough. The guards let him out a postern gate in the north wall, and they rode down Shadowblack Lane to the foot of Aegon's High Hill, and thence onto Pigrun Alley, past rows of shuttered windows and tall timber-and-stone buildings whose upper stories leaned out so far over the street they almost kissed. The moon seemed to follow them as they went, playing peek-and-sneak among the chimneys. They encountered no one but a lone old crone, carrying a dead cat by the tail. She gave them a fearful look, as if she were afraid they might try to steal her dinner, and slunk off into the shadows without a word.

Tyrion reflected on the men who had been Hand before him, who had proved no match for his sister's wiles. How could they be? Men like that... too honest to live, too noble to shit, Cersei devours such fools every morning when she breaks her fast. The only way to defeat my sister is to play her own game, and that was something the Lords Stark and Arryn would never do. Small wonder that both of them were dead, while Tyrion Lannister had never felt more alive. His stunted legs might make him a comic grotesque at a harvest ball, but this dance he knew.

Despite the hour, the brothel was crowded. Chataya greeted them pleasantly and escorted them to the common room. Bronn went upstairs with a dark-eyed girl from Dorne, but Alayaya was busy entertaining. "She will be so pleased to know you've come," said Chataya. "I will see that the turret room is made ready for you. Will my lord take a cup of wine while he waits?"

"I will," he said.

The wine was poor stuff compared to the vintages from the Arbor the house normally served. "You must forgive us, my lord," Chataya said. "I cannot find good wine at any price of late."

"You are not alone in that, I fear."

Chataya commiserated with him a moment, then excused herself and glided off. A handsome woman, Tyrion reflected as he watched her go. He had seldom seen such elegance and dignity in a whore. Though to be sure, she saw herself more as a kind of priestess. Perhaps that is the secret. It is not what we do, so much as why we do it. Somehow that thought comforted him.

A few of the other patrons were giving him sideways looks. The last time he ventured out, a man had spit on him... well, had tried to. Instead he'd spit on Bronn, and in future would do his spitting without teeth.

"Is milord feeling unlove?" Dancy slid into his lap and nibbled at his ear. "I have a cure for that."

Smiling, Tyrion shook his head. "You are too beautiful for words, sweetling, but I've grown fond of Alayaya's remedy."

"You've never tried mine. Milord never chooses anyone but 'Yaya. She's good but I'm better, don't you want to see?"

"Next time, perhaps." Tyrion had no doubt that Dancy would be a lively handful. She was pug-nosed and bouncy, with freckles and a mane of thick red hair that tumbled down past her waist. But he had Shae waiting for him at the manse.

Giggling, she put her hand between his thighs and squeezed him through his breeches. "I don't think he wants to wait till next time," she announced. "He wants to come out and count all my freckles, I think."

"Dancy." Alayaya stood in the doorway, dark and cool in gauzy green silk. "His lordship is come to visit me."

Tyrion gently disentangled himself from the other girl and stood. Dancy did not seem to mind. "Next time," she reminded him. She put a finger in her mouth and sucked it.

As the black-skinned girl led him up the stairs, she said, "Poor Dancy. She has a fortnight to get my lord to choose her. Elsewise she loses her black pearls to Marei."

Marei was a cool, pale, delicate girl Tyrion had noticed once or twice. Green eyes and porcelain skin, long straight silvery hair, very lovely, but too solemn by half. "Id hate to have the poor child lose her pearls on account of me."

"Then take her upstairs next time."

"Maybe I will."

She smiled. "I think not, my lord."

She's right, Tyrion thought, I won't. Shae may be only a whore, but I am faithful to her after my fashion.

In the turret room, as he opened the door of the wardrobe, he looked at Alayaya curiously. "What do you do while I'm gone?"

She raised her arms and stretched like some sleek black cat. "Sleep. I am much better rested since you began to visit us, my lord. And Marei is teaching us to read, perhaps soon I will be able to pass the time with a book."

"Sleep is good," he said. "And books are better." He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. Then it was down the shaft and through the tunnel.

As he left the stable on his piebald gelding, Tyrion heard the sound of music drifting over the rooftops. It was pleasant to think that men still sang, even in the midst of butchery and famine. Remembered notes filled his head, and for a moment he could almost hear Tysha as she'd sung to him half a lifetime ago. He reined up to listen. The tune was wrong, the words too faint to hear. A different song then, and why not? His sweet innocent Tysha had been a lie start to finish, only a whore his brother Jaime had hired to make him a man.

I'm free of Tysha now, he thought. She's haunted me half my life, but I don't need her anymore, no more than I need Alayaya or Dancy or Marei, or the hundreds like them I've bedded with over the years. I have Shae now Shae.

The gates of the manse were closed and barred. Tyrion pounded until the ornate bronze eye clacked open. "It's me." The man who admitted him was one of Varys's prettier finds, a Braavosi daggerman with a harelip and a lazy eye. Tyrion had wanted no handsome young guardsmen loitering about Shae day after day. "Find me old, ugly, scarred men, preferably impotent," he had told the eunuch. "Men who prefer boys. Or men who prefer sheep, for that matter." Varys had not managed to come up with any sheeplovers, but he did find a eunuch strangler and a pair of foulsmelling Ibbenese who were as fond of axes as they were of each other. The others were as choice a lot of mercenaries as ever graced a dungeon, each uglier than the last. When Varys had paraded them before him, Tyrion had been afraid he'd gone too far, but Shae had never uttered a word of complaint. And why would she? She has never complained of me, and I'm more hideous than all her guards together. Perhaps she does not even see ugliness.

Even so, Tyrion would sooner have used some of his mountain clansmen to guard the manse; Chella's Black Ears perhaps, or the Moon Brothers. He had more faith in their iron loyalties and sense of honor than in the greed of sellswords. The risk was too great, however. All King's Landing knew the wildlings were his. If he sent the Black Ears here, it would only be a matter of time until the whole city knew the King's Hand was keeping a concubine.

One of the Ibbenese took his horse. "Have you woken her?" Tyrion asked him.

"No, m'lord."

"Good."

The fire in the bedchamber had burned down to embers, but the room was still warm. Shae had kicked off her blankets and sheets as she slept. She lay nude atop the featherbed, the soft curves of her young body limned in the faint glow from the hearth. Tyrion stood in the door and drank in the sight of her. Younger than Marei, sweeter than Dancy, more beautiful than Alayaya, she's all I need and more. How could a whore look so clean and sweet and innocent, he wondered?

He had not intended to disturb her, but the sight of her was enough to make him hard. He let his garments fall to the floor, then crawled onto the bed and gently pushed her legs apart and kissed

her between the thighs. Shae murmured in her sleep. He kissed her again, and licked at her secret sweetness, on and on until his beard and her cunt were both soaked. When she gave a soft moan and shuddered, he climbed up and thrust himself inside her and exploded almost at once.

Her eyes were open. She smiled and stroked his head and whispered, "I just had the sweetest dream, m'lord."

Tyrion nipped at her small hard nipple and nestled his head on her shoulder. He did not pull out of her; would that he never had to pull out of her. "This is no dream," he promised her. It is real, all of it, he thought, the wars, the intrigues, the great bloody game, and me in the center of it... me, the dwarf, the monster, the one they scorned and laughed at, but now I hold it all, the power, the city, the girl. This was what I was made for, and gods forgive me, but I do love it...

And her. And her.

ARYA

Whatever names Harren the Black had meant to give his towers were long forgotten. They were called the Tower of Dread, the Widow's Tower, the Wailing Tower, the Tower of Ghosts, and Kingspyre Tower. Arya slept in a shallow niche in the cavernous vaults beneath the Wailing Tower, on a bed of straw. She had water to wash in whenever she liked, a chunk of soap. The work was hard, but no harder than walking miles every day. Weasel did not need to find worms and bugs to eat, as Arry had; there was bread every day, and barley stews with bits of carrot and turnip, and once a fortnight even a bite of meat.

Hot Pie ate even better; he was where he belonged, in the kitchens, a round stone building with a domed roof that was a world unto itself. Arya took her meals at a trestle table in the undercroft with Weese and his other charges, but sometimes she would be chosen to help fetch their food, and she and Hot Pie could steal a moment to talk. He could never remember that she was now Weasel and kept calling her Arry, even though he knew she was a girl. Once he tried to slip her a hot apple tart, but he made such a clumsy job of it that two of the cooks saw. They took the tart away and beat him with a big wooden spoon.

Gendry had been sent to the forge; Arya seldom saw him. As for those she served with, she did not even want to know their names. That only made it hurt worse when they died. Most of them were older than she was and content to let her alone.

Harrenhal was vast, much of it far gone in decay. Lady Whent had held the castle as bannerman to House Tully, but she'd used only the lower thirds of two of the five towers, and let the rest go to ruin. Now she was fled, and the small household she'd left could not begin to tend the needs of all the knights, lords, and highborn prisoners Lord Tywin had brought, so the Lannisters must forage for servants as well as for plunder and provender. The talk was that Lord Tywin planned to restore Harrenhal to glory, and make it his new seat once the war was done.

Weese used Arya to run messages, draw water, and fetch food, and sometimes to serve at table in the Barracks Hall above the armory, where the men-at-arms took their meals. But most of her work was cleaning. The ground floor of the Wailing Tower was given over to storerooms and granaries, and two floors above housed part of the garrison, but the upper stories had not been occupied for eighty years. Now Lord Tywin had commanded that they be made fit for habitation again. There were floors to be scrubbed, grime to be washed off windows, broken chairs and rotted beds to be carried off. The topmost story was infested with nests of the huge black bats that House Whent had used for its sigil, and there were rats in the cellars as well... and ghosts, some said, the spirits of Harren the Black and his sons.

Arya thought that was stupid. Harren and his sons had died in Kingspyre Tower, that was why it had that name, so why should they cross the yard to haunt her? The Wailing Tower only wailed when the wind blew from the north, and that was just the sound the air made blowing through the cracks in the stones where they had fissured from the heat. If there were ghosts in Harrenhal, they never troubled her. It was the living men she feared, Weese and Ser Gregor Clegane and Lord Tywin Lannister himself, who kept his apartments in Kingspyre Tower, still

the tallest and mightiest of all, though lopsided beneath the weight of the slagged stone that made it look like some giant half-melted black candle.

She wondered what Lord Tywin would do if she marched up to him and confessed to being Arya Stark, but she knew she'd never get near enough to talk to him, and anyhow he'd never believe her if she did, and afterward Weese would beat her bloody.

In his own small strutting way, Weese was nearly as scary as Ser Gregor. The Mountain swatted men like flies, but most of the time he did not even seem to know the fly was there. Weese always knew you were there, and what you were doing, and sometimes what you were thinking. He would hit at the slightest provocation, and he had a dog who was near as bad as he was, an ugly spotted bitch that smelled worse than any dog Arya had ever known. Once she saw him set the dog on a latrine boy who'd annoyed him. She tore a big chunk out of the boy's calf while Weese laughed.

It took him only three days to earn the place of honor in her nightly prayers. "Weese," she would whisper, first of all. "Dunsen, Chiswyck, Polliver, Raff the Sweetling. The Tickler and the Hound. Ser Gregor, Ser Amory, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, King Joffrey, Queen Cersei." If she let herself forget even one of them, how would she ever find him again to kill him?

On the road Arya had felt like a sheep, but Harrenhal turned her into a mouse. She was grey as a mouse in her scratchy wool shift, and like a mouse she kept to the crannies and crevices and dark holes of the castle, scurrying out of the way of the mighty.

Sometimes she thought they were all mice within those thick walls, even the knights and the great lords. The size of the castle made even Gregor Clegane seem small. Harrenhal covered thrice as much ground as Winterfell, and its buildings were so much larger they could scarcely be compared. Its stables housed a thousand horses, its godswood covered twenty acres, its kitchens were as large as Winterfell's Great Hall, and its own great hall, grandly named the Hall of a Hundred Hearths even though it only had thirty and some (Arya had tried to count them, twice, but she came up with thirty-three once and thirty-five the other time) was so cavernous that Lord Tywin could have feasted his entire host, though he never did. Walls, doors, halls, steps, everything was built to an inhuman scale that made Arya remember the stories Old Nan used to tell of the giants who lived beyond the Wall.

And as lords and ladies never notice the little grey mice under their feet, Arya heard all sorts of secrets just by keeping her ears open as she went about her duties. Pretty Pia from the buttery was a slut who was working her way through every knight in the castle. The wife of the gaoler was with child, but the real father was either Ser Alyn Stackspear or a singer called Whitesmile Wat. Lord Lefford made mock of ghosts at table, but always kept a candle burning by his bed. Ser Dunaver's squire Jodge could not hold his water when he slept. The cooks despised Ser Harys Swyft and spit in all his food. Once she even overheard Maester Tothmure's serving girl confiding to her brother about some message that said Joffrey was a bastard and not the rightful king at all. "Lord Tywin told him to burn the letter and never speak such filth again," the girl whispered.

King Robert's brothers Stannis and Renly had joined the fighting, she heard. "And both of them kings now," Weese said. "Realm's got more kings than a castle's got rats." Even Lannister men questioned how long Joffrey would hold the Iron Throne. "The lad's got no army but them gold cloaks, and he's ruled by a eunuch, a dwarf, and a woman," she heard a lordling mutter in his cups. "What good will the likes of them be if it comes to battle?" There was always talk of Beric Dondarrion. A fat archer once said the Bloody Mummerys had slain him, but the others only laughed. "Lorch killed the man at Rushing Falls, and the Mountain's slain him twice. Got me a silver stag says he don't stay dead this time neither."

Arya did not know who Bloody Mummerys were until a fortnight later, when the queerest company of men she'd ever seen arrived at Harrenhal. Beneath the standard of a black goat with bloody horns rode copper men with bells in their braids; lancers astride striped black-and-white horses; bowmen with powdered cheeks; squat hairy men with shaggy shields; brown-skinned men in feathered cloaks; a wispy fool in green-and-pink motley; swordsmen with fantastic forked beards dyed green and purple and silver; spearmen with colored scars that covered their cheeks; a slender man in septon's robes, a fatherly one in maester's grey, and a sickly one whose leather cloak was fringed with long blond hair.

At their head was a man stick-thin and very tall, with a drawn emaciated face made even longer by the ropy black beard that grew from his pointed chin nearly to his waist. The helm that hung from his saddle horn was black steel, fashioned in the shape of a goat's head. About his neck he wore a chain made of linked coins of many different sizes, shapes, and metals, and his horse was one of the strange black-and-white ones.

"You don't want to know that lot, Weasel," Weese said when he saw her looking at the goat-helmed man. Two of his drinking friends were with him, men-at-arms in service to Lord Lefford. "Who are they?" she asked.

One of the soldiers laughed. "The Footmen, girl. Toes of the Goat. Lord Tywin's Bloody Mummerys."

"Pease for wits. You get her flayed, you can scrub the bloody steps," said Weese. "They're sellswords, Weasel girl. Call themselves the Brave Companions. Don't use them other names where they can hear, or they'll hurt you bad. The goat-helm's their captain, Lord Vargo Hoat."

"He's no fucking lord," said the second soldier. "I heard Ser Amory say so. He's just some sellsword with a mouth full of slobber and a high opinion of hisself."

"Aye," said Weese, "but she better call him lord if she wants to keep all her parts."

Arya looked at Vargo Hoat again. How many monsters does Lord Tywin have?

The Brave Companions were housed in the Widow's Tower, so Arya need not serve them. She was glad of that; on the very night they arrived, fighting broke out between the sellswords and some Lannister men. Ser Harys Swyft's squire was stabbed to death and two of the Bloody Mummerys were wounded. The next morning Lord Tywin hanged them both from the gatehouse walls, along with one of Lord Lydden's archers. Weese said the archer had started all the trouble by taunting the sellswords over Beric Dondarrion. After the hanged men had stopped kicking, Vargo Hoat and Ser Harys embraced and kissed and swore to love each other always as Lord

Tywin looked on. Arya thought it was funny the way Vargo Hoat lisped and slobbered, but she knew better than to laugh.

The Bloody Mummerys did not linger long at Harrenhal, but before they rode out again, Arya heard one of them saying how a northern army under Roose Bolton had occupied the ruby ford of the Trident. "If he crosses, Lord Tywin will smash him again like he did on the Green Fork," a Lannister bowman said, but his fellows jeered him down. "Bolton'll never cross, not till the Young Wolf marches from Riverrun with his wild northmen and all them wolves."

Arya had not known her brother was so near. Riverrun was much closer than Winterfell, though she was not certain where it lay in relation to Harrenhal. I could find out somehow, I know I could, if only I could get away. When she thought of seeing Robb's face again Arya had to bite her lip. And I want to see Jon too, and Bran and Rickon, and Mother. Even Sansa... I'll kiss her and beg her pardons like a proper lady, she'll like that.

From the courtyard talk she'd learned that the upper chambers of the Tower of Dread housed three dozen captives taken during some battle on the Green Fork of the Trident. Most had been given freedom of the castle in return for their pledge not to attempt escape. They vowed not to escape, Arya told herself, but they never swore not to help me escape.

The captives ate at their own table in the Hall of a Hundred Hearths, and could often be seen about the grounds. Four brothers took their exercise together every day, fighting with staves and wooden shields in the Flowstone Yard. Three of them were Freys of the Crossing, the fourth their bastard brother. They were only there a short time, though; one morning two other brothers arrived under a peace banner with a chest of gold, and ransomed them from the knights who'd captured them. The six Freys all left together.

No one ransomed the northmen, though. One fat lordling haunted the kitchens, Hot Pie told her, always looking for a morsel. His mustache was so bushy that it covered his mouth, and the clasp that held his cloak was a silver-and-sapphire trident. He belonged to Lord Tywin, but the fierce, bearded young man who liked to walk the battlements alone in a black cloak patterned with white suns had been taken by some hedge knight who meant to get rich off him. Sansa would have known who he was, and the fat one too, but Arya had never taken much interest in titles and sigils. Whenever Septa Mordane had gone on about the history of this house and that house, she was inclined to drift and dream and wonder when the lesson would be done.

She did remember Lord Cerwyn, though. His lands had been close to Winterfell, so he and his son Cley had often visited. Yet as fate would have it, he was the only captive who was never seen; he was abed in a tower cell, recovering from a wound. For days and days Arya tried to work out how she might steal past the door guards to see him. If he knew her, he would be honor bound to help her. A lord would have gold for a certainty, they all did; perhaps he would pay some of Lord Tywin's own sellswords to take her to Riverrun. Father had always said that most sellswords would betray anyone for enough gold.

Then one morning she spied three women in the cowled grey robes of the silent sisters loading a corpse into their wagon. The body was sewn into a cloak of the finest silk, decorated with a battle-axe sigil. When Arya asked who it was, one of the guards told her that Lord Cerwyn had

died. The words felt like a kick in the belly. He could never have helped you anyway, she thought as the sisters drove the wagon through the gate. He couldn't even help himself, you stupid mouse.

After that it was back to scrubbing and scurrying and listening at doors. Lord Tywin would soon march on Riverrun, she heard. or he would drive south to Highgarden, no one would ever expect that. No, he must defend King's Landing, Stannis was the greatest threat. He'd sent Gregor Clegane and Vargo Hoat to destroy Roose Bolton and remove the dagger from his back. He'd sent ravens to the Eyrie, he meant to wed the Lady Lysa Arryn and win the Vale. He'd bought a ton of silver to forge magic swords that would slay the Stark wargs. He was writing Lady Stark to make a peace, the Kingslayer would soon be freed.

Though ravens came and went every day, Lord Tywin himself spent most of his days behind closed doors with his war council. Arya caught glimpses of him, but always from afar—once walking the walls in the company of three maesters and the fat captive with the bushy mustache, once riding out with his lords bannermen to visit the encampments, but most often standing in an arch of the covered gallery watching men at practice in the yard below. He stood with his hands locked together on the gold pommel of his longsword. They said Lord Tywin loved gold most of all; he even shit gold, she heard one squire jest. The Lannister lord was strong-looking for an old man, with stiff golden whiskers and a bald head. There was something in his face that reminded Arya of her own father, even though they looked nothing alike. He has a lord's face, that's all, she told herself. She remembered hearing her lady mother tell Father to put on his lord's face and go deal with some matter. Father had laughed at that. She could not imagine Lord Tywin ever laughing at anything. one afternoon, while she was waiting her turn to draw a pail of water from the well, she heard the hinges of the east gate groaning. A party of men rode under the portcullis at a walk. When she spied the manticores crawling across the shield of their leader, a stab of hate shot through her.

In the light of day, Ser Amory Lorch looked less frightening than he had by torchlight, but he still had the pig's eyes she recalled. One of the women said that his men had ridden all the way around the lake chasing Beric Dondarrion and slaying rebels. We weren't rebels, Arya thought. We were the Night's Watch; the Night's Watch takes no side. Ser Amory had fewer men than she remembered, though, and many wounded. I hope their wounds fester. I hope they all die.

Then she saw the three near the end of the column.

Rorge had donned a black halfhelm with a broad iron nasal that made it hard to see that he did not have a nose. Biter rode ponderously beside him on a destrier that looked ready to collapse under his weight. Halfhealed burns covered his body, making him even more hideous than before.

But Jaqen H'ghar still smiled. His garb was still ragged and filthy, but he had found time to wash and brush his hair. It streamed down across his shoulders, red and white and shiny, and Arya heard the girls giggling to each other in admiration.

I should have let the fire have them. Gendry said to, I should have listened. If she hadn't thrown them that axe they'd all be dead. For a moment she was afraid, but they rode past her without a

flicker of interest. Only Jaqen H'ghar so much as glanced in her direction, and his eyes passed right over her. He does not know me, she thought. Arya was a fierce little boy with a sword, and I'm just a grey mouse girl with a pail.

She spent the rest of that day scrubbing steps inside the Wailing Tower. By evenfall her hands were raw and bleeding and her arms so sore they trembled when she lugged the pail back to the cellar. Too tired even for food, Arya begged Weese's pardons and crawled into her straw to sleep. "Weese," she yawned. "Dunsen, Chiswyck, Polliver, Raff the Sweetling. The Tickler and the Hound. Ser Gregor, Ser Amory, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, King Joffrey, Queen Cersei." She thought she might add three more names to her prayer, but she was too tired to decide tonight.

Arya was dreaming of wolves running wild through the wood when a strong hand clamped down over her mouth like smooth warm stone, solid and unyielding. She woke at once, squirming and struggling. "A girl says nothing," a voice whispered close behind her ear. "A girl keeps her lips closed, no one hears, and friends may talk in secret. Yes?"

Heart pounding, Arya managed the tiniest of nods.

Jaqen H'ghar took his hand away. The cellar was black as pitch and she could not see his face, even inches away. She could smell him, though; his skin smelled clean and soapy, and he had scented his hair. "A boy becomes a girl," he murmured.

"I was always a girl. I didn't think you saw me."

"A man sees. A man knows."

She remembered that she hated him. "You scared me. You're one of them now, I should have let you burn. What are you doing here? Go away or I'll yell for Weese."

"A man pays his debts. A man owes three."

"Three? "

"The Red God has his due, sweet girl, and only death may pay for life. This girl took three that were his. This girl must give three in their places. Speak the names, and a man will do the rest." He wants to help me, Arya realized with a rush of hope that made her dizzy. "Take me to Riverrun, it's not far, if we stole some horses we could-"

He laid a finger on her lips. "Three lives you shall have of me. No more, no less. Three and we are done. So a girl must ponder." He kissed her hair softly. "But not too long."

By the time Arya lit her stub of a candle, only a faint smell remained of him, a whiff of ginger and cloves lingering in the air. The woman in the next niche rolled over on her straw and complained of the light, so Arya blew it out. When she closed her eyes, she saw faces swimming before her. Joffrey and his mother, Ilyn Payne and Meryn Trant and Sandor Clegane... but they were in King's Landing hundreds of miles away, and Ser Gregor had lingered only a few nights before departing again for more foraging, taking Raff and Chiswyck and the Tickler with him. Ser Amory Lorch was here, though, and she hated him almost as much. Didn't she? She wasn't certain. And there was always Weese.

She thought of him again the next morning, when lack of sleep made her yawn. "Weasel," Weese purred, "next time I see that mouth droop open, I'll pull out your tongue and feed it to my

bitch.” He twisted her ear between his fingers to make certain she’d heard, and told her to get back to those steps, he wanted them clean down to the third landing by nightfall.

As she worked, Arya thought about the people she wanted dead. She pretended she could see their faces on the steps, and scrubbed harder to wipe them away. The Starks were at war with the Lannisters and she was a Stark, so she should kill as many Lannisters as she could, that was what you did in wars. But she didn’t think she should trust Jaqen. I should kill them myself. Whenever her father had condemned a man to death, he did the deed himself with Ice, his greatsword. “If you would take a man’s life, you owe it to him to look him in the face and hear his last words,” she’d heard him tell Robb and Jon once.

The next day she avoided Jaqen H’ghar, and the day after that. It was not hard. She was very small and Harrenhal was very large, full of places where a mouse could hide.

And then Ser Gregor returned, earlier than expected, driving a herd of goats this time in place of a herd of prisoners. She heard he’d lost four men in one of Lord Beric’s night raids, but those Arya hated returned unscathed and took up residence on the second floor of the Wailing Tower. Weese saw that they were well supplied with drink. “They always have a good thirst, that lot,” he grumbled. “Weasel, go up and ask if they’ve got any clothes that need mending, I’ll have the women see to it.”

Arya ran up her well-scrubbed steps. No one paid her any mind when she entered. Chiswyck was seated by the fire with a horn of ale to hand, telling one of his funny stories. She dared not interrupt, unless she wanted a bloody lip.

“After the Hand’s tourney, it were, before the war come,” Chiswyck was saying. “We were on our ways back west, seven of us with Ser Gregor. Raff was with me, and young Joss Stilwood, he’d squired for Ser in the lists. Well, we come on this pisswater river, running high on account there’d been rains. No way to ford, but there’s an alehouse near, so there we repair. Ser rousts the brewer and tells him to keep our horns full till the waters fall, and you should see the man’s pig eyes shine at the sight o’ silver. So he’s fetching us ale, him and his daughter, and poor thin stuff it is, no more’n brown piss, which don’t make me any happier, nor Ser neither. And all the time this brewer’s saying how glad he is to have us, custom being slow on account o’ them rains. The fool won’t shut his yap, not him, though Ser is saying not a word, just brooding on the Knight o’ Pansies and that bugger’s trick he played. You can see how tight his mouth sits, so me and the other lads we know better’n to say a squeak to him, but this brewer he’s got to talk, he even asks how m’lord fared in the jousting. Ser just gave him this look.” Chiswyck cackled, quaffed his ale, and wiped the foam away with the back of his hand. “Meanwhile, this daughter of his has been fetching and pouring, a fat little thing, eighteen or so-”

“Thirteen, more like,” Raff the Sweetling drawled.

“Well, be that as it may, she’s not much to look at, but Eggon’s been drinking and gets to touching her, and might be I did a little touching meself, and Raff’s telling young Stilwood that he ought to drag the girl upstairs and make hisself a man, giving the lad courage as it were. Finally Joss reaches up under her skirt, and she shrieks and drops her flagon and goes running off

to the kitchen. Well, it would have ended right there, only what does the old fool do but he goes to Ser and asks him to make us leave the girl alone, him being an anointed knight and all such.

“Ser Gregor, he wasn’t paying no mind to none of our fun, but now he looks, you know how he does, and he commands that the girl be brought before him. Now the old man has to drag her out of the kitchen, and no one to blame but hisself. Ser looks her over and says, ‘So this is the whore you’re so concerned for’ and this besotted old fool says, ‘My Layna’s no whore, ser’ right to Gregor’s face. Ser, he never blinks, just says, ‘She is now’ tosses the old man another silver, rips the dress off the wench, and takes her right there on the table in front of her da, her flopping and wiggling like a rabbit and making these noises. The look on the old man’s face, I laughed so hard ale was coming out me nose. Then this boy hears the noise, the son I figure, and comes rushing up from the cellar, so Raff has to stick a dirk in his belly. By then Ser’s done, so he goes back to his drinking and we all have a turn. Tobbot, you know how he is, he flops her over and goes in the back way. The girl was done fighting by the time I had her, maybe she’d decided she liked it after all, though to tell the truth I wouldn’t have minded a little wiggling. And now here’s the best bit... when it’s all done, Ser tells the old man that he wants his change. The girl wasn’t worth a silver, he says... and damned if that old man didn’t fetch a fistful of coppers, beg mlord’s pardon, and thank him for the custom!”

The men all roared, none louder than Chiswyck himself, who laughed so hard at his own story that snot dribbled from his nose down into his scraggy grey beard. Arya stood in the shadows of the stairwell and watched him. She crept back down to the cellars without saying a word. When Weese found that she hadn’t asked about the clothes, he yanked down her breeches and caned her until blood ran down her thighs, but Arya closed her eyes and thought of all the sayings Syrio had taught her, so she scarcely felt it.

Two nights later, he sent her to the Barracks Hall to serve at table. She was carrying a flagon of wine and pouring when she glimpsed Jaqen H’ghar at his trencher across the aisle. Chewing her lip, Arya glanced around warily to make certain Weese was not in sight. Fear cuts deeper than swords, she told herself.

She took a step, and another, and with each she felt less a mouse. She worked her way down the bench, filling wine cups. Rorge sat to Jaqen’s right, deep drunk, but he took no note of her. Arya leaned close and whispered, “Chiswyck,” right in Jaqen’s ear. The Lorathi gave no sign that he had heard.

When her flagon was empty, Arya hurried down to the cellars to refill it from the cask, and quickly returned to her pouring. No one had died of thirst while she was gone, nor even noted her brief absence.

Nothing happened the next day, nor the day after, but on the third day Arya went to the kitchens with Weese to fetch their dinner. “One of the Mountain’s men fell off a wallwalk last night and broke his fool neck,” she heard Weese tell a cook.

“Drunk?” the woman asked.

“No more’n usual. Some are saying it was Harren’s ghost flung him down.” He snorted to show what he thought of such notions.

It wasn't Harren, Arya wanted to say, it was me. She had killed Chiswyck with a whisper, and she would kill two more before she was through. I'm the ghost in Harrenhal, she thought. And that night, there was one less name to hate.

CATELYN

The meeting place was a grassy sward dotted with pale grey mushrooms and the raw stumps of felled trees.

“We are the first, my lady,” Hallis Mollen said as they reined up amidst the stumps, alone between the armies. The direwolf banner of House Stark flapped and fluttered atop the lance he bore. Catelyn could not see the sea from here, but she could feel how close it was. The smell of salt was heavy on the wind gusting from the east.

Stannis Baratheon’s foragers had cut the trees down for his siege towers and catapults. Catelyn wondered how long the grove had stood, and whether Ned had rested here when he led his host south to lift the last siege of Storm’s End. He had won a great victory that day, all the greater for being bloodless.

Gods grant that I shall do the same, Catelyn prayed. Her own liege men thought she was mad even to come. “This is no fight of ours, my lady,” Ser Wendel Manderly had said. “I know the king would not wish his mother to put herself at risk.”

“We are all at risk,” she told him, perhaps too sharply. “Do you think I wish to be here, ser?” I belong at Riverrun with my dying father, at Winterfell with my sons. “Robb sent me south to speak for him, and speak for him I shall.” It would be no easy thing to forge a peace between these brothers, Catelyn knew, yet for the good of the realm, it must be tried.

Across rain-sodden fields and stony ridges, she could see the great castle of Storm’s End rearing up against the sky, its back to the unseen sea. Beneath that mass of pale grey stone, the encircling army of Lord Stannis Baratheon looked as small and insignificant as mice with banners.

The songs said that Storm’s End had been raised in ancient days by Durran, the first Storm King, who had won the love of the fair Elenei, daughter of the sea god and the goddess of the wind. On the night of their wedding, Elenei had yielded her maidenhood to a mortal’s love and thus doomed herself to a mortal’s death, and her grieving parents had unleashed their wrath and sent the winds and waters to batter down Durran’s hold. His friends and brothers and wedding guests were crushed beneath collapsing walls or blown out to sea, but Elenei sheltered Durran within her arms so he took no harm, and when the dawn came at last he declared war upon the gods and vowed to rebuild.

Five more castles he built, each larger and stronger than the last, only to see them smashed asunder when the gale winds came howling up Shipbreaker Bay, driving great walls of water before them. His lords pleaded with him to build inland; his priests told him he must placate the gods by giving Elenei back to the sea; even his smallfolk begged him to relent. Durran would have none of it. A seventh castle he raised, most massive of all. Some said the children of the forest helped him build it, shaping the stones with magic; others claimed that a small boy told him what he must do, a boy who would grow to be Bran the Builder. No matter how the tale was told, the end was the same. Though the angry gods threw storm after storm against it, the seventh

castle stood defiant, and Durran Godsgrief and fair Elenei dwelt there together until the end of their days.

Gods do not forget, and still the gales came raging up the narrow sea. Yet Storm's End endured, through centuries and tens of centuries, a castle like no other. Its great curtain wall was a hundred feet high, unbroken by arrow slit or postern, everywhere rounded, curving, smooth, its stones fit so cunningly together that nowhere was crevice nor angle nor gap by which the wind might enter. That wall was said to be forty feet thick at its narrowest, and near eighty on the seaward face, a double course of stones with an inner core of sand and rubble. Within that mighty bulwark, the kitchens and stables and yards sheltered safe from wind and wave. Of towers, there was but one, a colossal drum tower, windowless where it faced the sea, so large that it was granary and barracks and feast hall and lord's dwelling all in one, crowned by massive battlements that made it look from afar like a spiked fist atop an upthrust arm.

"My lady," Hal Mollen called. Two riders had emerged from the tidy little camp beneath the castle, and were coming toward them at a slow walk. "That will be King Stannis."

"No doubt." Catelyn watched them come. Stannis it must be, yet that is not the Baratheon banner. It was a bright yellow, not the rich gold of Renly's standards, and the device it bore was red, though she could not make out its shape.

Renly would be last to arrive. He had told her as much when she set out. He did not propose to mount his horse until he saw his brother well on his way. The first to arrive must wait on the other, and Renly would do no waiting. It is a sort of game kings play, she told herself. Well, she was no king, so she need not play it. Catelyn was practiced at waiting.

As he neared, she saw that Stannis wore a crown of red gold with points fashioned in the shape of flames. His belt was studded with garnets and yellow topaz, and a great square-cut ruby was set in the hilt of the sword he wore. Otherwise his dress was plain: studded leather jerkin over quilted doublet, worn boots, breeches of brown roughspun. The device on his sun-yellow banner showed a red heart surrounded by a blaze of orange fire. The crowned stag was there, yes... shrunken and enclosed within the heart. Even more curious was his standard bearer—a woman, garbed all in reds, face shadowed within the deep hood of her scarlet cloak. A red priestess, Catelyn thought, wondering. The sect was numerous and powerful in the Free Cities and the distant east, but there were few in the Seven Kingdoms.

"Lady Stark," Stannis Baratheon said with chill courtesy as he reined up. He inclined his head, balder than she remembered.

"Lord Stannis," she returned.

Beneath the tight-trimmed beard his heavy jaw clenched hard, yet he did not hector her about titles. For that she was duly grateful. "I had not thought to find you at Storm's End."

"I had not thought to be here."

His deepset eyes regarded her uncomfortably. This was not a man made for easy courtesies. "I am sorry for your lord's death," he said, "though Eddard Stark was no friend to me."

"He was never your enemy, my lord. When the Lords Tyrell and Redwyne held you prisoned in that castle, starving, it was Eddard Stark who broke the siege."

“At my brother’s command, not for love of me,” Stannis answered. “Lord Eddard did his duty, I will not deny it. Did I ever do less? I should have been Robert’s Hand.”

“That was your brother’s will. Ned never wanted it.”

“Yet he took it. That which should have been mine. Still, I give you my word, you shall have justice for his murder.”

How they loved to promise heads, these men who would be king. “Your brother promised me the same. But if truth be told, I would sooner have my daughters back, and leave justice to the gods. Cersei still holds my Sansa, and of Arya there has been no word since the day of Robert’s death.”

“If your children are found when I take the city, they shall be sent to you.” Alive or dead, his tone implied.

“And when shall that be, Lord Stannis? King’s Landing is close to your Dragonstone, but I find you here instead.”

“You are frank, Lady Stark. Very well, I’ll answer you frankly. To take the city, I need the power of these southron lords I see across the field. My brother has them. I must needs take them from him.”

“Men give their allegiance where they will, my lord. These lords swore fealty to Robert and House Baratheon. If you and your brother were to put aside your quarrel-”

“I have no quarrel with Renly, should he prove dutiful. I am his elder, and his king. I want only what is mine by rights. Renly owes me loyalty and obedience. I mean to have it. From him, and from these other lords.” Stannis studied her face. “And what cause brings you to this field, my lady? Has House Stark cast its lot with my brother, is that the way of it?”

This one will never bend, she thought, yet she must try nonetheless. Too much was at stake. “My son reigns as King in the North, by the will of our lords and people. He bends the knee to no man, but holds out the hand of friendship to all.”

“Kings have no friends,” Stannis said bluntly, “only subjects and enemies.”

“And brothers,” a cheerful voice called out behind her. Catelyn glanced over her shoulder as Lord Renly’s palfrey picked her way through the stumps. The younger Baratheon was splendid in his green velvet doublet and satin cloak trimmed in vair. The crown of golden roses girded his temples, jade stag’s head rising over his forehead, long black hair spilling out beneath. Jagged chunks of black diamond studded his swordbelt, and a chain of gold and emeralds looped around his neck.

Renly had chosen a woman to carry his banner as well, though Brienne hid face and form behind plate armor that gave no hint of her sex. Atop her twelve-foot lance, the crowned stag pranced black-on-gold as the wind off the sea rippled the cloth.

His brother’s greeting was curt. “Lord Renly.”

“King Renly. Can that truly be you, Stannis?”

Stannis frowned. “Who else should it be?”

Renly gave an easy shrug. “When I saw that standard, I could not be certain. Whose banner do you bear?”

“Mine own.”

The red-clad priestess spoke up. “The king has taken for his sigil the fiery heart of the Lord of Light.”

Renly seemed amused by that. “All for the good. If we both use the same banner, the battle will be terribly confused.”

Catelyn said, “Let us hope there will be no battle. We three share a common foe who would destroy us all.”

Stannis studied her, unsmiling. “The Iron Throne is mine by rights. All those who deny that are my foes.”

“The whole of the realm denies it, brother,” said Renly. “Old men deny it with their death rattle, and unborn children deny it in their mothers’ wombs. They deny it in Dorne and they deny it on the Wall. No one wants you for their king. Sorry.”

Stannis clenched his jaw, his face taut. “I swore I would never treat with you while you wore your traitor’s crown. Would that I had kept to that vow.”

“This is folly,” Catelyn said sharply. “Lord Tywin sits at Harrenhal with twenty thousand swords. The remnants of the Kingslayer’s army have regrouped at the Golden Tooth, another Lannister host gathers beneath the shadow of Casterly Rock, and Cersei and her son hold King’s Landing and your precious Iron Throne. You each name yourself king, yet the kingdom bleeds, and no one lifts a sword to defend it but my son.”

Renly shrugged. “Your son has won a few battles. I shall win the war. The Lannisters can wait my pleasure.”

“If you have proposals to make, make them,” Stannis said brusquely, “or I will be gone.”

“Very well,” said Renly. “I propose that you dismount, bend your knee, and swear me your allegiance.”

Stannis choked back rage. “That you shall never have.”

“You served Robert, why not me?”

“Robert was my elder brother. You are the younger.”

“Younger, bolder, and far more comely...”

“... and a thief and a usurper besides.”

Renly shrugged. “The Targaryens called Robert usurper. He seemed to be able to bear the shame. So shall I. - .”

This will not do. “Listen to yourselves! If you were sons of mine, I would bang your heads together and lock you in a bedchamber until you remembered that you were brothers.”

Stannis frowned at her. “You presume too much, Lady Stark. I am the rightful king, and your son no less a traitor than my brother here. His day will come as well.”

The naked threat fanned her fury. “You are very free to name others traitor and usurper, my lord, yet how are you any different? You say you alone are the rightful king, yet it seems to me that Robert had two sons. By all the laws of the Seven Kingdoms, Prince Joffrey is his rightful heir, and Tommen after him... and we are all traitors, however good our reasons.”

Renly laughed. "You must forgive Lady Catelyn, Stannis. She's come all the way down from Riverrun, a long way ahorse. I fear she never saw your little letter."

"Joffrey is not my brother's seed," Stannis said bluntly. "Nor is Tommen. They are bastards. The girl as well. All three of them abominations born of incest."

Would even Cersei be so mad? Catelyn was speechless.

"Isn't that a sweet story, my lady?" Renly asked. "I was camped at Horn Hill when Lord Tarly received his letter, and I must say, it took my breath away." He smiled at his brother. "I had never suspected you were so clever, Stannis. Were it only true, you would indeed be Robert's heir."

"Were it true? Do you name me a liar?"

"Can you prove any word of this fable?"

Stannis ground his teeth.

Robert could never have known, Catelyn thought, or Cersei would have lost her head in an instant. "Lord Stannis," she asked, "if you knew the queen to be guilty of such monstrous crimes, why did you keep silent?"

"I did not keep silent," Stannis declared. "I brought my suspicions to Jon Arryn."

"Rather than your own brother?"

"My brother's regard for me was never more than dutiful," said Stannis. "From me, such accusations would have seemed peevish and self-serving, a means of placing myself first in the line of succession. I believed Robert would be more disposed to listen if the charges came from Lord Arryn, whom he loved."

"Ah," said Renly. "So we have the word of a dead man."

"Do you think he died by happenstance, you purblind fool? Cersei had him poisoned, for fear he would reveal her. Lord Jon had been gathering certain proofs—"

"—which doubtless died with him. How inconvenient."

Catelyn was remembering, fitting pieces together. "My sister Lysa accused the queen of killing her husband in a letter she sent me at Winterfell," she admitted. "Later, in the Eyrie, she laid the murder at the feet of the queen's brother Tyrion."

Stannis snorted. "If you step in a nest of snakes, does it matter which one bites you first?"

"All this of snakes and incest is droll, but it changes nothing. You may well have the better claim, Stannis, but I still have the larger army." Renly's hand slid inside his cloak. Stannis saw, and reached at once for the hilt of his sword, but before he could draw steel his brother produced... a peach. "Would you like one, brother?" Renly asked, smiling. "From Highgarden. You've never tasted anything so sweet, I promise you." He took a bite. Juice ran from the corner of his mouth.

"I did not come here to eat fruit." Stannis was fuming.

"My lords!" Catelyn said. "We ought to be hammering out the terms of an alliance, not trading taunts."

“A man should never refuse to taste a peach,” Renly said as he tossed the stone away. “He may never get the chance again. Life is short, Stannis. Remember what the Starks say. Winter is coming.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“I did not come here to be threatened, either.”

“Nor were you,” Renly snapped back. “When I make threats, you’ll know it. If truth be told, I’ve never liked you, Stannis, but you are my own blood, and I have no wish to slay you. So if it is Storm’s End you want, take it... as a brother’s gift. As Robert once gave it to me, I give it to YOU.”

“It is not yours to give. It is mine by rights.”

Sighing, Renly half turned in the saddle. “What am I to do with this brother of mine, Brienne? He refuses my peach, he refuses my castle, he even shunned my wedding...”

“We both know your wedding was a mummer’s farce. A year ago you were scheming to make the girl one of Robert’s whores.”

“A year ago I was scheming to make the girl Robert’s queen,” Renly said, “but what does it matter? The boar got Robert and I got Margaery. You’ll be pleased to know she came to me a maid.”

“In your bed she’s like to die that way.”

“Oh, I expect I’ll get a son on her within the year. Pray, how many sons do you have, Stannis? Oh, yes-none.” Renly smiled innocently. “As to your daughter, I understand. If my wife looked like yours, I’d send my fool to service her as well.”

“Enough!” Stannis roared. “I will not be mocked to my face, do you hear me? I will not!” He yanked his longsword from its scabbard. The steel gleamed strangely bright in the wan sunlight, now red, now yellow, now blazing white. The air around it seemed to shimmer, as if from heat.

Catelyn’s horse whinnied and backed away a step, but Brienne moved between the brothers, her own blade in hand. “Put up your steel!” she shouted at Stannis.

Cersei Lannister is laughing herself breathless, Catelyn thought wearily.

Stannis pointed his shining sword at his brother. “I am not without mercy,” thundered he who was notoriously without mercy. “Nor do I wish to sully Lightbringer with a brother’s blood. For the sake of the mother who bore us both, I will give you this night to rethink your folly, Renly. Strike your banners and come to me before dawn, and I will grant you Storm’s End and your old seat on the council and even name you my heir until a son is born to me. Otherwise, I shall destroy you.”

Renly laughed. “Stannis, that’s a very pretty sword, I’ll grant you, but I think the glow off it has ruined your eyes. Look across the fields, brother. Can you see all those banners?”

“Do you think a few bolts of cloth will make you king?”

“Tyrell swords will make me king. Rowan and Tarly and Caron will make me king, with axe and mace and warhammer. Tarth arrows and Penrose lances, Fossoway, Cuy, Mullendore, Estermont, Selmy, Hightower, Oakheart, Crane, Caswell, Blackbar, Morrigen, Beesbury, Shermer, Dunn, Footly... even House Florent, your own wife’s brothers and uncles, they will make me king. All the chivalry of the south rides with me, and that is the least part of my power.

My foot is coming behind, a hundred thousand swords and spears and pikes. And you will destroy me? With what, pray? That paltry rabble I see there huddled under the castle walls? I'll call them five thousand and be generous, codfish lords and onion knights and sellswords. Half of them are like to come over to me before the battle starts. You have fewer than four hundred horse, my scouts tell me—freeriders in boiled leather who will not stand an instant against armored lances. I do not care how seasoned a warrior you think you are, Stannis, that host of yours won't survive the first charge of my vanguard."

"We shall see, brother." Some of the light seemed to go out of the world when Stannis slid his sword back into its scabbard. "Come the dawn, we shall see."

"I hope your new god's a merciful one, brother."

Stannis snorted and galloped away, disdainful. The red priestess lingered a moment behind. "Look to your own sins, Lord Renly," she said as she wheeled her horse around.

Catelyn and Lord Renly returned together to the camp where his thousands and her few waited their return. "That was amusing, if not terribly profitable," he commented. "I wonder where I can get a sword like that? Well, doubtless Loras will make me a gift of it after the battle. It grieves me that it must come to this."

"You have a cheerful way of grieving," said Catelyn, whose distress was not feigned.

"Do I?" Renly shrugged. "So be it. Stannis was never the most cherished of brothers, I confess. Do you suppose this tale of his is true? If Joffrey is the Kingslayer's get—"

"—your brother is the lawful heir."

"While he lives," Renly admitted. "Though it's a fool's law, wouldn't you agree? Why the oldest son, and not the best-fitted? The crown will suit me, as it never suited Robert and would not suit Stannis. I have it in me to be a great king, strong yet generous, clever, just, diligent, loyal to my friends and terrible to my enemies, yet capable of forgiveness, patient—"

"—humble?" Catelyn supplied.

Renly laughed. "You must allow a king some flaws, my lady."

Catelyn felt very tired. It had all been for nothing. The Baratheon brothers would drown each other in blood while her son faced the Lannisters alone, and nothing she could say or do would stop it. It is past time I went back to Riverrun to close my father's eyes, she thought. That much at least I can do. I may be a poor envoy, but I am a good mourner, gods save me.

Their camp was well sited atop a low stony ridge that ran from north to south. It was far more orderly than the sprawling encampment on the Mander, though only a quarter as large. When he'd learned of his brother's assault on Storm's End, Renly had split his forces, much as Robb had done at the Twins. His great mass of foot he had left behind at Bitterbridge with his young queen, his wagons, carts, draft animals, and all his cumbersome siege machinery, while Renly himself led his knights and freeriders in a swift dash east.

How like his brother Robert he was, even in that... only Robert had always had Eddard Stark to temper his boldness with caution. Ned would surely have prevailed upon Robert to bring up his whole force, to encircle Stannis and besiege the besiegers. That choice Renly had denied himself in his headlong rush to come to grips with his brother. He had outdistanced his supply lines, left

food and forage days behind with all his wagons and mules and oxen. He must come to battle soon, or starve.

Catelyn sent Hal Mollen to tend to their horses while she accompanied Renly back to the royal pavilion at the heart of the encampment. Inside the walls of green silk, his captains and lords bannermen were waiting to hear word of the parley. "My brother has not changed," their young king told them as Brienne unfastened his cloak and lifted the gold-and-jade crown from his brow. "Castles and courtesies will not appease him, he must have blood. Well, I am of a mind to grant his wish."

"Your Grace, I see no need for battle here," Lord Mathis Rowan put in. "The castle is strongly garrisoned and well provisioned, Ser Cortnay Penrose is a seasoned commander, and the trebuchet has not been built that could breach the walls of Storm's End. Let Lord Stannis have his siege. He will find no joy in it, and whilst he sits cold and hungry and profitless, we will take King's Landing."

"And have men say I feared to face Stannis?"

"Only fools will say that," Lord Mathis argued.

Renly looked to the others. "What say you all?"

"I say that Stannis is a danger to you," Lord Randyll Tarly declared. "Leave him unblooded and he will only grow stronger, while your own power is diminished by battle. The Lannisters will not be beaten in a day. By the time you are done with them, Lord Stannis may be as strong as you... or stronger."

Others chorused their agreement. The king looked pleased. "We shall fight, then."

I have failed Robb as I failed Ned, Catelyn thought. "My lord," she announced. "If you are set on battle, my purpose here is done. I ask your leave to return to Riverrun."

"You do not have it." Renly seated himself on a camp chair.

She stiffened. "I had hoped to help you make a peace, my lord. I will not help you make a war." Renly gave a shrug. "I daresay we'll prevail without your five-an-twenty, my lady. I do not mean for you to take part in the battle, only to watch it."

"I was at the Whispering Wood, my lord. I have seen enough butchery. I came here an envoy--"

"And an envoy you shall leave," Renly said, "but wiser than you came. You shall see what befalls rebels with your own eyes, so your son can hear it from your own lips. We'll keep you safe, never fear." He turned away to make his dispositions. "Lord Mathis, you shall lead the center of my main battle. Bryce, you'll have the left. The right is mine. Lord Estermont, you shall command the reserve."

"I shall not fail you, Your Grace," Lord Estermont replied.

Lord Mathis Rowan spoke up. "Who shall have the van?"

"Your Grace," said Ser Jon Fossoway, "I beg the honor."

"Beg all you like," said Ser Guyard the Green, "by rights it should be one of the seven who strikes the first blow."

"It takes more than a pretty cloak to charge a shield wall," Randyll Tarly announced. "I was leading Mace Tyrell's van when you were still sucking on your mother's teat, Guyard."

A clamor filled the pavilion, as other men loudly set forth their claims. The knights of summer, Catelyn thought. Renly raised a hand. "Enough, my lords. If I had a dozen vassals, all of you should have one, but the greatest glory by rights belongs to the greatest knight. Ser Loras shall strike the first blow."

"With a glad heart, Your Grace." The Knight of Flowers knelt before the king. "Grant me your blessing, and a knight to ride beside me with your banner. Let the stag and rose go to battle side by side."

Renly glanced about him. "Brienne."

"Your Grace?" She was still armored in her blue steel, though she had taken off her helm. The crowded tent was hot, and sweat plastered limp yellow hair to her broad, homely face. "My place is at your side. I am your sworn shield..."

"One of seven," the king reminded her. "Never fear, four of your fellows will be with me in the fight."

Brienne dropped to her knees. "If I must part from Your Grace, grant me the honor of arming you for battle."

Catelyn heard someone snigger behind her. She loves him, poor thing, she thought sadly. She'd play his squire just to touch him, and never care how great a fool they think her.

"Granted," Renly said. "Now leave me, all of you. Even kings must rest before a battle."

"My lord," Catelyn said, "there was a small sept in the last village we passed. If you will not permit me to depart for Riverrun, grant me leave to go there and pray."

"As you will. Ser Robar, give Lady Stark safe escort to this sept... but see that she returns to us by dawn."

"You might do well to pray yourself," Catelyn added.

"For victory?"

"For wisdom."

Renly laughed. "Loras, stay and help me pray. It's been so long I've quite forgotten how. As to the rest of you, I want every man in place by first light, armed, armored, and horsed. We shall give Stannis a dawn he will not soon forget."

Dusk was falling when Catelyn left the pavilion. Ser Robar Royce fell in beside her. She knew him slightly—one of Bronze Yohn's sons, comely in a rough-hewn way, a tourney warrior of some renown. Renly had gifted him with a rainbow cloak and a suit of blood red armor, and named him one of his seven. "You are a long way from the Vale, ser," she told him.

"And you far from Winterfell, my lady."

"I know what brought me here, but why have you come? This is not your battle, no more than it is mine."

"I made it my battle when I made Renly my king."

"The Royces are bannermen to House Arryn."

"My lord father owes Lady Lysa fealty, as does his heir. A second son must find glory where he can." Ser Robar shrugged. "A man grows weary of tourneys."

He could not be older than one-and-twenty, Catelyn thought, of an age with his king... but her king, her Robb, had more wisdom at fifteen than this youth had ever learned. Or so she prayed.

In Catelyn's small corner of the camp, Shadd was slicing carrots into a kettle, Hal Mollen was dicing with three of his Winterfell men, and Lucas Blackwood sat sharpening his dagger. "Lady Stark," Lucas said when he saw her, "Mollen says it is to be battle at dawn."

"Hal has the truth of it," she answered. And a loose tongue as well, it would seem.

"Do we fight or flee?"

"We pray, Lucas," she answered him. "We pray."

SANSA

“The longer you keep him waiting, the worse it will go for you,” Sandor Clegane warned her.

Sansa tried to hurry, but her fingers fumbled at buttons and knots. The Hound was always rough-tongued, but something in the way he had looked at her filled her with dread. Had Joffrey found out about her meetings with Ser Dontos? Please no, she thought as she brushed out her hair. Ser Dontos was her only hope. I have to look pretty, Joff likes me to look pretty, he’s always liked me in this gown, this color. She smoothed the cloth down. The fabric was tight across her chest.

When she emerged, Sansa walked on the Hound’s left, away from the burned side of his face. “Tell me what I’ve done.”

“Not you. Your kingly brother.”

“Robb’s a traitor.” Sansa knew the words by rote. “I had no part in whatever he did.” Gods be good, don’t let it be the Kingslayer. If Robb had harmed Jaime Larmister, it would mean her life. She thought of Ser Ilyn, and how those terrible pale eyes staring pitilessly out of that gaunt pockmarked face.

The Hound snorted. “They trained you well, little bird.” He conducted her to the lower bailey, where a crowd had gathered around the archery butts. Men moved aside to let them through. She could hear Lord Gyles coughing. Loitering stablehands eyed her insolently, but Ser Horas Redwyne averted his gaze as she passed, and his brother Hobber pretended not to see her. A yellow cat was dying on the ground, mewling piteously, a crossbow quarrel through its ribs. Sansa stepped around it, feeling ill.

Ser Dontos approached on his broomstick horse; since he’d been too drunk to mount his destrier at the tourney, the king had decreed that henceforth he must always go horsed. “Be brave,” he whispered, squeezing her arm.

Joffrey stood in the center of the throng, winding an ornate crossbow. Ser Boros and Ser Meryn were with him. The sight of them was enough to tie her insides in knots.

“Your Grace.” She fell to her knees.

“Kneeling won’t save you now,” the king said. “Stand up. You’re here to answer for your brother’s latest treasons.”

“Your Grace, whatever my traitor brother has done, I had no part. You know that, I beg you, please-”

“Get her up!”

The Hound pulled her to her feet, not ungently.

“Ser Lancel,” Joff said, “tell her of this outrage.”

Sansa had always thought Lancel Lannister comely and well spoken, but there was neither pity nor kindness in the look he gave her. “Using some vile sorcery, your brother fell upon Ser Stafford Lannister with an army of wargs, not three days ride from Lannisport. Thousands of

good men were butchered as they slept, without the chance to lift sword. After the slaughter, the northmen feasted on the flesh of the slain.”

Horror coiled cold hands around Sansa’s throat.

“You have nothing to say?” asked Joffrey.

“Your Grace, the poor child is shocked witless,” murmured Ser Dontos.

“Silence, fool.” Joffrey lifted his crossbow and pointed it at her face. “You Starks are as unnatural as those wolves of yours. I’ve not forgotten how your monster savaged me.”

“That was Arya’s wolf,” she said. “Lady never hurt you, but you killed her anyway.”

“No, your father did,” Joff said, “but I killed your father. I wish I’d done it myself. I killed a man last night who was bigger than your father. They came to the gate shouting my name and calling for bread like I was some baker, but I taught them better. I shot the loudest one right through the throat.”

“And he died?” With the ugly iron head of the quarrel staring her in the face, it was hard to think what else to say.

“Of course he died, he had my quarrel in his throat. There was a woman throwing rocks, I got her as well, but only in the arm.” Frowning, he lowered the crossbow. “I’d shoot you too, but if I do Mother says they’d kill my uncle Jaime. Instead you’ll just be punished and we’ll send word to your brother about what will happen to you if he doesn’t yield. Dog, hit her.”

“Let me beat her!” Ser Dontos shoved forward, tin armor clattering. He was armed with a “morningstar” whose head was a melon. My Florian. She could have kissed him, blotchy skin and broken veins and all. He trotted his broomstick around her, shouting “Traitor, traitor” and whacking her over the head with the melon. Sansa covered herself with her hands, staggering every time the fruit pounded her, her hair sticky by the second blow. People were laughing. The melon flew to pieces. Laugh, Joffrey, she prayed as the juice ran down her face and the front of her blue silk gown. Laugh and be satisfied.

Joffrey did not so much as snigger. “Boros. Meryn.”

Ser Meryn Trant seized Dontos by the arm and flung him brusquely away. The red-faced fool went sprawling, broomstick, melon, and all. Ser Boros seized Sansa.

“Leave her face,” Joffrey commanded. “I like her pretty.”

Boros slammed a fist into Sansa’s belly, driving the air out of her. When she doubled over, the knight grabbed her hair and drew his sword, and for one hideous instant she was certain he meant to open her throat. As he laid the flat of the blade across her thighs, she thought her legs might break from the force of the blow. Sansa screamed. Tears welled in her eyes. It will be over soon. She soon lost count of the blows.

“Enough,” she heard the Hound rasp.

“No it isn’t,” the king replied. “Boros, make her naked.”

Boros shoved a meaty hand down the front of Sansa’s bodice and gave a hard yank. The silk came tearing away, baring her to the waist. Sansa covered her breasts with her hands. She could hear sniggers, far off and cruel. “Beat her bloody,” Joffrey said, “we’ll see how her brother fancies-”

“What is the meaning of this?”

The Imp’s voice cracked like a whip, and suddenly Sansa was free. She stumbled to her knees, arms crossed over her chest, her breath ragged. “Is this your notion of chivalry, Ser Boros?” Tyrion Lannister demanded angrily. His pet sellsword stood with him, and one of his wildlings, the one with the burned eye. “What sort of knight beats helpless maids?”

“The sort who serves his king, Imp.” Ser Boros raised his sword, and Ser Meryn stepped up beside him, his blade scraping clear of its scabbard.

“Careful with those,” warned the dwarf’s sellsword. “You don’t want to get blood all over those pretty white cloaks.”

“Someone give the girl something to cover herself with,” the Imp said.

Sandor Clegane unfastened his cloak and tossed it at her. Sansa clutched it against her chest, fists bunched hard in the white wool. The coarse weave was scratchy against her skin, but no velvet had ever felt so fine.

“This girl’s to be your queen,” the Imp told Joffrey. “Have you no regard for her honor?”

“I’m punishing her.”

“For what crime? She did not fight her brother’s battle.”

“She has the blood of a wolf.”

“And you have the wits of a goose.”

“You can’t talk to me that way. The king can do as he likes.”

“Aerys Targaryen did as he liked. Has your mother ever told you what happened to him?”

Ser Boros Blount harrumphed. “No man threatens His Grace in the presence of the Kingsguard.”

Tyrion Lannister raised an eyebrow. “I am not threatening the king, ser, I am educating my nephew. Bronn, Timett, the next time Ser Boros opens his mouth, kill him.” The dwarf smiled. “Now that was a threat, ser. See the difference?”

Ser Boros turned a dark shade of red. “The queen will hear of this!”

“No doubt she will. And why wait? Joffrey, shall we send for your mother?”

The king flushed.

“Nothing to say, Your Grace?” his uncle went on. “Good. Learn to use your ears more and your mouth less, or your reign will be shorter than I am. Wanton brutality is no way to win your people’s love... or your queen’s.”

“Fear is better than love, Mother says.” Joffrey pointed at Sansa. “She fears me.”

The Imp sighed. “Yes, I see. A pity Stannis and Renly aren’t twelve year-old girls as well. Bronn, Timett, bring her.”

Sansa moved as if in a dream. She thought the Imp’s men would take her back to her bedchamber in Maegor’s Holdfast, but instead they conducted her to the Tower of the Hand. She had not set foot inside that place since the day her father fell from grace, and it made her feel faint to climb those steps again.

Some serving girls took charge of her, mouthing meaningless comforts to stop her shaking. One stripped off the ruins of her gown and smallclothes, and another bathed her and washed the

sticky juice from her face and her hair. As they scrubbed her down with soap and sluiced warm water over her head, all she could see were the faces from the bailey. Knights are sworn to defend the weak, protect women, and fight for the right, but none of them did a thing. Only Ser Dontos had tried to help, and he was no longer a knight, no more than the Imp was, nor the Hound... the Hound hated knights... I hate them too, Sansa thought. They are no true knights, not one of them.

After she was clean, plump ginger-headed Maester Frenken came to see her. He bid her lie facedown on the mattress while he spread a salve across the angry red welts that covered the backs of her legs. Afterward he mixed her a draught of dreamwine, with some honey so it might go down easier. "Sleep a bit, child. When you wake, all this will seem a bad dream."

No it won't, you stupid man, Sansa thought, but she drank the dreamwine anyway, and slept.

It was dark when she woke again, not quite knowing where she was, the room both strange and strangely familiar. As she rose, a stab of pain went through her legs and brought it all back. Tears filled her eyes. Someone had laid out a robe for her beside the bed. Sansa slipped it on and opened the door. Outside stood a hard-faced woman with leathery brown skin, three necklaces looped about her scrawny neck. One was gold and one was silver and one was made of human ears. "Where does she think she's going?" the woman asked, leaning on a tall spear.

"The godswood.- She had to find Ser Dontos, beg him to take her home now before it was too late.

"The halfman said you're not to leave," the woman said. "Pray here, the gods will hear."

Meekly, Sansa dropped her eyes and retreated back inside. She realized suddenly why this place seemed so familiar. They've put me in Arya's old bedchamber, from when Father was the Hand of the King. All her things are gone and the furnishings have been moved around, but it's the same...

A short time later, a serving girl brought a platter of cheese and bread and olives, with a flagon of cold water. "Take it away," Sansa commanded, but the girl left the food on a table. She was thirsty, she realized. Every step sent knives through her thighs, but she made herself cross the room. She drank two cups of water, and was nibbling on an olive when the knock came.

Anxiously, she turned toward the door, smoothed down the folds of her robe. "Yes?"

The door opened, and Tyrion Lannister stepped inside. "My lady. I trust I am not disturbing you?"

"Am I your prisoner?"

"My guest." He was wearing his chain of office, a necklace of linked golden hands. "I thought we might talk."

"As my lord commands." Sansa found it hard not to stare; his face was so ugly it held a queer fascination for her.

"The food and garments are to your satisfaction?" he asked. "If there is anything else you need, you have only to ask."

"You are most kind. And this morning... it was very good of you to help me."

“You have a right to know why Joffrey was so wroth. Six nights gone, your brother fell upon my uncle Stafford, encamped with his host at a village called Oxcross not three days ride from Casterly Rock. Your northerners won a crushing victory. We received word only this morning.”

Robb will kill you all, she thought, exulting. “It’s... terrible, my lord. My brother is a vile traitor.”

The dwarf smiled wanly. “Well, he’s no fawn, he’s made that clear enough.”

“Ser Lancel said Robb led an army of wargs.”

The Imp gave a disdainful bark of laughter. “Ser Lancel’s a wineskin warrior who wouldn’t know a warg from a wart. Your brother had his direwolf with him, but I suspect that’s as far as it went. The northmen crept into my uncle’s camp and cut his horse lines, and Lord Stark sent his wolf among them. Even war-trained destriers went mad. Knights were trampled to death in their pavilions, and the rabble woke in terror and fled, casting aside their weapons to run the faster. Ser Stafford was slain as he chased after a horse. Lord Rickard Karstark drove a lance through his chest. Ser Rubert Brax is also dead, along with Ser Lymond Vikary, Lord Crakehall, and Lord Jast. Half a hundred more have been taken captive, including Jast’s sons and my nephew Martyn Lannister. Those who survived are spreading wild tales and swearing that the old gods of the north march with your brother.”

“Then... there was no sorcery?”

Lannister snorted. “Sorcery is the sauce fools spoon over failure to hide the flavor of their own incompetence. My mutton-headed uncle had not even troubled to post sentries, it would seem. His host was raw-apprentice boys, miners, fieldhands, fisherfolk, the sweepings of Lannisport. The only mystery is how your brother reached him. Our forces still hold the stronghold at the Golden Tooth, and they swear he did not pass.” The dwarf gave an irritated shrug. “Well, Robb Stark is my father’s bane. Joffrey is mine. Tell me, what do you feel for my kingly nephew?”

“I love him with all my heart,” Sansa said at once.

“Truly?” He did not sound convinced. “Even now?”

“My love for His Grace is greater than it has ever been.”

The Imp laughed aloud. “Well, someone has taught you to lie well. You may be grateful for that one day, child. You are a child still, are you not? Or have you flowered?”

Sansa blushed. It was a rude question, but the shame of being stripped before half the castle made it seem like nothing. “No, my lord.”

“That’s all to the good. If it gives you any solace, I do not intend that you ever wed Joffrey. No marriage will reconcile Stark and Lannister after all that has happened, I fear. More’s the pity. The match was one of King Robert’s better notions, if Joffrey hadn’t mucked it up.”

She knew she ought to say something, but the words caught in her throat.

“You grow very quiet,” Tyrion Lannister observed. “Is this what you want? An end to your betrothal?”

“I...” Sansa did not know what to say. Is it a trick? Will he punish me if I tell the truth? She stared at the dwarf’s brutal bulging brow, the hard black eye and the shrewd green one, the crooked teeth and wiry beard. “I only want to be loyal.”

“Loyal,” the dwarf mused, “and far from any Lannisters. I can scarce blame you for that. When I was your age, I wanted the same thing.” He smiled. “They tell me you visit the godswood every day. What do you pray for, Sansa?”

I pray for Robb’s victory and Joffrey’s death... and for home. For Winterfell. “I pray for an end to the fighting.”

“We’ll have that soon enough. There will be another battle, between your brother Robb and my lord father, and that will settle the issue.”

Robb will beat him, Sansa thought. He beat your uncle and your brother Jaime, he’ll beat your father too.

It was as if her face were an open book, so easily did the dwarf read her hopes. “Do not take Oxcross too much to heart, my lady,” he told her, not unkindly. “A battle is not a war, and my lord father is assuredly not my uncle Stafford. The next time you visit the godswood, pray that your brother has the wisdom to bend the knee. Once the north returns to the king’s peace, I mean to send you home.” He hopped down off the window seat and said, “You may sleep here tonight. I’ll give you some of my own men as a guard, some Stone Crows perhaps-”

“No,” Sansa blurted out, aghast. If she was locked in the Tower of the Hand, guarded by the dwarf’s men, how would Ser Dontos ever spirit her away to freedom?

“Would you prefer Black Ears? I’ll give you Chella if a woman would make you more at ease.”

“Please, no, my lord, the wildlings frighten me.”

He grinned. “Me as well. But more to the point, they frighten Joffrey and that nest of sly vipers and lickspittle dogs he calls a Kingsguard. With Chella or Timett by your side, no one would dare offer you harm.”

“I would sooner return to my own bed.” A lie came to her suddenly, but it seemed so right that she blurted it out at once. “This tower was where my father’s men were slain. Their ghosts would give me terrible dreams, and I would see their blood wherever I looked.”

Tyrion Lannister studied her face. “I am no stranger to nightmares, Sansa. Perhaps you are wiser than I knew. Permit me at least to escort you safely back to your own chambers.”

CATELYN

It was full dark before they found the village. Catelyn found herself wondering if the place had a name. If so, its people had taken that knowledge with them when they fled, along with all they owned, down to the candles in the sept. Ser Wendel lit a torch and led her through the low door.

Within, the seven walls were cracked and crooked. God is one, Septon Osmynd had taught her when she was a girl, with seven aspects, as the sept is a single building, with seven walls. The wealthy septs of the cities had statues of the Seven and an altar to each. In Winterfell, Septon Chayle hung carved masks from each wall. Here Catelyn found only rough charcoal drawings. Ser Wendel set the torch in a sconce near the door, and left to wait outside with Robar Royce.

Catelyn studied the faces. The Father was bearded, as ever. The Mother smiled, loving and protective. The Warrior had his sword sketched in beneath his face, the Smith his hammer. The Maid was beautiful, the Crone wizened and wise.

And the seventh face... the Stranger was neither male nor female, yet both, ever the outcast, the wanderer from far places, less and more than human, unknown and unknowable. Here the face was a black oval, a shadow with stars for eyes. It made Catelyn uneasy. She would get scant comfort there.

She knelt before the Mother. "My lady, look down on this battle with a mother's eyes. They are all sons, every one. Spare them if you can, and spare my own sons as well. Watch over Robb and Bran and Rickon. Would that I were with them."

A crack ran down through the Mother's left eye. it made her look as if she were crying. Catelyn could hear Ser Wendel's booming voice, and now and again Ser Robar's quiet answers, as they talked of the coming battle. Otherwise the night was still. Not even a cricket could be heard, and the gods kept their silence. Did your old gods ever answer you, Ned? she wondered. When you knelt before your heart tree, did they hear you?

Flickering torchlight danced across the walls, making the faces seem half -alive, twisting them, changing them. The statues in the great septs of the cities wore the faces the stonemasons had given them, but these charcoal scratchings were so crude they might be anyone. The Father's face made her think of her own father, dying in his bed at Riverrun. The Warrior was Renly and Stannis, Robb and Robert, Jaime Lannister and Jon Snow. She even glimpsed Arya in those lines, just for an instant. Then a gust of wind through the door made the torch sputter, and the semblance was gone, washed away in orange glare.

The smoke was making her eyes burn. She rubbed at them with the heels of her scarred hands. When she looked up at the Mother again, it was her own mother she saw. Lady Minisa Tully had died in childbed, trying to give Lord Hoster a second son. The baby had perished with her, and afterward some of the life had gone out of Father. She was always so calm, Catelyn thought, remembering her mother's soft hands, her warm smile. If she had lived, how different our lives might have been. She wondered what Lady Minisa would make of her eldest daughter, kneeling here before her. I have come so many thousands of leagues, and for what? Who have I served? I

have lost my daughters, Robb does not want me, and Bran and Rickon must surely think me a cold and unnatural mother. I was not even with Ned when he died...

Her head swam, and the sept seemed to move around her. The shadows swayed and shifted, furtive animals racing across the cracked white walls. Catelyn had not eaten today. Perhaps that had been unwise. She told herself that there had been no time, but the truth was that food had lost its savor in a world without Ned. When they took his head off, they killed me too.

Behind her the torch spit, and suddenly it seemed to her that it was her sister's face on the wall, though the eyes were harder than she recalled, not Lysa's eyes but Cersei's. Cersei is a mother too. No matter who fathered those children, she felt them kick inside her, brought them forth with her pain and blood, nursed them at her breast. If they are truly Jaime's...

"Does Cersei pray to you too, my lady?" Catelyn asked the Mother. She could see the proud, cold, lovely features of the Lannister queen etched upon the wall. The crack was still there; even Cersei could weep for her children. "Each of the Seven embodies all of the Seven," Septon Osmynd had told her once. There was as much beauty in the Crone as in the Maiden, and the Mother could be fiercer than the Warrior when her children were in danger. Yes...

She had seen enough of Robert Baratheon at Winterfell to know that the king did not regard Joffrey with any great warmth. If the boy was truly Jaime's seed, Robert would have put him to death along with his mother, and few would have condemned him. Bastards were common enough, but incest was a monstrous sin to both old gods and new, and the children of such wickedness were named abominations in sept and godswood alike. The dragon kings had wed brother to sister, but they were the blood of old Valyria where such practices had been common, and like their dragons the Targaryens answered to neither gods nor men.

Ned must have known, and Lord Arryn before him. Small wonder that the queen had killed them both. Would I do any less for my own? Catelyn clenched her hands, feeling the tightness in her scarred fingers where the assassin's steel had cut to the bone as she fought to save her son. "Bran knows too," she whispered, lowering her head. Gods be good, he must have seen something, heard something, that was why they tried to kill him in his bed.

Lost and weary, Catelyn Stark gave herself over to her gods. She knelt before the Smith, who fixed things that were broken, and asked that he give her sweet Bran his protection. She went to the Maid and beseeched her to lend her courage to Arya and Sansa, to guard them in their innocence. To the Father, she prayed for justice, the strength to seek it and the wisdom to know it, and she asked the Warrior to keep Robb strong and shield him in his battles. Lastly she turned to the Crone, whose statues often showed her with a lamp in one hand. "Guide me, wise lady," she prayed. "Show me the path I must walk, and do not let me stumble in the dark places that lie ahead."

Finally there were footsteps behind her, and a noise at the door. "My lady," Ser Robar said gently, "pardon, but our time is at an end. We must be back before the dawn breaks."

Catelyn rose stiffly. Her knees ached, and she would have given much for a featherbed and a pillow just then. "Thank you, ser. I am ready."

They rode in silence through sparse woodland where the trees leaned drunkenly away from the sea. The nervous whinny of horses and the clank of steel guided them back to Renly's camp. The long ranks of man and horse were armored in darkness, as black as if the Smith had hammered night itself into steel. There were banners to her right, banners to her left, and rank on rank of banners before her, but in the predawn gloom, neither colors nor sigils could be discerned. A grey army, Catelyn thought. Grey men on grey horses beneath grey banners. As they sat their horses waiting, Renly's shadow knights pointed their lances upward, so she rode through a forest of tall naked trees, bereft of leaves and life. Where Storm's End stood was only a deeper darkness, a wall of black through which no stars could shine, but she could see torches moving across the fields where Lord Stannis had made his camp.

The candles within Renly's pavilion made the shimmering silken walls seem to glow, transforming the great tent into a magical castle alive with emerald light. Two of the Rainbow Guard stood sentry at the door to the royal pavilion. The green light shone strangely against the purple plums of Ser Parmen's surcoat, and gave a sickly hue to the sunflowers that covered every inch of Ser Emmon's enameled yellow plate. Long silken plumes flew from their helmets, and rainbow cloaks draped their shoulders.

Within, Catelyn found Brienne armoring the king for battle while the Lords Tarly and Rowan spoke of dispositions and tactics. It was pleasantly warm inside, the heat shimmering off the coals in a dozen small iron braziers. "I must speak with you, Your Grace," she said, granting him a king's style for once, anything to make him heed her.

"In a moment, Lady Catelyn," Renly replied. Brienne fit backplate to breastplate over his quilted tunic. The king's armor was a deep green, the green of leaves in a summer wood, so dark it drank the candlelight. Gold highlights gleamed from inlay and fastenings like distant fires in that wood, winking every time he moved. "Pray continue, Lord Mathis."

"Your Grace," Mathis Rowan said with a sideways glance at Catelyn. "As I was saying, our battles are well drawn up. Why wait for daybreak? Sound the advance."

"And have it said that I won by treachery, with an unchivalrous attack? Dawn was the chosen hour."

"Chosen by Stannis," Randyll Tarly pointed out. "He'd have us charge into the teeth of the rising sun. We'll be half-blind."

"Only until first shock," Renly said confidently. "Ser Loras will break them, and after that it will be chaos." Brienne tightened green leather straps and buckled golden buckles. "When my brother falls, see that no insult is done to his corpse. He is my own blood, I will not have his head paraded about on a spear."

"And if he yields?" Lord Tarly asked.

"Yields?" Lord Rowan laughed. "When Mace Tyrell laid siege to Storm's End, Stannis ate rats rather than open his gates."

"Well I remember." Renly lifted his chin to allow Brienne to fasten his gorget in place. "Near the end, Ser Gawen Wylde and three of his knights tried to steal out a postern gate to surrender.

Stannis caught them and ordered them flung from the walls with catapults. I can still see Gawen's face as they strapped him down. He had been our master-at-arms."

Lord Rowan appeared puzzled. "No men were hurled from the walls. I would surely remember that."

"Maester Cressen told Stannis that we might be forced to eat our dead, and there was no gain in flinging away good meat." Renly pushed back his hair. Brienne bound it with a velvet tie and pulled a padded cap down over his ears, to cushion the weight of his helm. "Thanks to the Onion Knight we were never reduced to dining on corpses, but it was a close thing. Too close for Ser Gawen, who died in his cell."

"Your Grace." Catelyn had waited patiently, but time grew short. "You promised me a word."

Renly nodded. "See to your battles, my lords... oh, and if Barristan Selmy is at my brother's side, I want him spared."

"There's been no word of Ser Barristan since Joffrey cast him out," Lord Rowan objected.

"I know that old man. He needs a king to guard, or who is he? Yet he never came to me, and Lady Catelyn says he is not with Robb Stark at Riverrun. Where else but with Stannis?"

"As you say, Your Grace. No harm will come to him." The lords bowed deeply and departed.

"Say your say, Lady Stark," Renly said. Brienne swept his cloak over his broad shoulders. It was cloth-of-gold, heavy, with the crowned stag of Baratheon picked out in flakes of jet.

"The Lannisters tried to kill my son Bran. A thousand times I have asked myself why. Your brother gave me my answer. There was a hunt the day he fell. Robert and Ned and most of the other men rode out after boar, but Jaime Lannister remained at Winterfell, as did the queen."

Renly was not slow to take the implication. "So you believe the boy caught them at their incest..."

"I beg you, my lord, grant me leave to go to your brother Stannis and tell him what I suspect."

"To what end?"

"Robb will set aside his crown if you and your brother will do the same," she said, hoping it was true. She would make it true if she must; Robb would listen to her, even if his lords would not. "Let the three of you call for a Great Council, such as the realm has not seen for a hundred years. We will send to Winterfell, so Bran may tell his tale and all men may know the Lannisters for the true usurpers. Let the assembled lords of the Seven Kingdoms choose who shall rule them."

Renly laughed. "Tell me, my lady, do direwolves vote on who should lead the pack?" Brienne brought the king's gauntlets and greathelm, crowned with golden antlers that would add a foot and a half to his height. "The time for talk is done. Now we see who is stronger." Renly pulled a lobstered green-and-gold gauntlet over his left hand, while Brienne knelt to buckle on his belt, heavy with the weight of longsword and dagger.

"I beg you in the name of the Mother," Catelyn began when a sudden gust of wind flung open the door of the tent. She thought she glimpsed movement, but when she turned her head, it was only the king's shadow shifting against the silken walls. She heard Renly begin a jest, his shadow moving, lifting its sword, black on green, candles guttering, shivering, something was

queer, wrong, and then she saw Renly's sword still in its scabbard, sheathed still, but the shadow sword...

"Cold," said Renly in a small puzzled voice, a heartbeat before the steel of his gorget parted like cheesecloth beneath the shadow of a blade that was not there. He had time to make a small thick gasp before the blood came gushing out of his throat.

"Your Gr-no!" cried Brienne the Blue when she saw that evil flow, sounding as scared as any little girl. The king stumbled into her arms, a sheet of blood creeping down the front of his armor, a dark red tide that drowned his green and gold. More candles guttered out. Renly tried to speak, but he was choking on his own blood. His legs collapsed, and only Brienne's strength held him up. She threw back her head and screamed, wordless in her anguish.

The shadow Something dark and evil had happened here, she knew, something that she could not begin to understand. Renly never cast that shadow Death came in that door and blew the life out of him as swift as the wind snuffed out his candles.

Only a few instants passed before Robar Royce and Emmon Cuy came bursting in, though it felt like half the night. A pair of men-at-arms crowded in behind with torches. When they saw Renly in Brienne's arms, and her drenched with the king's blood, Ser Robar gave a cry of horror. "Wicked woman!" screamed Ser Emmon, he of the sunflowered steel. "Away from him, you vile creature!"

"Gods be good, Brienne, why?" asked Ser Robar.

Brienne looked up from her king's body. The rainbow cloak that hung from her shoulders had turned red where the king's blood had soaked into the cloth. "I... I..."

"You'll die for this." Ser Emmon snatched up a long-handled battleaxe from the weapons piled near the door. "You'll pay for the king's life with your own!"

"NO!" Catelyn Stark screamed, finding her voice at last, but it was too late, the blood madness was on them, and they rushed forward with shouts that drowned her softer words.

Brienne moved faster than Catelyn would have believed. Her own sword was not to hand, so she snatched Renly's from its scabbard and raised it to catch Emmon's axe on the downswing. A spark flashed bluewhite as steel met steel with a rending crash, and Brienne sprang to her feet, the body of the dead king thrust rudely aside. Ser Emmon stumbled over it as he tried to close, and Brienne's blade sheared through the wooden haft to send his axehead spinning. Another man thrust a flaming torch at her back, but the rainbow cloak was too sodden with blood to burn. Brienne spun and cut, and torch and hand went flying. Flames crept across the carpet. The maimed man began to scream. Ser Emmon dropped the axe and fumbled for his sword. The second man-at-arms lunged, Brienne parried, and their swords danced and clanged against each other. When Emmon Cuy came wading back in, Brienne was forced to retreat, yet somehow she held them both at bay. On the ground, Renly's head rolled sickeningly to one side, and a second mouth yawned wide, the blood coming from him now in slow pulses.

Ser Robar had hung back, uncertain, but now he was reaching for his hilt. "Robar, no, listen." Catelyn seized his arm. "You do her wrong, it was not her. Help her! Hear me, it was Stannis."

The name was on her lips before she could think how it got there, but as she said it, she knew that it was true. "I swear it, you know me, it was Stannis killed him."

The young rainbow knight stared at this madwoman with pale and frightened eyes. "Stannis? How?"

"I do not know. Sorcery, some dark magic, there was a shadow, a shadow" Her own voice sounded wild and crazed to her, but the words poured out in a rush as the blades continued to clash behind her. "A shadow with a sword, I swear it, I saw. Are you blind, the girl loved him! Help her!" She glanced back, saw the second guardsman fall, his blade dropping from limp fingers. Outside there was shouting. More angry men would be bursting in on them any instant, she knew. "She is innocent, Robar. You have my word, on my husband's grave and my honor as a Stark! "

That resolved him. "I will hold them," Ser Robar said. "Get her away." He turned and went out. The fire had reached the wall and was creeping up the side of the tent. Ser Emmon was pressing Brienne hard, him in his enameled yellow steel and her in wool. He had forgotten Catelyn, until the iron brazier came crashing into the back of his head. Helmed as he was, the blow did no lasting harm, but it sent him to his knees. "Brienne, with me," Catelyn commanded. The girl was not slow to see the chance. A slash, and the green silk parted. They stepped out into darkness and the chill of dawn. Loud voices came from the other side of the pavilion. "This way," Catelyn urged, "and slowly. We must not run, or they will ask why. Walk easy, as if nothing were amiss."

Brienne thrust her sword blade through her belt and fell in beside Catelyn. The night air smelled of rain. Behind them, the king's pavilion was well ablaze, flames rising high against the dark. No one made any move to stop them. Men rushed past them, shouting of fire and murder and sorcery. Others stood in small groups and spoke in low voices. A few were praying, and one young squire was on his knees, sobbing openly.

Renly's battles were already coming apart as the rumors spread from mouth to mouth. The nightfires had burned low, and as the east began to lighten the immense mass of Storm's End emerged like a dream of stone while wisps of pale mist raced across the field, flying from the sun on wings of wind. Morning ghosts, she had heard Old Nan call them once, spirits returning to their graves. And Renly one of them now, gone like his brother Robert, like her own dear Ned.

"I never held him but as he died," Brienne said quietly as they walked through the spreading chaos. Her voice sounded as if she might break at any instant. "He was laughing one moment, and suddenly the blood was everywhere... my lady, I do not understand. Did you see, did you...?"

"I saw a shadow. I thought it was Renly's shadow at the first, but it was his brother's."

"Lord Stannis?"

"I felt him. It makes no sense, I know."

It made sense enough for Brienne. "I will kill him," the tall homely girl declared. "With my lord's own sword, I will kill him. I swear it. I swear it. I swear it."

Hal Mollen and the rest of her escort were waiting with the horses. Ser Wendel Manderly was all in a lather to know what was happening. "My lady, the camp has gone mad," he blurted when

he saw them. “Lord Renly, is he-” He stopped suddenly, staring at Brienne and the blood that drenched her.

“Dead, but not by our hands.”

“The battle-” Hal Mollen began.

“There will be no battle.” Catelyn mounted, and her escort formed up about her, with Ser Wendel to her left and Ser Perwyn Frey on her right. “Brienne, we brought mounts enough for twice our number. Choose one, and come with us.”

“I have my own horse, my lady. And my armor-”

“Leave them. We must be well away before they think to look for us. We were both with the king when he was killed. That will not be forgotten.” Wordless, Brienne turned and did as she was bid. “Ride,” Catelyn commanded her escort when they were all ahorse. “If any man tries to stop us, cut him down.”

As the long fingers of dawn fanned across the fields, color was returning to the world. Where grey men had sat grey horses armed with shadow spears, the points of ten thousand lances now glinted silverly cold, and on the myriad flapping banners Catelyn saw the blush of red and pink and orange, the richness of blues and browns, the blaze of gold and yellow. All the power of Storm’s End and Highgarden, the power that had been Renly’s an hour ago. They belong to Stannis now, she realized, even if they do not know it themselves yet. Where else are they to turn, if not to the last Baratheon? Stannis has won all with a single evil stroke.

I am the rightful king, he had declared, his jaw clenched hard as iron, and your son no less a traitor than my brother here. His day will come as well.

A chill went through her.

JON

The hill jutted above the dense tangle of forest, rising solitary and sudden, its windswept heights visible from miles off. The wildlings called it the Fist of the First Men, rangers said. It did look like a fist, Jon Snow thought, punching up through earth and wood, its bare brown slopes knuckled with stone.

He rode to the top with Lord Mormont and the officers, leaving Ghost below under the trees. The direwolf had run off three times as they climbed, twice returning reluctantly to Jon's whistle. The third time, the Lord Commander lost patience and snapped, "Let him go, boy. I want to reach the crest before dusk. Find the wolf later."

The way up was steep and stony, the summit crowned by a chest-high wall of tumbled rocks. They had to circle some distance west before they found a gap large enough to admit the horses. "This is good ground, Thoren," the Old Bear proclaimed when at last they attained the top. "We could scarce hope for better. We'll make our camp here to await Halfhand." The Lord Commander swung down off his saddle, dislodging the raven from his shoulder. Complaining loudly, the bird took to the air.

The views atop the hill were bracing, yet it was the ringwall that drew Jon's eye, the weathered grey stones with their white patches of lichen, their beards of green moss. It was said that the Fist had been a ringfort of the First Men in the Dawn Age. "An old place, and strong," Thoren Smallwood said.

"Old," Mormont's raven screamed as it flapped in noisy circles about their heads. "Old, old, old."

"Quiet," Mormont growled up at the bird. The Old Bear was too proud to admit to weakness, but Jon was not deceived. The strain of keeping up with younger men was taking its toll.

"These heights will be easy to defend, if need be," Thoren pointed out as he walked his horse along the ring of stones, his sable-trimmed cloak stirring in the wind.

"Yes, this place will do." The Old Bear lifted a hand to the wind, and raven landed on his forearm, claws scrabbling against his black ringmail.

"What about water, my lord?" Jon wondered.

"We crossed a brook at the foot of the hill."

"A long climb for a drink," Jon pointed out, "and outside the ring of stones."

Thoren said, "Are you too lazy to climb a hill, boy?"

When Lord Mormont said, "We're not like to find another place as strong. We'll carry water, and make certain we are well supplied," Jon knew better than to argue. So the command was given, and the brothers of the Night's Watch raised their camp behind the stone ring the First Men had made. Black tents sprouted like mushrooms after a rain, and blankets and bedrolls covered the bare ground. Stewards tethered the garrons in long lines, and saw them fed and watered. Foresters took their axes to the trees in the waning afternoon light to harvest enough wood to see them through the night. A score of builders set to clearing brush, digging latrines,

and untying their bundles of fire-hardened stakes. "I will have every opening in the ringwall ditched and staked before dark," the Old Bear had commanded.

Once he'd put up the Lord Commander's tent and seen to their horses, Jon Snow descended the hill in search of Ghost. The direwolf came at once, all in silence. One moment Jon was striding beneath the trees, whistling and shouting, alone in the green, pinecones and fallen leaves under his feet; the next, the great white direwolf was walking beside him, pale as morning mist.

But when they reached the ringfort, Ghost balked again. He padded forward warily to sniff at the gap in the stones, and then retreated, as if he did not like what he'd smelled. Jon tried to grab him by the scruff of his neck and haul him bodily inside the ring, no easy task; the wolf weighed as much as he did, and was stronger by far. "Ghost, what's wrong with you?" It was not like him to be so unsettled. In the end Jon had to give it up. "As you will," he told the wolf. "Go, hunt." The red eyes watched him as he made his way back through the mossy stones.

They ought to be safe here. The hill offered commanding views, and the slopes were precipitous to the north and west and only slightly more gentle to the east. Yet as the dusk deepened and darkness seeped into the hollows between the trees, Jon's sense of foreboding grew. This is the haunted forest, he told himself. Maybe there are ghosts here, the spirits of the First Men. This was their place, once.

"Stop acting the boy," he told himself. Clambering atop the piled rocks, Jon gazed off toward the setting sun. He could see the light shimmering like hammered gold off the surface of the Milkwater as it curved away to the south. Upriver the land was more rugged, the dense forest giving way to a series of bare stony hills that rose high and wild to the north and west. On the horizon stood the mountains like a great shadow, range on range of them receding into the blue-grey distance, their jagged peaks sheathed eternally in snow. Even from afar they looked vast and cold and inhospitable.

Closer at hand, it was the trees that ruled. To south and east the wood went on as far as Jon could see, a vast tangle of root and limb painted in a thousand shades of green, with here and there a patch of red where a weirwood shouldered through the pines and sentinels, or a blush of yellow where some broadleaves had begun to turn. When the wind blew, he could hear the creak and groan of branches older than he was. A thousand leaves fluttered, and for a moment the forest seemed a deep green sea, storm-tossed and heaving, eternal and unknowable.

Ghost was not like to be alone down there, he thought. Anything could be moving under that sea, creeping toward the ringfort through the dark of the wood, concealed beneath those trees. Anything. How would they ever know? He stood there for a long time, until the sun vanished behind the saw-toothed mountains and darkness began to creep through the forest.

"Jon?" Samwell Tarly called up. "I thought it looked like you. Are you well?"

"Well enough." Jon hopped down. "How did you fare today?"

"Well. I fared well. Truly."

Jon was not about to share his disquiet with his friend, not when Samwell Tarly was at last beginning to find his courage. "The Old Bear means to wait here for Qhorin Halfhand and the men from the Shadow Tower."

“It seems a strong place,” said Sam. “A ringfort of the First Men. Do you think there were battles fought here?”

“No doubt. You’d best get a bird ready. Mormont will want to send back word.”

“I wish I could send them all. They hate being caged.”

“You would too, if you could fly.”

“If I could fly, I’d be back at Castle Black eating a pork pie,” said Sam.

Jon clapped him on the shoulder with his burned hand. They walked back through the camp together. Cookfires were being lit all around them. Overhead, the stars were coming out. The long red tail of Mormont’s Torch burned as bright as the moon. Jon heard the ravens before he saw them. Some were calling his name. The birds were not shy when it came to making noise.

They feel it too. “I’d best see to the Old Bear,” he said. “He gets noisy when he isn’t fed as well.”

He found Mormont talking with Thoren Smallwood and half a dozen other officers. “There you are,” the old man said gruffly. “Bring us some hot wine, if you would. The night is chilly.”

“Yes, my lord.” Jon built a cookfire, claimed a small cask of Mormont’s favorite robust red from stores, and poured it into a kettle. He hung the kettle above the flames while he gathered the rest of his ingredients. The Old Bear was particular about his hot spiced wine. So much cinnamon and so much nutmeg and so much honey, not a drop more. Raisins and nuts and dried berries, but no lemon, that was the rankest sort of southron heresy-which was queer, since he always took lemon in his morning beer. The drink must be hot to warm a man properly, the Lord Commander insisted, but the wine must never be allowed to come to a boil. Jon kept a careful eye on the kettle.

As he worked, he could hear the voices from inside the tent. Jarman Buckwell said, “The easiest road up into the Frostfangs is to follow the Milkwater back to its source. Yet if we go that path, Rayder will know of our approach, certain as sunrise.”

“The Giant’s Stair might serve,” said Ser Mallador Locke, “or the Skirling Pass, if it’s clear.”

The wine was steaming. Jon lifted the kettle off the fire, filled eight cups, and carried them into the tent. The Old Bear was peering at the crude map Sam had drawn him that night back in Craster’s Keep. He took a cup from Jon’s tray, tried a swallow of wine, and gave a brusque nod of approval. His raven hopped down his arm. “Corn,” it said. “Corn. Corn.”

Ser Ottyn Wythers waved the wine away. “I would not go into the mountains at all,” he said in a thin, tired voice. “The Frostfangs have a cruel bite even in summer, and now... if we should be caught by a storm...”

“I do not mean to risk the Frostfangs unless I must,” said Mormont. “Wildlings can no more live on snow and stone than we can. They will emerge from the heights soon, and for a host of any size, the only route is along the Milkwater. If so, we are strongly placed here. They cannot hope to slip by us.”

“They may not wish to. They are thousands, and we will be three hundred when the Halfhand reaches us.” Ser Mallador accepted a cup from Jon.

“If it comes to battle, we could not hope for better ground than here,” declared Mormont. “We’ll strengthen the defenses. Pits and spikes, caltrops scattered on the slopes, every breach mended. Jarman, I’ll want your sharpest eyes as watchers. A ring of them, all around us and along the river, to warn of any approach. Hide them up in trees. And we had best start bringing up water too, more than we need. We’ll dig cisterns. It will keep the men occupied, and may prove needful later.”

“My rangers-” started Thoren Smallwood.

“Your rangers will limit their ranging to this side of the river until the Halfhand reaches us. After that, we’ll see. I will not lose more of my men.”

“Mance Rayder might be massing his host a day’s ride from here, and we’d never know,” Smallwood complained.

“We know where the wildlings are massing,” Mormont came back. “We had it from Craster. I dislike the man, but I do not think he lied to us in this.”

“As you say.” Smallwood took a sullen leave. The others finished their wine and followed, more courteously.

“Shall I bring you supper, my lord?” Jon asked.

“Corn,” the raven cried. Mormont did not answer at once. When he did he said only, “Did your wolf find game today?”

“He’s not back yet.”

“We could do with fresh meat.” Mormont dug into a sack and offered his raven a handful of corn. “You think I’m wrong to keep the rangers close?”

“That’s not for me to say, my lord.”

“It is if you’re asked.”

“If the rangers must stay in sight of the Fist, I don’t see how they can hope to find my uncle,” Jon admitted.

“They can’t.” The raven pecked at the kernels in the Old Bear’s palm. “Two hundred men or ten thousand, the country is too vast.” The corn gone, Mormont turned his hand over.

“You would not give up the search?”

“Maester Aemon thinks you clever.” Mormont moved the raven to his shoulder. The bird tilted its head to one side, little eyes a-glitter.

The answer was there. “Is it... it seems to me that it might be easier for one man to find two hundred than for two hundred to find one.”

The raven gave a cackling scream, but the Old Bear smiled through the grey of his beard. “This many men and horses leave a trail even Aemon could follow. On this hill, our fires ought to be visible as far off as the foothills of the Frostfangs. If Ben Stark is alive and free, he will come to us, I have no doubt.”

“Yes,” said Jon, “but... what if?”

“...he’s dead?” Mormont asked, not unkindly.

Jon nodded, reluctantly.

“Dead,” the raven said. “Dead. Dead.”

“He may come to us anyway,” the Old Bear said. “As Othor did, and Jafer Flowers. I dread that as much as you, Jon, but we must admit the possibility.”

“Dead,” his raven cawed, ruffling its wings. Its voice grew louder and more shrill. “Dead.”

Mormont stroked the bird’s black feathers, and stifled a sudden yawn with the back of his hand. “I will forsake supper, I believe. Rest will serve me better. Wake me at first light.”

“Sleep well, my lord.” Jon gathered up the empty cups and stepped outside. He heard distant laughter, the plaintive sound of pipes. A great blaze was crackling in the center of the camp, and he could smell stew cooking. The Old Bear might not be hungry, but Jon was. He drifted over toward the fire.

Dywen was holding forth, spoon in hand. “I know this wood as well as any man alive, and I tell you, I wouldn’t care to ride through it alone tonight. Can’t you smell it?”

Grenn was staring at him with wide eyes, but Dolorous Edd said, “All I smell is the shit of two hundred horses. And this stew. Which has a similar aroma, now that I come to sniff it.”

“I’ve got your similar aroma right here.” Hake patted his dirk. Grumbling, he filled Jon’s bowl from the kettle.

The stew was thick with barley, carrot, and onion, with here and there a ragged shred of salt beef, softened in the cooking.

“What is it you smell, Dywen?” asked Grenn.

The forester sucked on his spoon a moment. He had taken out his teeth. His face was leathery and wrinkled, his hands gnarled as old roots. “Seems to me like it smells... well... cold.”

“Your head’s as wooden as your teeth,” Hake told him. “There’s no smell to cold.”

There is, thought Jon, remembering the night in the Lord Commander’s chambers. It smells like death. Suddenly he was not hungry anymore. He gave his stew to Grenn, who looked in need of an extra supper to warm him against the night.

The wind was blowing briskly when he left. By morning, frost would cover the ground, and the tent ropes would be stiff and frozen. A few fingers of spiced wine sloshed in the bottom of the kettle. Jon fed fresh wood to the fire and put the kettle over the flames to reheat. He flexed his fingers as he waited, squeezing and spreading until the hand tingled. The first watch had taken up their stations around the perimeter of the camp. Torches flickered all along the ringwall. The night was moonless, but a thousand stars shone overhead.

A sound rose out of the darkness, faint and distant, but unmistakable: the howling of wolves. Their voices rose and fell, a chilly song, and lonely. It made the hairs rise along the back of his neck. Across the fire, a pair of red eyes regarded him from the shadows. The light of the flames made them glow.

“Ghost,” Jon breathed, surprised. “So you came inside after all, eh?” The white wolf often hunted all night; he had not expected to see him again till daybreak. “Was the hunting so bad?” he asked. “Here. To me, Ghost.”

The direwolf circled the fire, sniffing Jon, sniffing the wind, never still. It did not seem as if he were after meat right now. When the dead came walking, Ghost knew He woke me, warned me.

Alarmed, he got to his feet. "is something out there? Ghost, do you have a scent?" Dywen said he smelled cold.

The direwolf loped off, stopped, looked back. He wants me to follow. Pulling up the hood of his cloak, Jon walked away from the tents, away from the warmth of his fire, past the lines of shaggy little garrons. One of the horses whickered nervously when Ghost padded by. Jon soothed him with a word and paused to stroke his muzzle. He could hear the wind whistling through cracks in the rocks as they neared the ringwall. A voice called out a challenge. Jon stepped into the torchlight. "I need to fetch water for the Lord Commander."

"Go on, then," the guard said. "Be quick about it." Huddled beneath his black cloak, with his hood drawn up against the wind, the man never even looked to see if he had a bucket.

Jon slipped sideways between two sharpened stakes while Ghost slid beneath them. A torch had been thrust down into a crevice, its flames flying pale orange banners when the gusts came. He snatched it up as he squeezed through the gap between the stones. Ghost went racing down the hill. Jon followed more slowly, the torch thrust out before him as he made his descent. The camp sounds faded behind him. The night was black, the slope steep, stony, and uneven. A moment's inattention would be a sure way to break an ankle... or his neck. What am I doing? he asked himself as he picked his way down.

The trees stood beneath him, warriors armored in bark and leaf, deployed in their silent ranks awaiting the command to storm the hill. Black, they seemed... it was only when his torchlight brushed against them that Jon glimpsed a flash of green. Faintly, he heard the sound of water flowing over rocks. Ghost vanished in the underbrush. Jon struggled after him, listening to the call of the brook, to the leaves sighing in the wind. Branches clutched at his cloak, while overhead thick limbs twined together and shut out the stars.

He found Ghost lapping from the stream. "Ghost," he called, "to me. Now" When the direwolf raised his head, his eyes glowed red and baleful, and water streamed down from his jaws like slaver. There was something fierce and terrible about him in that instant. And then he was off, bounding past Jon, racing through the trees. "Ghost, no, stay," he shouted, but the wolf paid no heed. The lean white shape was swallowed by the dark, and Jon had only two choices-to climb the hill again, alone, or to follow.

He followed, angry, holding the torch out low so he could see the rocks that threatened to trip him with every step, the thick roots that seemed to grab at his feet, the holes where a man could twist an ankle. Every few feet he called again for Ghost, but the night wind was swirling amongst the trees and it drank the words. This is madness, he thought as he plunged deeper into the trees. He was about to turn back when he glimpsed a flash of white off ahead and to the right, back toward the hill. He jogged after it, cursing under his breath.

A quarter way around the Fist he chased the wolf before he lost him again. Finally he stopped to catch his breath amidst the scrub, thorns, and tumbled rocks at the base of the hill. Beyond the torchlight, the dark pressed close.

A soft scrabbling noise made him turn. Jon moved toward the sound, stepping carefully among boulders and thornbushes. Behind a fallen tree, he came on Ghost again. The direwolf was digging furiously, kicking up dirt.

“What have you found?” Jon lowered the torch, revealing a rounded mound of soft earth. A grave, he thought. But whose?

He knelt, jammed the torch into the ground beside him. The soil was loose, sandy. Jon pulled it out by the fistful. There were no stones, no roots. Whatever was here had been put here recently. Two feet down, his fingers touched cloth. He had been expecting a corpse, fearing a corpse, but this was something else. He pushed against the fabric and felt small, hard shapes beneath, unyielding. There was no smell, no sign of graveworms. Ghost backed off and sat on his haunches, watching.

Jon brushed the loose soil away to reveal a rounded bundle perhaps two feet across. He jammed his fingers down around the edges and worked it loose. When he pulled it free, whatever was inside shifted and clinked. Treasure, he thought, but the shapes were wrong to be coins, and the sound was wrong for metal.

A length of frayed rope bound the bundle together. Jon unsheathed his dagger and cut it, groped for the edges of the cloth, and pulled. The bundle turned, and its contents spilled out onto the ground, glittering dark and bright. He saw a dozen knives, leaf-shaped spearheads, numerous arrowheads. Jon picked up a dagger blade, featherlight and shiny black, hiltless. Torchlight ran along its edge, a thin orange line that spoke of razor sharpness. Dragonglass. What the maesters call obsidian. Had Ghost uncovered some ancient cache of the children of the forest, buried here for thousands of years? The Fist of the First Men was an old place, only...

Beneath the dragonglass was an old warhorn, made from an auroch's horn and banded in bronze. Jon shook the dirt from inside it, and a stream of arrowheads fell out. He let them fall, and pulled up a corner of the cloth the weapons had been wrapped in, rubbing it between his fingers. Good wool, thick, a double weave, damp but not rotted. It could not have been long in the ground. And it was dark. He seized a handful and pulled it close to the torch. Not dark. Black.

Even before Jon stood and shook it out, he knew what he had: the black cloak of a Sworn Brother of the Night's Watch.

BRAN

Alebelly found him in the forge, working the bellows for Mikken. “Maester wants you in the turret, m’lord prince. There’s been a bird from the king.”

“From Robb?” Excited, Bran did not wait for Hodor, but let Alebelly carry him up the steps. He was a big man, though not so big as Hodor and nowhere near as strong. By the time they reached the maester’s turret he was red-faced and puffing. Rickon was there before them, and both Walder Freys as well.

Maester Luwin sent Alebelly away and closed his door. “My lords,” he said gravely, “we have had a message from His Grace, with both good news and ill. He has won a great victory in the west, shattering a Lannister army at a place named Oxcross, and has taken several castles as well. He writes us from Ashemark, formerly the stronghold of House Marbrand.”

Rickon tugged at the maester’s robe. “Is Robb coming home?”

“Not just yet, I fear. There are battles yet to fight.”

“Was it Lord Tywin he defeated?” asked Bran.

“No,” said the maester. “Ser Stafford Lannister commanded the enemy host. He was slain in the battle.”

Bran had never even heard of Ser Stafford Lannister. He found himself agreeing with Big Walder when he said, “Lord Tywin is the only one who matters.”

“Tell Robb I want him to come home,” said Rickon. “He can bring his wolf home too, and Mother and Father.” Though he knew Lord Eddard was dead, sometimes Rickon forgot... willfully, Bran suspected. His little brother was stubborn as only a boy of four can be.

Bran was glad for Robb’s victory, but disquieted as well. He remembered what Osha had said the day that his brother had led his army out of Winterfell. He’s marching the wrong way, the wildling woman had insisted.

“Sadly, no victory is without cost.” Maester Luwin turned to the Walders. “My lords, your uncle Ser Stevron Frey was among those who lost their lives at Oxcross. He took a wound in the battle, Robb writes. It was not thought to be serious, but three days later he died in his tent, asleep.”

Big Walder shrugged. “He was very old. Five-and-sixty, I think. Too old for battles. He was always saying he was tired.”

Little Walder hooted. “Tired of waiting for our grandfather to die, you mean. Does this mean Ser Emmon’s the heir now?”

“Don’t be stupid,” his cousin said. “The sons of the first son come before the second son. Ser Ryman is next in line, and then Edwyn and Black Walder and Petyr Pimple. And then Aegon and all his sons.”

“Ryman is old too,” said Little Walder. “Past forty, I bet. And he has a bad belly. Do you think he’ll be lord?”

“I’ll be lord. I don’t care if he is.”

Maester Luwin cut in sharply. "You ought to be ashamed of such talk, my lords. Where is your grief? Your uncle is dead."

"Yes," said Little Walder. "We're very sad."

They weren't, though. Bran got a sick feeling in his belly. They like the taste of this dish better than I do. He asked Maester Luwin to be excused.

"Very well." The maester rang for help. Hodor must have been busy in the stables. It was Osha who came. She was stronger than Alebelly, though, and had no trouble lifting Bran in her arms and carrying him down the steps.

"Osha," Bran asked as they crossed the yard. "Do you know the way north? To the Wall and... and even past?"

"The way's easy. Look for the Ice Dragon, and chase the blue star in the rider's eye." She backed through a door and started up the winding steps.

"And there are still giants there, and... the rest... the Others, and the children of the forest too?"

"The giants I've seen, the children I've heard tell of, and the white walkers... why do you want to know?"

"Did you ever see a three-eyed crow?"

"No." She laughed. "And I can't say I'd want to." Osha kicked open the door to his bedchamber and set him in his window seat, where he could watch the yard below.

It seemed only a few heartbeats after she took her leave that the door opened again, and Jojen Reed entered unbidden, with his sister Meera behind him. "You heard about the bird?" Bran asked. The other boy nodded. "It wasn't a supper like you said. It was a letter from Robb, and we didn't eat it, but--"

"The green dreams take strange shapes sometimes," Jojen admitted. "The truth of them is not always easy to understand."

"Tell me the bad thing you dreamed," Bran said. "The bad thing that is coming to Winterfell."

"Does my lord prince believe me now? Will he trust my words, no matter how queer they sound in his ears?"

Bran nodded.

"It is the sea that comes."

"The sea?"

"I dreamed that the sea was lapping all around Winterfell. I saw black waves crashing against the gates and towers, and then the salt water came flowing over the walls and filled the castle. Drowned men were floating in the yard. When I first dreamed the dream, back at Greywater, I didn't know their faces, but now I do. That Alebelly is one, the guard who called our names at the feast. Your septon's another. Your smith as well."

"Mikken?" Bran was as confused as he was dismayed. "But the sea is hundreds and hundreds of leagues away, and Winterfell's walls are so high the water couldn't get in even if it did come."

"In the dark of night the salt sea will flow over these walls," said Jojen. "I saw the dead, bloated and drowned."

“We have to tell them,” Bran said. “Alebelly and Mikken, and Septon Chayle. Tell them not to drown.”

“It will not save them,” replied the boy in green.

Meera came to the window seat and put a hand on his shoulder. “They will not believe, Bran. No more than you did.”

Jojen sat on Bran’s bed. “Tell me what you dream.”

He was scared, even then, but he had sworn to trust them, and a Stark of Winterfell keeps his sworn word. “There’s different kinds,” he said slowly. “There’s the wolf dreams, those aren’t so bad as the others. I run and hunt and kill squirrels. And there’s dreams where the crow comes and tells me to fly. Sometimes the tree is in those dreams too, calling my name. That frightens me. But the worst dreams are when I fall.” He looked down into the yard, feeling miserable. “I never used to fall before. When I climbed. I went everywhere, up on the roofs and along the walls, I used to feed the crows in the Burned Tower. Mother was afraid that I would fall but I knew I never would. Only I did, and now when I sleep I fall all the time.”

Meera gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Is that all?”

“I guess.”

“Warg,” said Jojen Reed.

Bran looked at him, his eyes wide. “What?”

“Warg. Shapechanger. Beastling. That is what they will call you, if they should ever hear of your wolf dreams.”

The names made him afraid again. “Who will call me?”

“Your own folk. In fear. Some will hate you if they know what you are. Some will even try to kill you.”

Old Nan told scary stories of beastlings and shapechangers sometimes. In the stories they were always evil. “I’m not like that,” Bran said. “I’m not. It’s only dreams.”

“The wolf dreams are no true dreams. You have your eye closed tight whenever you’re awake, but as you drift off it flutters open and your soul seeks out its other half. The power is strong in you.”

“I don’t want it. I want to be a knight.”

“A knight is what you want. A warg is what you are. You can’t change that, Bran, you can’t deny it or push it away. You are the winged wolf, but you will never fly.” Jojen got up and walked to the window. “Unless you open your eye.” He put two fingers together and poked Bran in the forehead, hard.

When he raised his hand to the spot, Bran felt only the smooth unbroken skin. There was no eye, not even a closed one. “How can I open it if it’s not there?”

“You will never find the eye with your fingers, Bran. You must search with your heart.” Jojen studied Bran’s face with those strange green eyes. “Or are you afraid?”

“Maester Luwin says there’s nothing in dreams that a man need fear. “

“There is,” said Jojen.

“What?”

“The past. The future. The truth.”

They left him more muddled than ever. When he was alone, Bran tried to open his third eye, but he didn't know how. No matter how he wrinkled his forehead and poked at it, he couldn't see any different than he'd done before. In the days that followed, he tried to warn others about what Jojen had seen, but it didn't go as he wanted. Mikken thought it was funny. “The sea, is it? Happens I always wanted to see the sea. Never got where I could go to it, though. So now it's coming to me, is it? The gods are good, to take such trouble for a poor smith.”

“The gods will take me when they see fit,” Septon Chayle said quietly, “though I scarcely think it likely that I'll drown, Bran. I grew up on the banks of the White Knife, you know. I'm quite the strong swimmer.”

Alebelly was the only one who paid the warning any heed. He went to talk to Jojen himself, and afterward stopped bathing and refused to go near the well. Finally he stank so bad that six of the other guards threw him into a tub of scalding water and scrubbed him raw while he screamed that they were going to drown him like the frogboy had said. Thereafter he scowled whenever he saw Bran or Jojen about the castle, and muttered under his breath.

It was a few days after Alebelly's bath that Ser Rodrik returned to Winterfell with his prisoner, a fleshy young man with fat moist lips and long hair who smelled like a privy, even worse than Alebelly had. “Reek, he's called,” Hayhead said when Bran asked who it was. “I never heard his true name. He served the Bastard of Bolton and helped him murder Lady Hornwood, they say.”

The Bastard himself was dead, Bran learned that evening over supper. Ser Rodrik's men had caught him on Hornwood land doing something horrible (Bran wasn't quite sure what, but it seemed to be something you did without your clothes) and shot him down with arrows as he tried to ride away. They came too late for poor Lady Hornwood, though. After their wedding, the Bastard had locked her in a tower and neglected to feed her. Bran had heard men saying that when Ser Rodrik had smashed down the door he found her with her mouth all bloody and her fingers chewed off.

“The monster has tied us a thorny knot,” the old knight told Maester Luwin. “Like it or no, Lady Hornwood was his wife. He made her say the vows before both septon and heart tree, and bedded her that very night before witnesses. She signed a will naming him as heir and fixed her seal to it.”

“Vows made at sword point are not valid,” the maester argued.

“Roose Bolton may not agree. Not with land at issue.” Ser Rodrik looked unhappy. “Would that I could take this serving man's head off as well, he's as bad as his master. But I fear I must keep him alive until Robb returns from his wars. He is the only witness to the worst of the Bastard's crimes. Perhaps when Lord Bolton hears his tale, he will abandon his claim, but meantime we have Manderly knights and Dreadfort men killing one another in Hornwood forests, and I lack the strength to stop them.” The old knight turned in his seat and gave Bran a stern look. “And what have you been about while I've been away, my lord prince? Commanding our guardsmen not to wash? Do you want them smelling like this Reek, is that it?”

“The sea is coming here,” Bran said. “Jojen saw it in a green dream. ‘Mebelly is going to drown.’”

Maester Luwin tugged at his chain collar. “The Reed boy believes he sees the future in his dreams, Ser Rodrik. I’ve spoken to Bran about the uncertainty of such prophecies, but if truth be told, there is trouble along the Stony Shore. Raiders in longships, plundering fishing villages. Raping and burning. Leobald Tallhart has sent his nephew Benfred to deal with them, but I expect they’ll take to their ships and flee at the first sight of armed men.”

“Aye, and strike somewhere else. The Others take all such cowards. They would never dare, no more than the Bastard of Bolton, if our main strength were not a thousand leagues south.” Ser Rodrik looked at Bran. “What else did the lad tell you?”

“He said the water would flow over our walls. He saw Alebelly drowned, and Mikken and Septon Chayle too.”

Ser Rodrik frowned. “Well, should it happen that I need to ride against these raiders myself, I shan’t take Alebelly, then. He didn’t see me drowned, did he? No? Good.”

It heartened Bran to hear that. Maybe they won’t drown, then, he thought. If they stay away from the sea.

Meera thought so too, later that night when she and Jojen met Bran in his room to play a three-sided game of tiles, but her brother shook his head. “The things I see in green dreams can’t be changed.”

That made his sister angry. “Why would the gods send a warning if we can’t heed it and change what’s to come?”

“I don’t know,” Jojen said sadly.

“If you were Alebelly, you’d probably jump into the well to have done with it! He should fight, and Bran should too.”

“Me?” Bran felt suddenly afraid. “What should I fight? Am I going to drown too?”

Meera looked at him guiltily. “I shouldn’t have said.”

He could tell that she was hiding something. “Did you see me in a green dream?” he asked Jojen nervously. “Was I drowned?”

“Not drowned.” Jojen spoke as if every word pained him. “I dreamed of the man who came today, the one they call Reek. You and your brother lay dead at his feet, and he was skinning off your faces with a long red blade.”

Meera rose to her feet. “If I went to the dungeon, I could drive a spear right through his heart. How could he murder Bran if he was dead?”

“The gaolers will stop you,” Jojen said. “The guards. And if you tell them why you want him dead, they’ll never believe.”

“I have guards too,” Bran reminded them. “Alebelly and Poxym Tym and Hayhead and the rest.”

Jojen’s mossy eyes were full of pity. “They won’t be able to stop him, Bran. I couldn’t see why, but I saw the end of it. I saw you and Rickon in your crypts, down in the dark with all the dead kings and their stone wolves.”

No, Bran thought. No. “If I went away... to Greywater, or to the crow, someplace far where they couldn’t find me...”

“It will not matter. The dream was green, Bran, and the green dreams do not lie.”

TYRION

Varys stood over the brazier, warming his soft hands. "It would appear Renly was murdered most fearfully in the very midst of his army. His throat was opened from ear to ear by a blade that passed through steel and bone as if they were soft cheese."

"Murdered by whose hand?" Cersei demanded.

"Have you ever considered that too many answers are the same as no answer at all? My informers are not always as highly placed as we might like. When a king dies, fancies sprout like mushrooms in the dark. A groom says that Renly was slain by a knight of his own Rainbow Guard. A washerwoman claims Stannis stole through the heart of his brother's army with his magic sword. Several men-at-arms believe a woman did the fell deed, but cannot agree on which woman. A maid that Renly had spurned, claims one. A camp follower brought in to serve his pleasure on the eve of battle, says a second. The third ventures that it might have been the Lady Catelyn Stark."

The queen was not pleased. "Must you waste our time with every rumor the fools care to tell?"

"You pay me well for these rumors, my gracious queen."

"We pay you for the truth, Lord Varys. Remember that, or this small council may grow smaller still."

Varys tittered nervously. "You and your noble brother will leave His Grace with no council at all if you continue."

"I daresay, the realm could survive a few less councillors," said Littlefinger with a smile.

"Dear dear Petyr," said Varys, "are you not concerned that yours might be the next name on the Hand's little list?"

"Before you, Varys? I should never dream of it."

"Mayhaps we will be brothers on the Wall together, you and I" Varys giggled again.

"Sooner than you'd like, if the next words out of your mouth are not something useful, eunuch." From the look of her eyes, Cersei was prepared to castrate Varys all over again.

"Might this be some ruse?" asked Littlefinger.

"If so, it is a ruse of surpassing cleverness," said Varys. "It has certainly hoodwinked me."

Tyrion had heard enough. "Joff will be so disappointed," he said. "He was saving such a nice spike for Renly's head. But whoever did the deed, we must assume Stannis was behind it. The gain is clearly his." He did not like this news; he had counted on the brothers Baratheon decimating each other in bloody battle. He could feel his elbow throbbing where the morningstar had laid it open. It did that sometimes in the damp. He squeezed it uselessly in his hand and asked, "What of Renly's host?"

"The greater part of his foot remains at Bitterbridge." Varys abandoned the brazier to take his seat at the table. "Most of the lords who rode with Lord Renly to Storm's End have gone over banner-and-blade to Stannis, with all their chivalry."

"Led by the Florents, I'd wager," said Littlefinger.

Varys gave him a simpering smile. "You would win, my lord. Lord Alester was indeed the first to bend the knee. Many others followed."

"Many," Tyrion said pointedly, "but not all?"

"Not all," agreed the eunuch. "Not Loras Tyrell, nor Randyll Tarly, nor Mathis Rowan. And Storm's End itself has not yielded. Ser Cortnay Penrose holds the castle in Renly's name, and will not believe his liege is dead. He demands to see the mortal remains before he opens his gates, but it seems that Renly's corpse has unaccountably vanished. Carried away, most likely. A fifth of Renly's knights departed with Ser Loras rather than bend the knee to Stannis. It's said the Knight of Flowers went mad when he saw his king's body, and slew three of Renly's guards in his wrath, among them Emmon Cuy and Robar Royce."

A pity he stopped at three, thought Tyrion.

"Ser Loras is likely making for Bitterbridge," Varys went on. "His sister is there, Renly's queen, as well as a great many soldiers who suddenly find themselves kingless. Which side will they take now? A ticklish question. Many serve the lords who remained at Storm's End, and those lords now belong to Stannis."

Tyrion leaned forward. "There is a chance here, it seems to me. Win Loras Tyrell to our cause and Lord Mace Tyrell and his bannermen might join us as well. They may have sworn their swords to Stannis for the moment, yet they cannot love the man, or they would have been his from the start."

"Is their love for us any greater?" asked Cersei.

"Scarcely," said Tyrion. "They loved Renly, clearly, but Renly is slain. Perhaps we can give them good and sufficient reasons to prefer Joffrey to Stannis... if we move quickly."

"What sort of reasons do you mean to give them?"

"Gold reasons," Littlefinger suggested at once.

Varys made a tsking sound. "Sweet Petyr, surely you do not mean to suggest that these puissant lords and noble knights could be bought like so many chickens in the market."

"Have you been to our markets of late, Lord Varys?" asked Littlefinger. "You'd find it easier to buy a lord than a chicken, I daresay. Of course, lords cluck prouder than chickens, and take it ill if you offer them coin like a tradesman, but they are seldom adverse to taking gifts... honors, lands, castles..."

"Bribes might sway some of the lesser lords," Tyrion said, "but never Highgarden."

"True," Littlefinger admitted. "The Knight of Flowers is the key there. Mace Tyrell has two older sons, but Loras has always been his favorite. Win him, and Highgarden will be yours."

Yes, Tyrion thought. "It seems to me we should take a lesson from the late Lord Renly. We can win the Tyrell alliance as he did. With a marriage."

Varys understood the quickest. "You think to wed King Joffrey to Margaery Tyrell?"

"I do." Renly's young queen was no more than fifteen, sixteen, he seemed to recall... older than Joffrey, but a few years were nothing, it was so neat and sweet he could taste it.

"Joffrey is betrothed to Sansa Stark," Cersei objected.

“Marriage contracts can be broken. What advantage is there in wedding the king to the daughter of a dead traitor?”

Littlefinger spoke up. “You might point out to His Grace that the Tyrells are much wealthier than the Starks, and that Margaery is said to be lovely... and beddable besides.”

“Yes,” said Tyrion, “Joff ought to like that well enough.”

“My son is too young to care about such things.”

“You think so?” asked Tyrion. “He’s thirteen, Cersei. The same age at which I married.”

“You shamed us all with that sorry episode. Joffrey is made of finer stuff.”

“So fine that he had Ser Boros rip off Sansa’s gown.”

“He was angry with the girl.”

“He was angry with that cook’s boy who spilled the soup last night as well, but he didn’t strip him naked.”

“This was not a matter of some spilled soup-”

No, it was a matter of some pretty teats. After that business in the yard, Tyrion had spoken with Varys about how they might arrange for Joffrey to visit Chataya’s. A taste of honey might sweeten the boy, he hoped. He might even be grateful, gods forbid, and Tyrion could do with a shade more gratitude from his sovereign. It would need to be done secretly, of course. The tricky bit would be parting him from the Hound. “The dog is never far from his master’s heels,” he’d observed to Varys, “but all men sleep. And some gamble and whore and visit winesinks as well.”

“The Hound does all these things, if that is your question.”

“No,” said Tyrion. “My question is when.”

Varys had laid a finger on his cheek, smiling enigmatically. “My lord, a suspicious man might think you wished to find a time when Sandor Clegane was not protecting King Joffrey, the better to do the boy some harm.”

“Surely you know me better than that, Lord Varys,” Tyrion said. “Why, all I want is for Joffrey to love me.”

The eunuch had promised to look into the matter. The war made its own demands, though; Joffrey’s initiation into manhood would need to wait. “Doubtless you know your son better than I do,” he made himself tell Cersei, “but regardless, there’s still much to be said for a Tyrell marriage. It may be the only way that Joffrey lives long enough to reach his wedding night.”

Littlefinger agreed. “The Stark girl brings Joffrey nothing but her body, sweet as that may be. Margaery Tyrell brings fifty thousand swords and all the strength of Highgarden.”

“Indeed.” Varys laid a soft hand on the queen’s sleeve. “You have a mother’s heart, and I know His Grace loves his little sweetling. Yet kings must learn to put the needs of the realm before their own desires. I say this offer must be made.”

The queen pulled free of the eunuch’s touch. “You would not speak so if you were women. Say what you will, my lords, but Joffrey is too proud to settle for Renly’s leavings. He will never consent.”

Tyrion shrugged. "When the king comes of age in three years, he may give or withhold his consent as he pleases. Until then, you are his regent and I am his Hand, and he will marry whomever we tell him to marry. Leavings or no."

Cersei's quiver was empty. "Make your offer then, but gods save you all if Joff does not like this girl."

"I'm so pleased we can agree," Tyrion said. "Now, which of us shall go to Bitterbridge? We must reach Ser Loras with our offer before his blood can cool."

"You mean to send one of the council?"

"I can scarcely expect the Knight of Flowers to treat with Bronn or Shagga, can I? The Tyrells are proud."

His sister wasted no time trying to twist the situation to her advantage. "Ser Jacelyn Bywater is nobly born. Send him."

Tyrion shook his head. "We need someone who can do more than repeat our words and fetch back a reply. Our envoy must speak for king and council and settle the matter quickly."

"The Hand speaks with the king's voice." Candlelight gleamed green as wildfire in Cersei's eyes. "If we send you, Tyrion, it will be as if Joffrey went himself. And who better, You wield words as skillfully as Jaime wields a sword."

Are you that eager to get me out of the city, Cersei? "You are too kind, sister, but it seems to me that a boy's mother is better fitted to arrange his marriage than any uncle. And you have a gift for winning friends that I could never hope to match."

Her eyes narrowed. "Joff needs me at his side."

"Your Grace, my lord Hand," said Littlefinger, "the king needs both of you here. Let me go in your stead."

"You?" What gain does he see in this? Tyrion wondered.

"I am of the king's council, yet not the king's blood, so I would make a poor hostage. I knew Ser Loras passing well when he was here at court, and gave him no cause to dislike me. Mace Tyrell bears me no enmity that I know of, and I flatter myself that I am not unskilled in negotiation."

He has us. Tyrion did not trust Petyr Baelish, nor did he want the man out of his sight, yet what other choice was left him? It must be Littlefinger or Tyrion himself, and he knew full well that if he left King's Landing for any length of time, all that he had managed to accomplish would be undone. "There is fighting between here and Bitterbridge," he said cautiously. "And you can be past certain that Lord Stannis will be dispatching his own shepherds to gather in his brother's wayward lambs."

"I've never been frightened of shepherds. It's the sheep who trouble me. Still, I suppose an escort might be in order."

"I can spare a hundred gold cloaks," Tyrion said.

"Five hundred."

"Three hundred."

“And forty more-twenty knights with as many squires. If I arrive without a knightly tail, the Tyrells will think me of small account.”

That was true enough. “Agreed.”

“I’ll include Horror and Slobber in my party, and send them on to their lord father afterward. A gesture of goodwill. We need Paxter Redwyne, he’s Mace Tyrell’s oldest friend, and a great power in his own right.”

“And a traitor,” the queen said, balking. “The Arbor would have declared for Renly with all the rest, except that Redwyne knew full well his whelps would suffer for it.”

“Renly is dead, Your Grace,” Littlefinger pointed out, “and neither Stannis nor Lord Paxter will have forgotten how Redwyne galleys closed the sea during the siege of Storm’s End. Restore the twins and perchance we may win Redwyne’s love.”

Cersei remained unconvinced. “The Others can keep his love, I want his swords and sails. Holding tight to those twins is the best way to make certain that we’ll have them.”

Tyrion had the answer. “Then let us send Ser Hobber back to the Arbor and keep Ser Horas here. Lord Paxter ought to be clever enough to riddle out the meaning of that, I should think.”

The suggestion was carried without protest, but Littlefinger was not done. “We’ll want horses. Swift and strong. The fighting will make remounts hard to come by. A goodly supply of gold will also be needed, for those gifts we spoke of earlier.”

“Take as much as you require. If the city falls, Stannis will steal it all anyway.”

“I’ll want my commission in writing. A document that will leave Mace Tyrell in no doubt as to my authority, granting me full power to treat with him concerning this match and any other arrangements that might be required, and to make binding pledges in the king’s name. It should be signed by Joffrey and every member of this council, and bear all our seals.”

Tyrion shifted uncomfortably. “Done. Will that be all? I remind you, there’s a long road between here and Bitterbridge.”

“I’ll be riding it before dawn breaks.” Littlefinger rose. “I trust that on my return, the king will see that I am suitably rewarded for my valiant efforts in his cause?”

Varys giggled. “Joffrey is such a grateful sovereign, I’m certain you will have no cause to complain, my good brave lord.”

The queen was more direct. “What do you want, Petyr?”

Littlefinger glanced at Tyrion with a sly smile. “I shall need to give that some consideration. No doubt I’ll think of something.” He sketched an airy bow and took his leave, as casual as if he were off to one of his brothels.

Tyrion glanced out the window. The fog was so thick that he could not even see the curtain wall across the yard. A few dim lights shone indistinct through that greyness. A foul day for travel, he thought. He did not envy Petyr Baelish. “We had best see to drawing up those documents. Lord Varys, send for parchment and quill. And someone will need to wake Joffrey.”

It was still grey and dark when the meeting finally ended. Varys scurried off alone, his soft slippers whisking along the floor. The Lannisters lingered a moment by the door. “How comes

your chain, brother?" the queen asked as Ser Preston fastened a vair-lined cloth-of-silver cloak about her shoulders.

"Link by link, it grows longer. We should thank the gods that Ser Cortnay Penrose is as stubborn as he is. Stannis will never march north with Storm's End untaken in his rear."

"Tyrion, I know we do not always agree on policy, but it seems to me that I was wrong about you. You are not so big a fool as I imagined. In truth, I realize now that you have been a great help. For that I thank you. You must forgive me if I have spoken to you harshly in the past."

"Must I?" He gave her a shrug, a smile. "Sweet sister, you have said nothing that requires forgiveness."

"Today, you mean?" They both laughed... and Cersei leaned over and planted a quick, soft kiss on his brow.

Too astonished for words, Tyrion could only watch her stride off down the hall, Ser Preston at her side. "Have I lost my wits, or did my sister just kiss me?" he asked Bronn when she was gone.

"Was it so sweet?"

"It was... unanticipated." Cersei had been behaving queerly of late. Tyrion found it very unsettling. "I am trying to recall the last time she kissed me. I could not have been more than six or seven. Jaime had dared her to do it."

"The woman's finally taken note of your charms."

"No," Tyrion said. "No, the woman is hatching something. Best find out what, Bronn. You know I hate surprises."

THEON

Theon wiped the spittle off his cheek with the back of his hand. “Robb will gut you, Greyjoy,” Benfred Tallheart screamed. “He’ll feed your turncloak’s heart to his wolf, you piece of sheep dung.”

Aeron Damphair’s voice cut through the insults like a sword through cheese. “Now you must kill him.”

“I have questions for him first,” said Theon.

“Puck your questions.” Benfred hung bleeding and helpless between Stygg and Werlag. “You’ll choke on them before you get any answers from me, craven. Turncloak.”

Uncle Aeron was relentless. “When he spits on you, he spits on all of us. He spits on the Drowned God. He must die.”

“My father gave me the command here, Uncle.”

“And sent me to counsel YOU.”

And to watch me. Theon dare not push matters too far with his uncle. The command was his, yes, but his men had a faith in the Drowned God that they did not have in him, and they were terrified of Aeron Damphair. I cannot fault them for that.

“You’ll lose your head for this, Greyjoy. The crows will eat the jelly of your eyes.” Benfred tried to spit again, but only managed a little blood. “The Others bugger your wet god.”

Tallhart, you’ve spit away your life, Theon thought. “Stygg, silence him,” he said.

They forced Benfred to his knees. Werlag tore the rabbitskin off his belt and jammed it between his teeth to stop his shouting. Stygg unlimbered his axe.

“No,” Aeron Damphair declared. “He must be given to the god. The old way.”

What does it matter? Dead is dead. “Take him, then.”

“You will come as well. You command here. The offering should come from you.”

That was more than Theon could stomach. “You are the priest, Uncle, I leave the god to you. Do me the same kindness and leave the battles to me.” He waved his hand, and Werlag and Stygg began to drag their captive off toward the shore. Aeron Damphair gave his nephew a reproachful look, then followed. Down to the pebbled beach they would go, to drown Benfred Tallhart in salt water. The old way.

Perhaps it’s a kindness, Theon told himself as he stalked off in the other direction. Stygg was hardly the most expert of headsmen, and Benfred had a neck thick as a boar’s, heavy with muscle and fat. I used to mock him for it, just to see how angry I could make him, he remembered. That had been, what, three years past? When Ned Stark had ridden to Torrhen’s Square to see Ser Helman, Theon had accompanied him and spent a fortnight in Benfred’s company.

He could hear the rough noises of victory from the crook in the road where the battle had been fought... if you’d go so far as to call it a battle. More like slaughtering sheep, if truth be told. Sheep fleeced in steel, but sheep nonetheless.

Climbing a jumble of stone, Theon looked down on the dead men and dying horses. The horses had deserved better. Tymor and his brothers had gathered up what mounts had come through the fight unhurt, while Urzen and Black Lorren silenced the animals too badly wounded to be saved. The rest of his men were looting the corpses. Gevin Harlaw knelt on a dead man's chest, sawing off his finger to get at a ring. Paying the iron price. My lord father would approve. Theon thought of seeking out the bodies of the two men he'd slain himself to see if they had any jewelry worth the taking, but the notion left a bitter taste in his mouth. He could imagine what Eddard Stark would have said. Yet that thought made him angry too. Stark is dead and rotting, and naught to me, he reminded himself.

Old Botley, who was called Fishwhiskers, sat scowling by his pile of plunder while his three sons added to it. One of them was in a shoving match with a fat man named Todric, who was reeling among the slain with a horn of ale in one hand and an axe in the other, clad in a cloak of white foxfur only slightly stained by the blood of its previous owner.

Drunk, Theon decided, watching him bellow. It was said that the ironmen of old had oft been blood-drunk in battle, so berserk that they felt no pain and feared no foe, but this was a common ale-drunk.

"Wex, my bow and quiver." The boy ran and fetched them. Theon bent the bow and slipped the string into its notches as Todric knocked down the Botley boy and flung ale into his eyes. Fishwhiskers leapt up cursing, but Theon was quicker. He drew on the hand that clutched the drinking horn, figuring to give them a shot to talk about, but Todric spoiled it by lurching to one side just as he loosed. The arrow took him through the belly.

The looters stopped to gape. Theon lowered his bow. "No drunkards, I said, and no squabbles over plunder." On his knees, Todric was dying noisily. "Botley, silence him." Fishwhiskers and his sons were quick to obey. They slit Todric's throat as he kicked feebly, and were stripping him of cloak and rings and weapons before he was even dead.

Now they know I mean what I say. Lord Balon might have given him the command, but Theon knew that some of his men saw only a soft boy from the green lands when they looked at him. "Anyone else have a thirst?" No one replied. "Good." He kicked at Benfred's fallen banner, clutched in the dead hand of the squire who'd borne it. A rabbitskin had been tied below the flag. Why rabbitskins? he had meant to ask, but being spat on had made him forget his questions. He tossed his bow back to Wex and strode off, remembering how elated he'd felt after the Whispering Wood, and wondering why this did not taste as sweet. Tallhart, you bloody overproud fool, you never even sent out a scout.

They'd been joking and even singing as they'd come on, the three trees of Tallhart streaming above them while rabbitskins flapped stupidly from the points of their lances. The archers concealed behind the gorse had spoiled the song with a rain of arrows, and Theon himself had led his men-at-arms out to finish the butcher's work with dagger, axe, and warhammer. He had ordered their leader spared for questioning.

Only he had not expected it to be Benfred Tallhart.

His limp body was being dragged from the surf when Theon returned to his Sea Bitch. The masts of his longships stood outlined against the sky along the pebbled beach. Of the fishing village, nothing remained but cold ashes that stank when it rained. The men had been put to the sword, all but a handful that Theon had allowed to flee to bring the word to Torrhen's Square. Their wives and daughters had been claimed for salt wives, those who were young enough and fair. The crones and the ugly ones had simply been raped and killed, or taken for thralls if they had useful skills and did not seem likely to cause trouble.

Theon had planned that attack as well, bringing his ships up to the shore in the chill darkness before the dawn and leaping from the prow with a longaxe in his hand to lead his men into the sleeping village. He did not like the taste of any of this, but what choice did he have?

His thrice-damned sister was sailing her Black Wind north even now, sure to win a castle of her own. Lord Balon had let no word of the hosting escape the Iron Islands, and Theon's bloody work along the Stony Shore would be put down to sea raiders out for plunder. The northmen would not realize their true peril, not until the hammers fell on Deepwood Motte and Moat Cailin. And after all is done and won, they will make songs for that bitch Asha, and forget that I was even here. That is, if he allowed it.

Dagmer Cleftjaw stood by the high carved prow of his longship, Foamdrinker. Theon had assigned him the task of guarding the ships; otherwise men would have called it Dagmer's victory, not his. A more prickly man might have taken that for a slight, but the Cleftjaw had only laughed.

"The day is won," Dagmer called down. "And yet you do not smile, boy. The living should smile, for the dead cannot." He smiled himself to show how it was done. It made for a hideous sight. Under a snowy white mane of hair, Dagmer Cleftjaw had the most gut-churning scar Theon had ever seen, the legacy of the longaxe that had near killed him as a boy. The blow had splintered his jaw, shattered his front teeth, and left him four lips where other men had but two. A shaggy beard covered his cheeks and neck, but the hair would not grow over the scar, so a shiny seam of puckered, twisted flesh divided his face like a crevasse through a snowfield. "We could hear them singing," the old warrior said. "It was a good song, and they sang it bravely."

"They sang better than they fought. Harps would have done them as much good as their lances did."

"How many men are lost?"

"Of ours?" Theon shrugged. "Todric. I killed him for getting drunk and fighting over loot."

"Some men are born to be killed." A lesser man might have been afraid to show a smile as frightening as his, yet Dagmer grinned more often and more broadly than Lord Balon ever had.

Ugly as it was, that smile brought back a hundred memories. Theon had seen it often as a boy, when he'd jumped a horse over a mossy wall, or flung an axe and split a target square. He'd seen it when he blocked a blow from Dagmer's sword, when he put an arrow through a seagull on the wing, when he took the tiller in hand and guided a longship safely through a snarl of foaming rocks. He gave me more smiles than my father and Eddard Stark together. Even Robb... he ought

to have won a smile the day he'd saved Bran from that wildling, but instead he'd gotten a scolding, as if he were some cook who'd burned the stew.

"You and I must talk, Uncle," Theon said. Dagmer was no true uncle, only a sworn man with perhaps a pinch of Greyjoy blood four or five lives back, and that from the wrong side of the blanket. Yet Theon had always called him uncle nonetheless.

"Come onto my deck, then." There were no lords from Dagmer, not when he stood on his own deck. On the Iron Islands, every captain was a king aboard his own ship.

He climbed the plank to the deck of the Foamdrinker in four long strides, and Dagmer led him back to the cramped aft cabin, where the old man poured a horn of sour ale and offered Theon the same. He declined. "We did not capture enough horses. A few, but... well, I'll make do with what I have, I suppose. Fewer men means more glory."

"What need do we have of horses?" Like most ironmen, Dagmer preferred to fight on foot or from the deck of a ship. "Horses will only shit on our decks and get in our way."

"If we sailed, yes," Theon admitted. "I have another plan." He watched the other carefully to see how he would take that. Without the Cleftjaw he could not hope to succeed. Command or no, the men would never follow him if both Aeron and Dagmer opposed him, and he had no hope of winning over the sour-faced priest.

"Your lord father commanded us to harry the coast, no more." Eyes pale as sea foam watched Theon from under those shaggy white eyebrows. Was it disapproval he saw there, or a spark of interest? The latter, he thought... hoped...

"You are my father's man."

"His best man, and always have been."

Pride, Theon thought. He is proud, I must use that, his pride will be the key. "There is no man in the Iron Islands half so skilled with spear or sword."

"You have been too long away, boy. When you left, it was as you say, but I am grown old in Lord Greyjoy's service. The singers call Andrik best now. Andrik the Unsmiling, they name him. A giant of a man. He serves Lord Drumm of Old Wyk. And Black Lorren and Qarl the Maid are near as dread."

"This Andrik may be a great fighter, but men do not fear him as they fear you."

"Aye, that's so," Dagmer said. The fingers curled around the drinking horn were heavy with rings, gold and silver and bronze, set with chunks of sapphire and garnet and dragonglass. He had paid the iron price for every one, Theon knew.

"If I had a man like you in my service, I should not waste him on this child's business of harrying and burning. This is no work for Lord Balon's best man."

Dagmer's grin twisted his lips apart and showed the brown splinters of his teeth. "Nor for his trueborn son?" He hooted. "I know you too well, Theon. I saw you take your first step, helped you bend your first bow. 'Tis not me who feels wasted."

"By rights I should have my sister's command," he admitted, uncomfortably aware of how peevish that sounded.

“You take this business too hard, boy. It is only that your lord father does not know you. With your brothers dead and you taken by the wolves, your sister was his solace. He learned to rely on her, and she has never failed him.”

“Nor have I. The Starks knew my worth. I was one of Brynden Blackfish’s picked scouts, and I charged with the first wave in the Whispering Wood. I was that close to crossing swords with the Kingslayer himself.” Theon held his hands two feet apart. “Daryn Hornwood came between us, and died for it.”

“Why do you tell me this?” Dagmer asked. “It was me who put your first sword in your hand. I know you are no craven.”

“Does my father?”

The hoary old warrior looked as if he had bitten into something he did not like the taste of. “It is only... Theon, the Boy Wolf is your friend, and these Starks had you for ten years.”

“I am no Stark.” Lord Eddard saw to that. “I am a Greyjoy, and I mean to be my father’s heir. How can I do that unless I prove myself with some great deed? “

“You are young. Other wars will come, and you shall do your great deeds. For now, we are commanded to harry the Stony Shore.”

“Let my uncle Aeron see to it. I’ll give him six ships, all but Foamdrinker and Sea Bitch, and he can burn and drown to his god’s surfeit.”

“The command was given you, not Aeron Damphair.”

“So long as the harrying is done, what does it matter? No priest could do what I mean to, nor what I ask of you. I have a task that only Dagmer Cleftjaw can accomplish.”

Dagmer took a long draught from his horn. “Tell me.”

He is tempted, Theon thought. He likes this reaver’s work no better than I do. “If my sister can take a castle, so can I.”

“Asha has four or five times the men we do.”

Theon allowed himself a sly smile. “But we have four times the wits, and five times the courage.”

“Your father-”

“-will thank me, when I hand him his kingdom. I mean to do a deed that the harpers will sing of for a thousand years.”

He knew that would give Dagmer pause. A singer had made a song about the axe that cracked his jaw in half, and the old man loved to hear it. Whenever he was in his cups he would call for a reaving song, something loud and stormy that told of dead heroes and deeds of wild valor. His hair is white and his teeth are rotten, but he still has a taste for glory.

“What would my part be in this scheme of yours, boy?” Dagmer Cleftjaw asked after a long silence, and Theon knew he had won.

“To strike terror into the heart of the foe, as only one of your name could do. You’ll take the great part of our force and march on Torrhen’s Square. Helman Tallhart took his best men south, and Benfred died here with their sons. His uncle Leobald will remain, with some small garrison.”

If I had been able to question Benfred, I would know just how small. “Make no secret of your approach. Sing all the brave songs you like. I want them to close their gates.”

“Is this Torrhen’s Square a strong keep?”

“Strong enough. The walls are stone, thirty feet high, with square towers at each corner and a square keep within.”

“Stone walls cannot be fired. How are we to take them? We do not have the numbers to storm even a small castle.”

“You will make camp outside their walls and set to building catapults and siege engines.”

“That is not the Old Way. Have you forgotten? Ironmen fight with swords and axes, not by flinging rocks. There is no glory in starving out a foeman.”

“Leobald will not know that. When he sees you raising siege towers, his old woman’s blood will run cold, and he will bleat for help. Stay your archers, Uncle, and let the raven fly. The castellan at Winterfell is a brave man, but age has stiffened his wits as well as his limbs. When he learns that one of his king’s bannermen is under attack by the fearsome Dagmer Cleftjaw, he will summon his strength and ride to Tallhart’s aid. It is his duty. Ser Rodrik is nothing if not dutiful.”

“Any force he summons will be larger than mine,” Dagmer said, “and these old knights are more cunning than you think, or they would never have lived to see their first grey hair. You set us a battle we cannot hope to win, Theon. This Torrhen’s Square will never fall.”

Theon smiled. “It’s not Torrhen’s Square I mean to take.”

ARYA

Confusion and clangor ruled the castle. Men stood on the beds of wagons loading casks of wine, sacks of flour, and bundles of new-fledged arrows. Smiths straightened swords, knocked dents from breastplates, and shod destriers and pack mules alike. Mail shirts were tossed in barrels of sand and rolled across the lumpy surface of the Flowstone Yard to scour them clean. Weese's women had twenty cloaks to mend, a hundred more to wash. The high and humble crowded into the sept together to pray. Outside the walls, tents and pavilions were coming down. Squires tossed pails of water over cookfires, while soldiers took out their oilstones to give their blades one last good lick. The noise was a swelling tide: horses blowing and whickering, lords shouting commands, men-at-arms trading curses, camp followers squabbling.

Lord Tywin Lannister was marching at last.

Ser Addam Marbrand was the first of the captains to depart, a day before the rest. He made a gallant show of it, riding a spirited red courser whose mane was the same copper color as the long hair that streamed past Ser Addam's shoulders. The horse was barded in bronze-colored trappings dyed to match the rider's cloak and emblazoned with the burning tree. Some of the castle women sobbed to see him go. Weese said he was a great horseman and sword fighter, Lord Tywin's most daring commander.

I hope he dies, Arya thought as she watched him ride out the gate, his men streaming after him in a double column. I hope they all die. They were going to fight Robb, she knew. Listening to the talk as she went about her work, Arya had learned that Robb had won some great victory in the west. He'd burned Lannisport, some said, or else he meant to burn it. He'd captured Casterly Rock and put everyone to the sword, or he was besieging the Golden Tooth... but something had happened, that much was certain.

Weese had her running messages from dawn to dusk. Some of them even took her beyond the castle walls, out into the mud and madness of the camp. I could flee, she thought as a wagon rumbled past her. I could hop on the back of a wagon and hide, or fall in with the camp followers, no one would stop me. She might have done it if not for Weese. He'd told them more than once what he'd do to anyone who tried to run off on him. "It won't be no beating, oh, no. I won't lay a finger on you. I'll just save you for the Qohorik, yes I will, I'll save you for the Crippler. Vargo Hoat his name is, and when he gets back he'll cut off your feet." Maybe if Weese were dead, Arya thought... but not when she was with him. He could look at you and smell what you were thinking, he always said so.

Weese never imagined she could read, though, so he never bothered to seal the messages he gave her. Arya peeked at them all, but they were never anything good, just stupid stuff sending this cart to the granary and that one to the armory. One was a demand for payment on a gambling debt, but the knight she gave it to couldn't read. When she told him what it said he tried to hit her, but Arya ducked under the blow, snatched a silver-banded drinking horn off his saddle, and darted away. The knight roared and came after her, but she slid between two wayns, wove through a crowd of archers, and jumped a latrine trench. In his mail he couldn't keep up. When

she gave the horn to Weese, he told her that a smart little Weasel like her deserved a reward. “I’ve got my eye on a plump crisp capon to sup on tonight. We’ll share it, me and you. You’ll like that.”

Everywhere she went, Arya searched for Jaqen H’ghar, wanting to whisper another name to him before those she hated were all gone out of her reach, but amidst the chaos and confusion the Lorathi sellsword was not to be found. He still owed her two deaths, and she was worried she would never get them if he rode off to battle with the rest. Finally she worked up the courage to ask one of the gate guards if he’d gone. “One of Lorch’s men, is he?” the man said. “He won’t be going, then. His lordship’s named Ser Amory castellan of Harrenhal. That whole lot’s staying right here, to hold the castle. The Bloody Mummer’s will be left as well, to do the foraging. That goat Vargo Hoat is like to spit, him and Lorch have always hated each other.”

The Mountain would be leaving with Lord Tywin, though. He would command the van in battle, which meant that Dunsen, Polliver, and Raff would all slip between her fingers unless she could find Jaqen and have him kill one of them before they left.

“Weasel,” Weese said that afternoon. “Get to the armory and tell Lucan that Ser Lyonel notched his sword in practice and needs a new one. Here’s his mark.” He handed her a square of paper. “Be quick about it now, he’s to ride with Ser Kevan Lannister.”

Arya took the paper and ran. The armory adjoined the castle smithy, a long high-roofed tunnel of a building with twenty forges built into its walls and long stone water troughs for tempering the steel. Half of the forges were at work when she entered. The walls rang with the sound of hammers, and burly men in leather aprons stood sweating in the sullen heat as they bent over bellows and anvils. When she spied Gendry, his bare chest was slick with sweat, but the blue eyes under the heavy black hair had the stubborn look she remembered. Arya didn’t know that she even wanted to talk to him. It was his fault they’d all been caught. “Which one is Lucan?” She thrust out the paper. “I’m to get a new sword for Ser Lyonel.”

“Never mind about Ser Lyonel.” He drew her aside by the arm. “Last night Hot Pie asked me if I heard you yell Winterfell back at the holdfast, when we were all fighting on the wall.”

“I never did!”

“Yes you did. I heard you too.”

“Everyone was yelling stuff,” Arya said defensively. “Hot Pie yelled hot pie. He must have yelled it a hundred times.”

“It’s what you yelled that matters. I told Hot Pie he should clean the wax out of his ears, that all you yelled was Go to hell! If he asks you, you better say the same.”

“I will,” she said, even though she thought go to hell was a stupid thing to yell. She didn’t dare tell Hot Pie who she really was. Maybe I should say Hot Pie’s name to Jaqen.

“I’ll get Lucan,” Gendry said.

Lucan grunted at the writing (though Arya did not think he could read it), and pulled down a heavy longsword. “This is too good for that oaf, and you tell him I said so,” he said as he gave her the blade.

“I will,” she lied. If she did any such thing, Weese would beat her bloody. Lucan could deliver his own insults.

The longsword was a lot heavier than Needle had been, but Arya liked the feel of it. The weight of steel in her hands made her feel stronger. Maybe I’m not a water dancer yet, but I’m not a mouse either. A mouse couldn’t use a sword but I can. The gates were open, soldiers coming and going, drays rolling in empty and going out creaking and swaying under their loads. She thought about going to the stables and telling them that Ser Lyonel wanted a new horse. She had the paper, the stableboys wouldn’t be able to read it any better than Lucan had. I could take the horse and the sword and just ride out. If the guards tried to stop me I’d show them the paper and say I was bringing everything to Ser Lyonel. She had no notion what Ser Lyonel looked like or where to find him, though. If they questioned her, they’d know, and then Weese... Weese...

As she chewed her lip, trying not to think about how it would feel to have her feet cut off, a group of archers in leather jerkins and iron helms went past, their bows slung across their shoulders. Arya heard snatches of their talk.

“Giants I tell you, he’s got giants twenty foot tall come down from beyond the Wall, follow him like dogs...”

“...not natural, coming on them so fast, in the night and all. He’s more wolf than man, all them Starks are...”

“Shit on your wolves and giants, the boy’d piss his pants if he knew we was coming. He wasn’t man enough to march on Harrenhal, was he? Ran Vother way, didn’t he? He’d run now if he knew what was best for him.”

“So you say, but might be the boy knows something we don’t, maybe it’s us ought to be run...”

Yes, Arya thought. Yes, it’s you who ought to run, you and Lord Tywin and the Mountain and Ser Addam and Ser Amory and stupid Ser Lyonel whoever he is, all of you better run or my brother will kill you, he’s a Stark, he’s more wolf than man, and so am I.

“Weasel.” Weese’s voice cracked like a whip. She never saw where he came from, but suddenly he was right in front of her. “Give me that. Took you long enough.” He snatched the sword from her fingers, and dealt her a stinging slap with the back of his hand. “Next time be quicker about it.”

For a moment she had been a wolf again, but Weese’s slap took it all away and left her with nothing but the taste of her own blood in her mouth. She’d bitten her tongue when he hit her. She hated him for that.

“You want another?” Weese demanded. “You’ll get it too. I’ll have none of your insolent looks. Get down to the brewhouse and tell Tuffleberry that I have two dozen barrels for him, but he better send his lads to fetch them or I’ll find someone wants ‘em worse.” Arya started off, but not quick enough for Weese. “You run if you want to eat tonight,” he shouted, his promises of a plump crisp capon already forgotten. “And don’t be getting lost again, or I swear I’ll beat you bloody.”

You won’t, Arya thought. You won’t ever again. But she ran. The old gods of the north must have been guiding her steps. Halfway to the brewhouse, as she passing under the stone bridge

that arched between Widow's Tower and Kingspyre, she heard harsh, growling laughter. Rorge came around a corner with three other men, the manticores badge of Ser Amory sewn over their hearts. When he saw her, he stopped and grinned, showing a mouthful of crooked brown teeth under the leather flap he wore sometimes to cover the hole in his face. "Yoren's little cunt," he called her. "Guess we know why that black bastard wanted you on the Wall, don't we?" He laughed again, and the others laughed with him. "Where's your stick now?" Rorge demanded suddenly, the smile gone as quick as it had come. "Seems to me I promised to fuck you with it." He took a step toward her. Arya edged backward. "Not so brave now that I'm not in chains, are you?"

"I saved you." She kept a good yard between them, ready to run quick as a snake if he made a grab for her.

"Owe you another fucking for that, seems like. Did Yoren pump your cunny, or did he like that tight little ass better?"

"I'm looking for Jaqen," she said. "There's a message."

Rorge halted. Something in his eyes... could it be that he was scared of Jaqen H'ghar? "The bathhouse. Get out of my way."

Arya whirled and ran, swift as a deer, her feet flying over the cobbles all the way to the bathhouse. She found Jaqen soaking in a tub, steam rising around him as a serving girl sluiced hot water over his head. His long hair, red on one side and white on the other, fell down across his shoulders, wet and heavy.

She crept up quiet as a shadow, but he opened his eyes all the same. "She steals in on little mice feet, but a man hears," he said. How could he hear me? she wondered, and it seemed as if he heard that as well. "The scuff of leather on stone sings loud as warhorns to a man with open ears. Clever girls go barefoot."

"I have a message." Arya eyed the serving girl uncertainly. When she did not seem likely to go away, she leaned in until her mouth was almost touching his ear. "Weese," she whispered.

Jaqen H'ghar closed his eyes again, floating languid, half-asleep. "Tell his lordship a man shall attend him at his leisure." His hand moved suddenly, splashing hot water at her, and Arya had to leap back to keep from getting drenched.

When she told Tuffleberry what Weese had said, the brewer cursed loudly. "You tell Weese my lads got duties to attend to, and you tell him he's a pox-ridden bastard too, and the seven hells will freeze over before he gets another horn of my ale. I'll have them barrels within the hour or Lord Tywin will hear of it, see if he don't."

Weese cursed too when Arya brought back that message, even though she left out the pox-ridden bastard part. He fumed and threatened, but in the end he rounded up six men and sent them off grumbling to fetch the barrels down to the brewhouse.

Supper that evening was a thin stew of barley, onion, and carrots, with a wedge of stale brown bread. One of the women had taken to sleeping in Weese's bed, and she got a piece of ripe blue cheese as well, and a wing off the capon that Weese had spoken of that morning. He ate the rest himself, the grease running down in a shiny line through the boils that festered at the corner of

his mouth. The bird was almost gone when he glanced up from his trencher and saw Arya staring. "Weasel, come here."

A few mouthfuls of dark meat still clung to one thigh. He forgot, but now he's remembered, Arya thought. It made her feel bad for telling Jaqen to kill him. She got off the bench and went to the head of the table.

"I saw you looking at me." Weese wiped his fingers on the front of her shift. Then he grabbed her throat with one hand and slapped her with the other. "What did I tell you?" He slapped her again, backhand. "Keep those eyes to yourself, or next time I'll spoon one out and feed it to my bitch." A shove sent her stumbling to the floor. Her hem caught on a loose nail in the splintered wooden bench and ripped as she fell. "You'll mend that before you sleep," Weese announced as he pulled the last bit of meat off the capon. When he was finished he sucked his fingers noisily, and threw the bones to his ugly spotted dog.

"Weese," Arya whispered that night as she bent over the tear in her shift. "Dunsen, Polliver, Raff the Sweetling," she said, calling a name every time she pushed the bone needle through the undyed wool. "The Tickler and the Hound. Ser Gregor, Ser Amory, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, King Joffrey, Queen Cersei." She wondered how much longer she would have to include Weese in her prayer, and drifted off to sleep dreaming that on the morrow, when she woke, he'd be dead.

But it was the sharp toe of Weese's boot that woke her, as ever. The main strength of Lord Tywin's host would ride this day, he told them as they broke their fast on oatcakes. "Don't none of you be thinking how easy it'll be here once m'lord of Lannister is gone," he warned. "The castle won't grow no smaller, I promise you that, only now there'll be fewer hands to tend to it. You lot of slugabeds are going to learn what work is now, yes you are."

Not from you. Arya picked at her oaten cake. Weese frowned at her, as if he smelled her secret. Quickly she dropped her gaze to her food, and dared not raise her eyes again.

Pale light filled the yard when Lord Tywin Lannister took his leave of Harrenhal. Arya watched from an arched window halfway up the Wailing Tower. His charger wore a blanket of enameled crimson scales and gilded crinet and charnfron, while Lord Tywin himself sported a thick ermine cloak. His brother Ser Kevan looked near as splendid. No less than four standard-bearers went before them, carrying huge crimson banners emblazoned with the golden lion. Behind the Lannisters came their great lords and captains. Their banners flared and flapped, a pageant of color: red ox and golden mountain, purple unicorn and bantam rooster, brindled boar and badger, a silver ferret and a juggler in motley, stars and sunbursts, peacock and panther, chevron and dagger, black hood and blue beetle and green arrow.

Last of all came Ser Gregor Clegane in his grey plate steel, astride a stallion as bad-tempered as his rider. Polliver rode beside him, with the black dog standard in his hand and Gendry's horned helm on his head. He was a tall man, but he looked no more than a half-grown boy when he rode in his master's shadow.

A shiver crept up Arya's spine as she watched them pass under the great iron portcullis of Harrenhal. Suddenly she knew that she had made a terrible mistake. I'm so stupid, she thought. Weese did not matter, no more than Chiswyck had. These were the men who mattered, the ones

she ought to have killed. Last night she could have whispered any of them dead, if only she hadn't been so mad at Weese for hitting her and lying about the capon. Lord Tywin, why didn't I say Lord Tywin?

Perhaps it was not too late to change her mind. Weese was not killed yet. If she could find Jaqen, tell him...

Hurriedly, Arya ran down the twisting steps, her chores forgotten. She heard the rattle of chains as the portcullis was slowly lowered, its spikes sinking deep into the ground... and then another sound, a shriek of pain and fear.

A dozen people got there before her, though none was coming any too close. Arya squirmed between them. Weese was sprawled across the cobbles, his throat a red ruin, eyes gaping sightlessly up at a bank of grey cloud. His ugly spotted dog stood on his chest, lapping at the blood pulsing from his neck, and every so often ripping a mouthful of flesh out of the dead man's face.

Finally someone brought a crossbow and shot the spotted dog dead while she was worrying at one of Weese's ears.

"Damnedest thing," she heard a man say. "He had that bitch dog since she was a pup."

"This place is cursed," the man with the crossbow said.

"It's Harren's ghost, that's what it is," said Goodwife Amabel. "I'll not sleep here another night, I swear it."

Arya lifted her gaze from the dead man and his dead dog. Jaqen H'ghar was leaning up against the side of the Wailing Tower. When he saw her looking, he lifted a hand to his face and laid two fingers casually against his cheek.

CATELYN

Two days ride from Riverrun, a scout spied them watering their horses beside a muddy stream. Catelyn had never been so glad to see the twin tower badge of House Frey.

When she asked him to lead them to her uncle, he said, "The Blackfish is gone west with the king, my lady. Martyn Rivers commands the outriders in his stead."

"I see." She had met Rivers at the Twins; a baseborn son of Lord Walder Frey, half brother to Ser Perwyn. It did not surprise her to learn that Robb had struck at the heart of Lannister power; clearly he had been contemplating just that when he sent her away to treat with Renly. "Where is Rivers now?"

"His camp is two hours ride, my lady."

"Take us to him," she commanded. Brienne helped her back into her saddle, and they set out at once.

"Have you come from Bitterbridge, my lady?" the scout asked.

"No." She had not dared. With Renly dead, Catelyn had been uncertain of the reception she might receive from his young widow and her protectors. Instead she had ridden through the heart of the war, through fertile riverlands turned to blackened desert by the fury of the Lannisters, and each night her scouts brought back tales that made her ill. "Lord Renly is slain," she added.

"We'd hoped that tale was some Lannister lie, or—"

"Would that it were. My brother commands in Riverrun?"

"Yes, my lady. His Grace left Ser Edmure to hold Riverrun and guard his rear."

Gods grant him the strength to do so, Catelyn thought. And the wisdom as well. "Is there word from Robb in the west?"

"You have not heard?" The man seemed surprised. "His Grace won a great victory at Oxcross. Ser Stafford Lannister is dead, his host scattered."

Ser Wendel Manderly gave a whoop of pleasure, but Catelyn only nodded. Tomorrow's trials concerned her more than yesterday's triumphs.

Martyn Rivers had made his camp in the shell of a shattered holdfast, beside a roofless stable and a hundred fresh graves. He went to one knee when Catelyn dismounted. "Well met, my lady. Your brother charged us to keep an eye out for your party, and escort you back to Riverrun in all haste should we come upon you."

Catelyn scarce liked the sound of that. "Is it my father?"

"No, my lady. Lord Hoster is unchanged." Rivers was a ruddy man with scant resemblance to his half brothers. "It is only that we feared you might chance upon Lannister scouts. Lord Tywin has left Harrenhal and marches west with all his power."

"Rise," she told Rivers, frowning. Stannis Baratheon would soon be on the march as well, gods help them all. "How long until Lord Tywin is upon us?"

"Three days, perhaps four, it is hard to know. We have eyes out along all the roads, but it would be best not to linger."

Nor did they. Rivers broke his camp quickly and saddled up beside her, and they set off again, near fifty strong now, flying beneath the direwolf, the leaping trout, the twin towers.

Her men wanted to hear more of Robb's victory at Oxcross, and Rivers obliged. "There's a singer come to Riverrun, calls himself Rymund the Rhymer, he's made a song of the fight. Doubtless you'll hear it sung tonight, my lady. 'Wolf in the Night' this Rymund calls it." He went on to tell how the remnants of Ser Stafford's host had fallen back on Lannisport. Without siege engines there was no way to storm Casterly Rock, so the Young Wolf was paying the Lannisters back in kind for the devastation they'd inflicted on the riverlands. Lords Karstark and Glover were raiding along the coast, Lady Mormont had captured thousands of cattle and was driving them back toward Riverrun, while the Greatjon had seized the gold mines at Castamere, Nunn's Deep, and the Pendric Hills. Ser Wendel laughed. "Nothing's more like to bring a Lannister running than a threat to his gold."

"How did the king ever take the Tooth?" Ser Perwyn Frey asked his bastard brother. "That's a hard strong keep, and it commands the hill road. "

"He never took it. He slipped around it in the night. It's said the direwolf showed him the way, that Grey Wind of his. The beast sniffed out a goat track that wound down a defile and up along beneath a ridge, a crooked and stony way, yet wide enough for men riding single file. The Lannisters in their watchtowers got not so much a glimpse of them." Rivers lowered his voice. "There's some say that after the battle, the king cut out Stafford Lannister's heart and fed it to the wolf."

"I would not believe such tales," Catelyn said sharply. "My son is no savage."

"As you say, my lady. Still, it's no more than the beast deserved. That is no common wolf, that one. The Greatjon's been heard to say that the old gods of the north sent those direwolves to your children."

Catelyn remembered the day when her boys had found the pups in the late summer snows. There had been five, three male and two female for the five trueborn children of House Stark... and a sixth, white of fur and red of eye, for Ned's bastard son Jon Snow. No common wolves, she thought. No indeed.

That night as they made their camp, Brienne sought out her tent. "My lady, you are safely back among your own now, a day's ride from your brother's castle. Give me leave to go."

Catelyn should not have been surprised. The homely young woman had kept to herself all through their journey, spending most of her time with the horses, brushing out their coats and pulling stones from their shoes. She had helped Shadd cook and clean game as well, and soon proved that she could hunt as well as any. Any task Catelyn asked her to turn her hand to, Brienne had performed deftly and without complaint, and when she was spoken to she answered politely, but she never chattered, nor wept, nor laughed. She had ridden with them every day and slept among them every night without ever truly becoming one of them.

It was the same when she was with Renly, Catelyn thought. At the feast, in the melee, even in Renly's pavilion with her brothers of the Rainbow Guard. There are walls around this one higher than Winterfell's.

“If you left us, where would you go?” Catelyn asked her.

“Back,” Brienne said. “To Storm’s End.”

“Alone.” It was not a question.

The broad face was a pool of still water, giving no hint of what might live in the depths below.
“Yes.”

“You mean to kill Stannis.”

Brienne closed her thick callused fingers around the hilt of her sword.

The sword that had been his. “I swore a vow. Three times I swore. You heard me.”

“I did,” Catelyn admitted. The girl had kept the rainbow cloak when she discarded the rest of her bloodstained clothing, she knew. Brienne’s own things had been left behind during their flight, and she had been forced to clothe herself in odd bits of Ser Wendel’s spare garb, since no one else in their party had garments large enough to fit her. “Vows should be kept, I agree, but Stannis has a great host around him, and his own guards sworn to keep him safe.”

“I am not afraid of his guards. I am as good as any of them. I should never have fled.”

“Is that what troubles you, that some fool might call you craven?” She sighed. “Renly’s death was no fault of yours. You served him valiantly, but when you seek to follow him into the earth, you serve no one.” She stretched out a hand, to give what comfort a touch could give. “I know how hard it is-”

Brienne shook off her hand. “No one knows.”

“You’re wrong,” Catelyn said sharply. “Every morning, when I wake, I remember that Ned is gone. I have no skill with swords, but that does not mean that I do not dream of riding to King’s Landing and wrapping my hands around Cersei Lannister’s white throat and squeezing until her face turns black.”

The Beauty raised her eyes, the only part of her that was truly beautiful. “If you dream that, why would you seek to hold me back? Is it because of what Stannis said at the parley?”

Was it? Catelyn glanced across the camp. Two men were walking sentry, spears in hand. “I was taught that good men must fight evil in this world, and Renly’s death was evil beyond all doubt. Yet I was also taught that the gods make kings, not the swords of men. If Stannis is our rightful king-”

“He’s not. Robert was never the rightful king either, even Renly said as much. Jaime Lannister murdered the rightful king, after Robert killed his lawful heir on the Trident. Where were the gods then? The gods don’t care about men, no more than kings care about peasants.”

“A good king does care.”

“Lord Renly... His Grace, he... he would have been the best king, my lady, he was so good, he...”

“He is gone, Brienne,” she said, as gently as she could. “Stannis and Joffrey remain... and so does my son.”

“He wouldn’t... you’d never make a peace with Stannis, would you? Bend the knee? You wouldn’t...”

“I will tell you true, Brienne. I do not know. My son may be a king, but I am no queen ... only a mother who would keep her children safe, however she could.”

“I am not made to be a mother. I need to fight.”

“Then fight... but for the living, not the dead. Renly’s enemies are Robb’s enemies as well.”

Brienne stared at the ground and shuffled her feet. “I do not know your son, my lady.” She looked up. “I could serve you. If you would have me.”

Catelyn was startled. “Why me?”

The question seemed to trouble Brienne. “You helped me. In the pavilion... when they thought that I had... that I had... “

“You were innocent.”

“Even so, you did not have to do that. You could have let them kill me. I was nothing to you.”

Perhaps I did not want to be the only one who knew the dark truth of what had happened there, Catelyn thought. “Brienne, I have taken many wellborn ladies into my service over the years, but never one like you. I am no battle commander.”

“No, but you have courage. Not battle courage perhaps but... I don’t know... a kind of woman’s courage. And I think, when the time comes, you will not try and hold me back. Promise me that. That you will not hold me back from Stannis.”

Catelyn could still hear Stannis saying that Robb’s turn too would come in time. It was like a cold breath on the back of her neck. “When the time comes, I will not hold you back.”

The tall girl knelt awkwardly, unsheathed Renly’s longsword, and laid it at her feet. “Then I am yours, my lady. Your liege man, or... whatever you would have me be. I will shield your back and keep your counsel and give my life for yours, if need be. I swear it by the old gods and the new.”

“And I vow that you shall always have a place by my hearth and meat and mead at my table, and pledge to ask no service of you that might bring you into dishonor. I swear it by the old gods and the new. Arise.” As she clasped the other woman’s hands between her own, Catelyn could not help but smile. How many times did I watch Ned accept a man’s oath of service- She wondered what he would think if he could see her now.

They forded the Red Fork late the next day, upstream of Riverrun where the river made a wide loop and the waters grew muddy and shallow. The crossing was guarded by a mixed force of archers and pikemen wearing the eagle badge of the Mallisters. When they saw Catelyn’s banners, they emerged from behind their sharpened stakes and sent a man over from the far bank to lead her party across. “Slow and careful like, milady,” he warned as he took the bridle of her horse. “We’ve planted iron spikes under the water, y’see, and there’s caltrops scattered among them rocks there. It’s the same on all the fords, by your brother’s command.”

Edmure thinks to fight here. The realization gave her a queasy feeling in the bowels, but she held her tongue.

Between the Red Fork and the Tumblestone, they joined a stream of smallfolk making for the safety of Riverrun. Some were driving animals before them, others pulling wayns, but they made way as Catelyn rode past, and cheered her with cries of “Tully!” or “Stark!” Half a mile from the

liking. They say you threw wise and gentle Pycelle into the dungeons when he dared raise his voice against you. Some even claim that you mean to seize the Iron Throne for your own.”

“Yes, and I am a monster besides, hideous and misshapen, never forget that.” His hand coiled into a fist. “I’ve heard enough. We both have work to attend to. Leave me.”

Perhaps my lord father was right to despise me all these years, if this is the best I can achieve, Tyrion thought when he was alone. He stared down at the remains of his supper, his belly roiling at the sight of the cold greasy capon. Disgusted, he pushed it away, shouted for Pod, and sent the boy running to summon Varys and Bronn. My most trusted advisers are a eunuch and a sellsword, and my lady’s a whore. What does that say of me~

Bronn complained of the gloom when he arrived, and insisted on a fire in the hearth. It was blazing by the time Varys made his appearance. “Where have you been?” Tyrion demanded.

“About the king’s business, my sweet lord.”

“Ah, yes, the king,” Tyrion muttered. “My nephew is not fit to sit a privy, let alone the Iron Throne.”

Varys shrugged. “An apprentice must be taught his trade.”

“Half the ‘prentices on Reeking Lane could rule better than this king of yours.” Bronn seated himself across the table and pulled a wing off the capon.

Tyrion had made a practice of ignoring the sellsword’s frequent insolences, but tonight he found it galling. “I don’t recall giving you leave to finish my supper.”

“You didn’t look to be eating it,” Bronn said through a mouthful of meat. “City’s starving, it’s a crime to waste food. You have any wine?”

Next he’ll want me to pour it for him, Tyrion thought darkly. “You go too far,” he warned.

“And you never go far enough.” Bronn tossed the wingbone to the rushes. “Ever think how easy life would be if the other one had been born first?” He thrust his fingers inside the capon and tore off a handful of breast. “The weepy one, Tommen. Seems like he’d do whatever he was told, as a good king should.”

A chill crept down Tyrion’s spine as he realized what the sellsword was hinting at. If Tommen was king...

There was only one way Tommen would become king. No, he could not even think it. Joffrey was his own blood, and Jaime’s son as much as Cersei’s. “I could have your head off for saying that,” he told Bronn, but the sellsword only laughed.

“Friends,” said Varys, “quarreling will not serve us. I beg you both, take heart.”

“Whose?” asked Tyrion sourly. He could think of several tempting choices.

DAVOS

Ser Cortnay Penrose wore no armor. He sat a sorrel stallion, his standard-bearer a dapple grey. Above them flapped Baratheon's crowned stag and the crossed quills of Penrose, white on a russet field. Ser Cortnay's spade-shaped beard was russet as well, though he'd gone wholly bald on top. If the size and splendor of the king's party impressed him, it did not show on that weathered face.

They trotted up with much clinking of chain and rattle of plate. Even Davos wore mail, though he could not have said why; his shoulders and lower back ached from the unaccustomed weight. It made him feel cumbered and foolish, and he wondered once more why he was here. It is not for me to question the king's commands, and yet...

Every man of the party was of better birth and higher station than Davos Seaworth, and the great lords glittered in the morning sun. Silvered steel and gold inlay brightened their armor, and their warhelms were crested in a riot of silken plumes, feathers, and cunningly wrought heraldic beasts with gemstone eyes. Stannis himself looked out of place in this rich and royal company. Like Davos, the king was plainly garbed in wool and boiled leather, though the circlet of red gold about his temples lent him a certain grandeur. Sunlight flashed off its flame-shaped points whenever he moved his head.

This was the closest Davos had come to His Grace in the eight days since Black Betha had joined the rest of the fleet off Storm's End. He'd sought an audience within an hour of his arrival, only to be told that the king was occupied. The king was often occupied, Davos learned from his son Devan, one of the royal squires. Now that Stannis Baratheon had come into his power, the lordlings buzzed around him like flies round a corpse. He looks half a corpse too, years older than when I left Dragonstone. Devan said the king scarcely slept of late. "Since Lord Renly died, he has been troubled by terrible nightmares," the boy had confided to his father. "Maester's potions do not touch them. Only the Lady Melisandre can soothe him to sleep."

Is that why she shares his pavilion now? Davos wondered. To pray with him? Or does she have another way to soothe him to sleep? It was an unworthy question, and one he dared not ask, even of his own son. Devan was a good boy, but he wore the flaming heart proudly on his doublet, and his father had seen him at the nightfires as dusk fell, beseeching the Lord of Light to bring the dawn. He is the king's squire, he told himself, it is only to be expected that he would take the king's god.

Davos had almost forgotten how high and thick the walls of Storm's End loomed up close. King Stannis halted beneath them, a few feet from Ser Cortnay and his standard-bearer. "Ser," he said with stiff courtesy. He made no move to dismount.

"My lord." That was less courteous, but not unexpected.

"It is customary to grant a king the style Your Grace," announced Lord Florent. A red gold fox poked its shining snout out from his breastplate through a circle of lapis lazuli flowers. Very tall, very courtly, and very rich, the Lord of Brightwater Keep had been the first of Renly's bannermen to declare for Stannis, and the first to renounce his old gods and take up the Lord of

Light. Stannis had left his queen on Dragonstone along with her uncle Axell, but the queen's men were more numerous and powerful than ever, and Alester Florent was the foremost.

Ser Cortnay Penrose ignored him, preferring to address Stannis. "This is a notable company. The great lords Estermont, Errol, and Varner. Ser Jon of the green-apple Fossoways and Ser Bryan of the red. Lord Caron and Ser Guyard of King Renly's Rainbow Guard... and the puissant Lord Alester Florent of Brightwater, to be sure. Is that your Onion Knight I spy to the rear? Well met, Ser Davos. I fear I do not know the lady."

"I am named Melisandre, ser." She alone came unarmored, but for her flowing red robes. At her throat the great ruby drank the daylight. "I serve your king, and the Lord of Light."

"I wish you well of them, my lady," Ser Cortnay answered, "but I bow to other gods, and a different king."

"There is but one true king, and one true god," announced Lord Florent.

"Are we here to dispute theology, my lord? Had I known, I would have brought a septon."

"You know full well why we are here," said Stannis. "You have had a fortnight to consider my offer. You sent your ravens. No help has come. Nor will it. Storm's End stands alone, and I am out of patience. One last time, ser, I command you to open your gates, and deliver me that which is mine by rights."

"And the terms?" asked Ser Cortnay.

"Remain as before," said Stannis. "I will pardon you for your treason, as I have pardoned these lords you see behind me. The men of your garrison will be free to enter my service or to return unmolested to their homes. You may keep your weapons and as much property as a man can carry. I will require your horses and pack animals, however."

"And what of Edric Storm?"

"My brother's bastard must be surrendered to me."

"Then my answer is still no, my lord."

The king clenched his jaw. He said nothing.

Melisandre spoke instead. "May the Lord of Light protect you in your darkness, Ser Cortnay."

"May the Others bugger your Lord of Light," Penrose spat back, "and wipe his arse with that rag you bear."

Lord Alester Florent cleared his throat. "Ser Cortnay, mind your tongue. His Grace means the boy no harm. The child is his own blood, and mine as well. My niece Delena was the mother, as all men know. If you will not trust to the king, trust to me. You know me for a man of honor—"

"I know you for a man of ambition," Ser Cortnay broke in. "A man who changes kings and gods the way I change my boots. As do these other turncloaks I see before me."

An angry clamor went up from the king's men. He is not far wrong, Davos thought. Only a short time before, the Fossoways, Guyard Mon rigen, and the Lords Caron, Varner, Errol, and Estermont had all belonged to Renly. They had sat in his pavilion, helped him make his battle plans, plotted how Stannis might be brought low. And Lord Florent had been with them—he might be Queen Selyse's own uncle, but that had not kept the Lord of Brightwater from bending his knee to Renly when Renly's star was rising.

Bryce Caron walked his horse forward a few paces, his long rainbowstriped cloak twisting in the wind off the bay. “No man here is a turncloak, ser. My fealty belongs to Storm’s End, and King Stannis is its rightful lord... and our true king. He is the last of House Baratheon, Robert’s heir and Renly’s.”

“If that is so, why is the Knight of Flowers not among you? And where is Mathis Rowan? Randyll Tarly? Lady Oakheart? Why are they not here in your company, they who loved Renly best? Where is Brienne of Tarth, I ask you?”

“That one?” Ser Guyard Morrigen laughed harshly. “She ran. As well she might. Hers was the hand that slew the king.”

“A lie,” Ser Cortnay said. “I knew Brienne when she was no more than a girl playing at her father’s feet in Evenfall Hall, and I knew her still better when the Evenstar sent her here to Storm’s End. She loved Renly Baratheon from the first moment she laid eyes on him, a blind man could see it.”

“To be sure,” declared Lord Florent airily, “and she would scarcely be the first maid maddened to murder by a man who spurned her. Though for my own part, I believe it was Lady Stark who slew the king. She had journeyed all the way from Riverrun to plead for an alliance, and Renly had refused her. No doubt she saw him as a danger to her son, and so removed him.”

“It was Brienne,” insisted Lord Caron. “Ser Emmon Cuy swore as much before he died. You have my oath on that, Ser Cortnay.”

Contempt thickened Ser Cortnay’s voice. “And what is that worth? You wear your cloak of many colors, I see. The one Renly gave you when you swore your oath to protect him. If he is dead, how is it you are not?” He turned his scorn on Guyard Morrigen. “I might ask the same of you, ser. Guyard the Green, yes? Of the Rainbow Guard? Sworn to give his own life for his king’s? If I had such a cloak, I would be ashamed to wear it.”

Morrigen bristled. “Be glad this is a parley, Penrose, or I would have your tongue for those words.”

“And cast it in the same fire where you left your manhood?”

“Enough!” Stannis said. “The Lord of Light willed that my brother die for his treason. Who did the deed matters not.”

“Not to you, perhaps,” said Ser Cortnay. “I have heard your proposal, Lord Stannis. Now here is mine.” He pulled off his glove and flung it full in the king’s face. “Single combat. Sword, lance, or any weapon you care to name. Or if you fear to hazard your magic sword and royal skin against an old man, name you a champion, and I shall do the same.” He gave Guyard Morrigen and Bryce Caron a scathing look. “Either of these pups would do nicely, I should think.”

Ser Guyard Morrigen grew dark with fury. “I will take up the gage, if it please the king.”

“As would I” Bryce Caron looked to Stannis.

The king ground his teeth. “No.”

Ser Cortnay did not seem surprised. “Is it the justice of your cause you doubt, my lord, or the strength of your arm? Are you afraid I’ll piss on your burning sword and put it out?”

“Do you take me for an utter fool, ser?” asked Stannis. “I have twenty thousand men. You are besieged by land and sea. Why would I choose single combat when my eventual victory is certain?” The king pointed a finger at him. “I give you fair warning. If you force me to take my castle by storm, you may expect no mercy. I will hang you for traitors, every one of you.”

“As the gods will it. Bring on your storm, my lord-and recall, if you do, the name of this castle.” Ser Cortnay gave a pull on his reins and rode back toward the gate.

Stannis said no word, but turned his horse around and started back toward his camp. The others followed. “If we storm these walls thousands will die,” fretted ancient Lord Estermont, who was the king’s grandfather on his mother’s side. “Better to hazard but a single life, surely? Our cause is righteous, so the gods must surely bless our champion’s arms with victory.”

God, old man, thought Davos. You forget, we have only one now, Melisandre’s Lord of Light.

Ser Jon Fossoway said, “I would gladly take this challenge myself, though I’m not half the swordsman Lord Caron is, or Ser Guyard. Renly left no notable knights at Storm’s End. Garrison duty is for old men and green boys.”

Lord Caron agreed. “An easy victory, to be sure. And what glory, to win Storm’s End with a single stroke!”

Stannis raked them all with a look. “You chatter like magpies, and with less sense. I will have quiet.” The king’s eyes fell on Davos. “Ser. Ride with me.” He spurred his horse away from his followers. Only Melisandre kept pace, bearing the great standard of the fiery heart with the crowned stag within. As if it had been swallowed whole.

Davos saw the looks that passed between the lordlings as he rode past them to join the king. These were no onion knights, but proud men from houses whose names were old in honor. Somehow he knew that Renly had never chided them in such a fashion. The youngest of the Baratheons had been born with a gift for easy courtesy that his brother sadly lacked.

He eased back to a slow trot when his horse came up beside the king’s. “Your Grace.” Seen at close hand, Stannis looked worse than Davos had realized from afar. His face had grown haggard, and he had dark circles under his eyes.

“A smuggler must be a fair judge of men,” the king said. “What do you make of this Ser Cortnay Penrose?”

“A stubborn man,” said Davos carefully.

“Hungry for death, I call it. He throws my pardon in my face. Aye, and throws his life away in the bargain, and the lives of every man inside those walls. Single combat?” The king snorted in derision. “No doubt he mistook me for Robert.”

“More like he was desperate. What other hope does he have?”

“None. The castle will fall. But how to do it quickly?” Stannis brooded on that for a moment. Under the steady clop-clop of hooves, Davos could hear the faint sound of the king grinding his teeth. “Lord Alester urges me to bring old Lord Penrose here. Ser Cortnay’s father. You know the man, I believe?”

“When I came as your envoy, Lord Penrose received me more courteously than most,” Davos said. “He is an old done man, sire. Sickly and failing.”

“Florent would have him fail more visibly. In his son’s sight, with a noose about his neck.”

It was dangerous to oppose the queen’s men, but Davos had vowed always to tell his king the truth. “I think that would be ill done, my liege. Ser Cortnay will watch his father die before he would ever betray his trust. It would gain us nothing, and bring dishonor to our cause.”

“What dishonor?” Stannis bristled. “Would you have me spare the lives of traitors?”

“You have spared the lives of those behind us.”

“Do you scold me for that, smuggler?”

“It is not my place.” Davos feared he had said too much.

The king was relentless. “You esteem this Penrose more than you do my lords bannermen. Why?”

“He keeps faith.”

“A misplaced faith in a dead usurper.”

“Yes,” Davos admitted, “but still, he keeps faith.”

“As those behind us do not?”

Davos had come too far with Stannis to play coy now. “Last year they were Robert’s men. A moon ago they were Renly’s. This morning they are yours. Whose will they be on the morrow?” And Stannis laughed. A sudden gust, rough and full of scorn. “I told you, Melisandre,” he said to the red woman, “my Onion Knight tells me the truth.”

“I see you know him well, Your Grace,” the red woman said.

“Davos, I have missed you sorely,” the king said. “Aye, I have a tail of traitors, your nose does not deceive you. My lords bannermen are inconstant even in their treasons. I need them, but you should know how it sickens me to pardon such as these when I have punished better men for lesser crimes. You have every right to reproach me, Ser Davos.”

“You reproach yourself more than I ever could, Your Grace. You must have these great lords to win your throne-”

“Fingers and all, it seems.” Stannis smiled grimly.

Unthinking, Davos raised his maimed hand to the pouch at his throat, and felt the fingerbones within. Luck.

The king saw the motion. “Are they still there, Onion Knight? You have not lost them?”

“No...”

“Why do you keep them? I have often wondered.”

“They remind me of what I was. Where I came from. They remind me of your justice, my liege.”

“It was justice,” Stannis said. “A good act does not wash out the bad, nor a bad act the good. Each should have its own reward. You were a hero and a smuggler.” He glanced behind at Lord Florent and the others, rainbow knights and turncloaks, who were following at a distance. “These pardoned lords would do well to reflect on that. Good men and true will fight for Joffrey, wrongly believing him the true king. A northman might even say the same of Robb Stark. But these lords who flocked to my brother’s banners knew him for a usurper. They turned their backs on their rightful king for no better reason than dreams of power and glory, and I have marked

them for what they are. Pardoned them, yes. Forgiven. But not forgotten.” He fell silent for a moment, brooding on his plans for justice. And then, abruptly, he said, “What do the smallfolk say of Renly’s death?”

“They grieve. Your brother was well loved.”

“Fools love a fool,” grumbled Stannis, “but I grieve for him as well. For the boy he was, not the man he grew to be.” He was silent for a time, and then he said, “How did the commons take the news of Cersei’s incest?”

“While we were among them they shouted for King Stannis. I cannot speak for what they said once we had sailed.”

“So you do not think they believed?”

“When I was smuggling, I learned that some men believe everything and some nothing. We met both sorts. And there is another tale being spread as well-”

“Yes.” Stannis bit off the word. “Selyse has given me horns, and tied a fool’s bells to the end of each. My daughter fathered by a halfwit jester! A tale as vile as it is absurd. Renly threw it in my teeth when we met to parley. You would need to be as mad as Patchface to believe such a thing.”

“That may be so, my liege... but whether they believe the story or no, they delight to tell it.” In many places it had come before them, poisoning the well for their own true tale.

“Robert could piss in a cup and men would call it wine, but I offer them pure cold water and they squint in suspicion and mutter to each other about how queer it tastes.” Stannis ground his teeth. “If someone said I had magicked myself into a boar to kill Robert, likely they would believe that as well.”

“You cannot stop them talking, my liege,” Davos said, “but when you take your vengeance on your brothers’ true killers, the realm will know such tales for lies.”

Stannis only seemed to half hear him. “I have no doubt that Cersei had a hand in Robert’s death. I will have justice for him. Aye, and for Ned Stark and Jon Arryn as well.”

“And for Renly?” The words were out before Davos could stop to consider them.

For a long time the king did not speak. Then, very softly, he said, “I dream of it sometimes. Of Renly’s dying. A green tent, candles, a woman screaming. And blood.” Stannis looked down at his hands. “I was still abed when he died. Your Devan will tell you. He tried to wake me. Dawn was nigh and my lords were waiting, fretting. I should have been ahorse, armored. I knew Renly would attack at break of day. Devan says I thrashed and cried out, but what does it matter? It was a dream. I was in my tent when Renly died, and when I woke my hands were clean.”

Ser Davos Seaworth could feel his phantom fingertips start to itch. Something is wrong here, the onetime smuggler thought. Yet he nodded and said, “I see.”

“Renly offered me a peach. At our parley. Mocked me, defied me, threatened me, and offered me a peach. I thought he was drawing a blade and went for mine own. Was that his purpose, to make me show fear? Or was it one of his pointless jests? When he spoke of how sweet the peach was, did his words have some hidden meaning?” The king gave a shake of his head, like a dog shaking a rabbit to snap its neck. “Only Renly could vex me so with a piece of fruit. He brought

his doom on himself with his treason, but I did love him, Davos. I know that now. I swear, I will go to my grave thinking of my brother's peach."

By then they were in amongst the camp, riding past the ordered rows of tents, the blowing banners, and the stacks of shields and spears. The stink of horse dung was heavy in the air, mingled with the woodsmoke and the smell of cooking meat. Stannis reined up long enough to bark a brusque dismissal to Lord Florent and the others, commanding them to attend him in his pavilion one hour hence for a council of war. They bowed their heads and dispersed, while Davos and Melisandre rode to the king's pavilion.

The tent had to be large, since it was there his lords bannermen came to council. Yet there was nothing grand about it. It was a soldier's tent of heavy canvas, dyed the dark yellow that sometimes passed for gold. Only the royal banner that streamed atop the center pole marked it as a king's. That, and the guards without; queen's men leaning on tall spears, with the badge of the fiery heart sewn over their own.

Grooms came up to help them dismount. One of the guards relieved Melisandre of her cumbersome standard, driving the staff deep into the soft ground. Devan stood to one side of the door, waiting to lift the flap for the king. An older squire waited beside him. Stannis took off his crown and handed it to Devan. "Cold water, cups for two. Davos, attend me. My lady, I shall send for you when I require you."

"As the king commands." Melisandre bowed.

After the brightness of the morning, the interior of the pavilion seemed cool and dim. Stannis seated himself on a plain wooden camp stool and waved Davos to another. "One day I may make you a lord, smuggler. If only to irk Celtigar and Florent. You will not thank me, though. It will mean you must suffer through these councils, and feign interest in the braying of mules."

"Why do you have them, if they serve no purpose?"

"The mules love the sound of their own braying, why else? And I need them to haul my cart. Oh, to be sure, once in a great while some useful notion is put forth. But not today, I think-ah, here's your son with our water."

Devan set the tray on the table and filled two clay cups. The king sprinkled a pinch of salt in his cup before he drank; Davos took his water straight, wishing it were wine. "You were speaking of your council?"

"Let me tell you how it will go. Lord Velaryon will urge me to storm the castle walls at first light, grappels and scaling ladders against arrows and boiling oil. The young mules will think this a splendid notion. Estermont will favor settling down to starve them out, as Tyrell and Redwyne once tried with me. That might take a year, but old mules are patient. And Lord Caron and the others who like to kick will want to take up Ser Cortnay's gauntlet and hazard all upon a single combat. Each one imagining he will be my champion and win undying fame." The king finished his water. "What would you have me do, smuggler?"

Davos considered a moment before he answered. "Strike for King's Landing at once."

The king snorted. "And leave Storm's End untaken?"

“Ser Cortnay does not have the power to harm you. The Lannisters do. A siege would take too long, single combat is too chancy, and an assault would cost thousands of lives with no certainty of success. And there is no need. Once you dethrone Joffrey this castle must come to you with all the rest. It is said about the camp that Lord Tywin Lannister rushes west to rescue Lannisport from the vengeance of the northmen...”

“You have a passing clever father, Devan,” the king told the boy standing by his elbow. “He makes me wish I had more smugglers in my service. And fewer lords. Though you are wrong in one respect, Davos. There is a need. If I leave Storm’s End untaken in my rear, it will be said I was defeated here. And that I cannot permit. Men do not love me as they loved my brothers. They follow me because they fear me... and defeat is death to fear. The castle must fall.” His jaw ground side to side. “Aye, and quickly. Doran Martell has called his banners and fortified the mountain passes. His Dornishmen are poised to sweep down onto the Marches. And Highgarden is far from spent. My brother left the greater part of his power at Bitterbridge, near sixty thousand foot. I sent my wife’s brother Ser Errol with Ser Parmen Crane to take them under my command, but they have not returned. I fear that Ser Loras Tyrell reached Bitterbridge before my envoys, and took that host for his own.”

“All the more reason to take King’s Landing as soon as we may. Salladhor Saan told me-”

“Salladhor Saan thinks only of gold!” Stannis exploded. “His head is full of dreams of the treasure he fancies lies under the Red Keep, so let us hear no more of Salladhor Saan. The day I need military counsel from a Lysene brigand is the day I put off my crown and take the black.” The king made a fist. “Are you here to serve me, smuggler? Or to vex me with arguments?”

“I am yours,” Davos said.

“Then hear me. Ser Cortnay’s lieutenant is cousin to the Fossoways. Lord Meadows, a green boy of twenty. Should some ill chance strike down Penrose, command of Storm’s End would pass to this stripling, and his cousins believe he would accept my terms and yield up the castle.”

“I remember another stripling who was given command of Storm’s End. He could not have been much more than twenty.”

“Lord Meadows is not as stonehead stubborn as I was.”

“Stubborn or craven, what does it matter? Ser Cortnay Penrose seemed hale and hearty to me.”

“So did my brother, the day before his death. The night is dark and full of terrors, Davos.”

Davos Seaworth felt the small hairs rising on the back of his neck. “My lord, I do not understand you.”

“I do not require your understanding. Only your service. Ser Cortnay will be dead within the day. Melisandre has seen it in the flames of the future. His death and the manner of it. He will not die in knightly combat, needless to say.” Stannis held out his cup, and Devan filled it again from the flagon. “Her flames do not lie. She saw Renly’s doom as well. On Dragonstone she saw it, and told Selyse. Lord Velaryon and your friend Salladhor Saan would have had me sail against Joffrey, but Melisandre told me that if I went to Storm’s End, I would win the best part of my brother’s power, and she was right.”

“B-but,” Davos stammered, “Lord Renly only came here because you had laid siege to the castle. He was marching toward King’s Landing before, against the Lannisters, he would have—” Stannis shifted in his seat, frowning. “Was, would have, what is that? He did what he did. He came here with his banners and his peaches, to his doom... and it was well for me he did. Melisandre saw another day in her flames as well. A morrow where Renly rode out of the south in his green armor to smash my host beneath the walls of King’s Landing. Had I met my brother there, it might have been me who died in place of him.”

“Or you might have joined your strength to his to bring down the Lannisters,” Davos protested. “Why not that? If she saw two futures, well... both cannot be true.”

King Stannis pointed a finger. “There you err, Onion Knight. Some lights cast more than one shadow. Stand before the nightfire and you’ll see for yourself. The flames shift and dance, never still. The shadows grow tall and short, and every man casts a dozen. Some are fainter than others, that’s all. Well, men cast their shadows across the future as well. One shadow or many. Melisandre sees them all.

“You do not love the woman. I know that, Davos, I am not blind. My lords dislike her too. Estermont thinks the flaming heart ill-chosen and begs to fight beneath the crowned stag as of old. Ser Guyard says a woman should not be my standard-bearer. Others whisper that she has no place in my war councils, that I ought to send her back to Asshai, that it is sinful to keep her in my tent of a night. Aye, they whisper... while she serves.”

“Serves how?” Davos asked, dreading the answer.

“As needed.” The king looked at him. “And you?”

“I...” Davos licked his lips. “I am yours to command. What would you have me do?”

“Nothing you have not done before. Only land a boat beneath the castle, unseen, in the black of night. Can you do that?”

“Yes. Tonight?”

The king gave a curt nod. “You will need a small boat. Not Black Betha. No one must know what you do.”

Davos wanted to protest. He was a knight now, no longer a smuggler, and he had never been an assassin. Yet when he opened his mouth, the words would not come. This was Stannis, his just lord, to whom he owed all he was. And he had his sons to consider as well. Gods be good, what has she done to him?

“You are quiet,” Stannis observed.

And should remain so, Davos told himself, yet instead he said, “My liege, you must have the castle, I see that now, but surely there are other ways. Cleaner ways. Let Ser Cortnay keep the bastard boy and he may well yield.”

“I must have the boy, Davos. Must. Melisandre has seen that in the flames as well.”

Davos groped for some other answer. “Storm’s End holds no knight who can match Ser Guyard or Lord Caron, or any of a hundred others sworn to your service. This single combat... could it be that Ser Cortnay seeks for a way to yield with honor? Even if it means his own life? “

A troubled look crossed the king's face like a passing cloud. "More like he plans some treachery. There will be no combat of champions. Ser Cortnay was dead before he ever threw that glove. The flames do not lie, Davos."

Yet they require me to make them true, he thought. It had been a long time since Davos Seaworth felt so sad.

And so it was that he found himself once more crossing Shipbreaker Bay in the dark of night, steering a tiny boat with a black sail. The sky was the same, and the sea. The same salt smell was in the air, and the water chuckling against the hull was just as he remembered it. A thousand flickering campfires burned around the castle, as the fires of the Tyrells and Redwynes had sixteen years before. But all the rest was different.

The last time it was life I brought to Storm's End, shaped to look like onions. This time it is death, in the shape of Melisandre of Asshai. Sixteen years ago, the sails had cracked and snapped with every shift of wind, until he'd pulled them down and gone on with muffled oars. Even so, his heart had been in his gullet. The men on the Redwyne galleys had grown lax after so long, however, and they had slipped through the cordon smooth as black satin. This time, the only ships in sight belonged to Stannis, and the only danger would come from watchers on the castle walls. Even so, Davos was taut as a bowstring.

Melisandre huddled upon a thwart, lost in the folds of a dark red cloak that covered her from head to heels, her face a paleness beneath the cowl. Davos loved the water. He slept best when he had a deck rocking beneath him, and the sighing of the wind in his rigging was a sweeter sound to him than any a singer could make with his harp strings. Even the sea brought him no comfort tonight, though. "I can smell the fear on you, ser knight," the red woman said softly.

"Someone once told me the night is dark and full of terrors. And tonight I am no knight. Tonight I am Davos the smuggler again. Would that you were an onion."

She laughed. "Is it me you fear? Or what we do?"

"What you do. I'll have no part of it."

"Your hand raised the sail. Your hand holds the tiller."

Silent, Davos tended to his course. The shore was a snarl of rocks, so he was taking them well out across the bay. He would wait for the tide to turn before coming about. Storm's End dwindled behind them, but the red woman seemed unconcerned. "Are you a good man, Davos Seaworth?" she asked.

Would a good man be doing this? "I am a man," he said. "I am kind to my wife, but I have known other women. I have tried to be a father to my sons, to help make them a place in this world. Aye, I've broken laws, but I never felt evil until tonight. I would say my parts are mixed, m'lady. Good and bad."

"A grey man," she said. "Neither white nor black, but partaking of both. Is that what you are, Ser Davos?"

"What if I am? It seems to me that most men are grey."

"If half of an onion is black with rot, it is a rotten onion. A man is good, or he is evil."

The fires behind them had melted into one vague glow against the black sky, and the land was almost out of sight. It was time to come about. "Watch your head, my lady." He pushed on the tiller, and the small boat threw up a curl of black water as she turned. Melisandre leaned under the swinging yard, one hand on the gunwale, calm as ever. Wood creaked, canvas cracked, and water splashed, so loudly a man might swear the castle was sure to hear. Davos knew better. The endless crash of wave on rock was the only sound that ever penetrated the massive seaward walls of Storm's End, and that but faintly.

A rippling wake spread out behind as they swung back toward the shore. "You speak of men and onions," Davos said to Melisandre. "What of women? Is it not the same for them? Are you good or evil, my lady?"

That made her chuckle. "Oh, good. I am a knight of sorts myself, sweet ser. A champion of light and life."

"Yet you mean to kill a man tonight," he said. "As you killed Maester Cressen."

"Your maester poisoned himself. He meant to poison me, but I was protected by a greater power and he was not."

"And Renly Baratheon? Who was it who killed him?"

Her head turned. Beneath the shadow of the cowl, her eyes burned like pale red candle flames. "Not I."

"Liar." Davos was certain now.

Melisandre laughed again. "You are lost in darkness and confusion, Ser Davos."

"And a good thing." Davos gestured at the distant lights flickering along the walls of Storm's End. "Feel how cold the wind is? The guards will huddle close to those torches. A little warmth, a little light, they're a comfort on a night like this. Yet that will blind them, so they will not see us pass." I hope. "The god of darkness protects us now, my lady. Even you."

The flames of her eyes seemed to burn a little brighter at that. "Speak not that name, ser. Lest you draw his black eye upon us. He protects no man, I promise you. He is the enemy of all that lives. It is the torches that hide us, you have said so yourself. Fire. The bright gift of the Lord of Light..."

"Have it your way."

"His way, rather."

The wind was shifting, Davos could feel it, see it in the way the black canvas rippled. He reached for the halyards. "Help me bring in the sail. I'll row us the rest of the way."

Together they tied off the sail as the boat rocked beneath them. As Davos unshipped the oars and slid them into the choppy black water, he said, "Who rowed you to Renly?"

"There was no need," she said. "He was unprotected. But here... this Storm's End is an old place. There are spells woven into the stones. Dark walls that no shadow can pass-ancient, forgotten, yet still in place."

"Shadow?" Davos felt his flesh prickling. "A shadow is a thing of darkness."

"You are more ignorant than a child, ser knight. There are no shadows in the dark. Shadows are the servants of light, the children of fire. The brightest flame casts the darkest shadows."

Frowning, Davos hushed her then. They were coming close to shore once more, and voices carried across the water. He rowed, the faint sound of his oars lost in the rhythm of the waves. The seaward side of Storm's End perched upon a pale white cliff, the chalky stone sloping up steeply to half again the height of the massive curtain wall. A mouth yawned in the cliff, and it was that Davos steered for, as he had sixteen years before. The tunnel opened on a cavern under the castle, where the storm lords of old had built their landing.

The passage was navigable only during high tide, and was never less than treacherous, but his smuggler's skills had not deserted him. Davos threaded their way deftly between the jagged rocks until the cave mouth loomed up before them. He let the waves carry them inside. They crashed around him, slamming the boat this way and that and soaking them to the skin. A half-seen finger of rock came rushing up out of the gloom, snarling foam, and Davos barely kept them off it with an oar.

Then they were past, engulfed in darkness, and the waters smoothed.

The little boat slowed and swirled. The sound of their breathing echoed until it seemed to surround them. Davos had not expected the blackness. The last time, torches had burned all along the tunnel, and the eyes of starving men had peered down through the murder holes in the ceiling. The portcullis was somewhere ahead, he knew. Davos used the oars to slow them, and they drifted against it almost gently.

"This is as far as we go, unless you have a man inside to lift the gate for us." His whispers scurried across the lapping water like a line of mice on soft pink feet.

"Have we passed within the walls?"

"Yes. Beneath. But we can go no farther. The portcullis goes all the way to the bottom. And the bars are too closely spaced for even a child to squeeze through."

There was no answer but a soft rustling. And then a light bloomed amidst the darkness.

Davos raised a hand to shield his eyes, and his breath caught in his throat. Melisandre had thrown back her cowl and shrugged out of the smothering robe. Beneath, she was naked, and huge with child. Swollen breasts hung heavy against her chest, and her belly bulged as if near to bursting. "Gods preserve us," he whispered, and heard her answering laugh, deep and throaty. Her eyes were hot coals, and the sweat that dappled her skin seemed to glow with a light of its own. Melisandre shone.

Panting, she squatted and spread her legs. Blood ran down her thighs, black as ink. Her cry might have been agony or ecstasy or both. And Davos saw the crown of the child's head push its way out of her. Two arms wriggled free, grasping, black fingers coiling around Melisandre's straining thighs, pushing, until the whole of the shadow slid out into the world and rose taller than Davos, tall as the tunnel, towering above the boat. He had only an instant to look at it before it was gone, twisting between the bars of the portcullis and racing across the surface of the water, but that instant was long enough.

He knew that shadow. As he knew the man who'd cast it.

JON

The call came drifting through the black of night. Jon pushed himself onto an elbow, his hand reaching for Longclaw by force of habit as the camp began to stir. The horn that wakes the sleepers, he thought.

The long low note lingered at the edge of hearing. The sentries at the ringwall stood still in their footsteps, breath frosting and heads turned toward the west. As the sound of the horn faded, even the wind ceased to blow. Men rolled from their blankets and reached for spears and swordbelts, moving quietly, listening. A horse whickered and was hushed. For a heartbeat it seemed as if the whole forest were holding its breath. The brothers of the Night's Watch waited for a second blast, praying they should not hear it, fearing that they would.

When the silence had stretched unbearably long and the men knew at last that the horn would not wind again, they grinned at one another sheepishly, as if to deny that they had been anxious. Jon Snow fed a few sticks to the fire, buckled on his swordbelt, pulled on his boots, shook the dirt and dew from the cloak, and fastened it around his shoulders. The flames blazed up beside him, welcome heat beating against his face as he dressed. He could hear the Lord Commander moving inside the tent. After a moment Mormont lifted the flap. "One blast?" On his shoulder, his raven sat fluffed and silent, looking miserable.

"One, my lord," Jon agreed. "Brothers returning."

Mormont moved to the fire. "The Halfhand. And past time." He had grown more restive every day they waited; much longer and he would have been fit to whelp cubs. "See that there's hot food for the men and fodder for the horses. I'll see Qhorin at once."

"I'll bring him, my lord." The men from the Shadow Tower had been expected days ago. When they had not appeared, the brothers had begun to wonder. Jon had heard gloomy mutterings around the cookfire, and not just from Dolorous Edd. Ser Ottyn Wythers was for retreating to Castle Black as soon as possible. Ser Mallador Locke would strike for the Shadow Tower, hoping to pick up Qhorin's trail and learn what had befallen him. And Thoren Smallwood wanted to push on into the mountains. "Mance Rayder knows he must battle the Watch," Thoren had declared, "but he will never look for us so far north. If we ride up the Milkwater, we can take him unawares and cut his host to ribbons before he knows we are on him."

"The numbers would be greatly against us," Ser Ottyn had objected. "Craster said he was gathering a great host. Many thousands. Without Qhorin, we are only two hundred."

"Send two hundred wolves against ten thousand sheep, ser, and see what happens," said Smallwood confidently.

"There are goats among these sheep, Thoren," warned Jarman Buckwell. "Aye, and maybe a few lions. Rattleshirt, Harma the Dogshead, Alfyn Crowkiller..."

"I know them as well as you do, Buckwell," Thoren Smallwood snapped back. "And I mean to have their heads, every one. These are wildlings. No soldiers. A few hundred heroes, drunk most like, amidst a great horde of women, children, and thralls. We will sweep over them and send them howling back to their hovels."

They had argued for many hours, and reached no agreement. The Old Bear was too stubborn to retreat, but neither would he rush headlong up the Milkwater, seeking battle. In the end, nothing had been decided but to wait a few more days for the men from the Shadow Tower, and talk again if they did not appear.

And now they had, which meant that the decision could be delayed no longer. Jon was glad of that much, at least. If they must battle Mance Rayder, let it be soon.

He found Dolorous Edd at the fire, complaining about how difficult it was for him to sleep when people insisted on blowing horns in the woods. Jon gave him something new to complain about. Together they woke Hake, who received the Lord Commander's orders with a stream of curses, but got up all the same and soon had a dozen brothers cutting roots for a soup.

Sam came puffing up as Jon crossed the camp. Under the black hood his face was as pale and round as the moon. "I heard the horn. Has your uncle come back?"

"It's only the men from the Shadow Tower." It was growing harder to cling to the hope of Benjen Stark's safe return. The cloak he had found beneath the Fist could well have belonged to his uncle or one of his men, even the Old Bear admitted as much, though why they would have buried it there, wrapped around the cache of dragonglass, no one could say. "Sam, I have to go."

At the ringwall, he found the guards sliding spikes from the half-frozen earth to make an opening. It was not long until the first of the brothers from the Shadow Tower began wending their way up the slope. All in leather and fur they were, with here and there a bit of steel or bronze; heavy beards covered hard lean faces, and made them look as shaggy as their garrons. Jon was surprised to see some of them were riding two to a horse. When he looked more closely, it was plain that many of them were wounded. There has been trouble on the way.

Jon knew Qhorin Halfhand the instant he saw him, though they had never met. The big ranger was half a legend in the Watch; a man of slow words and swift action, tall and straight as a spear, long-limbed and solemn. Unlike his men, he was clean-shaven. His hair fell from beneath his helm in a heavy braid touched with hoarfrost, and the blacks he wore were so faded they might have been greys. Only thumb and forefinger remained on the hand that held the reins; the other fingers had been sheared off catching a wildling's axe that would otherwise have split his skull. It was told that he had thrust his maimed fist into the face of the axeman so the blood spurted into his eyes, and slew him while he was blind. Since that day, the wildlings beyond the Wall had known no foe more implacable.

Jon hailed him. "Lord Commander Mormont would see you at once. I'll show you to his tent."

Qhorin swung down from his saddle. "My men are hungry, and our horses require tending."

"They'll all be seen to."

The ranger gave his horse into the care of one of his men and followed. "You are Jon Snow. You have your father's look."

"Did you know him, my lord?"

"I am no lordling. Only a brother of the Night's Watch. I knew Lord Eddard, yes. And his father before him."

Jon had to hurry his steps to keep up with Qhorin's long strides. "Lord Rickard died before I was born."

"He was a friend to the Watch." Qhorin glanced behind. "It is said that a direwolf runs with you."

"Ghost should be back by dawn. He hunts at night."

They found Dolorous Edd frying a rasher of bacon and boiling a dozen eggs in a kettle over the Old Bear's cookfire. Mormont sat in his woodand-leather camp chair. "I had begun to fear for you. Did you meet with trouble?"

"We met with Alfyn Crowkiller. Mance had sent him to scout along the Wall, and we chanced on him returning." Qhorin removed his helm. "Alfyn will trouble the realm no longer, but some of his company escaped us. We hunted down as many as we could, but it may be that a few will win back to the mountains."

"And the cost?"

"Four brothers dead. A dozen wounded. A third as many as the foe. And we took captives. One died quickly from his wounds, but the other lived long enough to be questioned."

"Best talk of this inside. Jon will fetch you a horn of ale. Or would you prefer hot spiced wine?"

"Boiled water will suffice. An egg and a bite of bacon."

"As you wish." Mormont lifted the flap of the tent and Qhorin Halfhand stooped and stepped through.

Edd stood over the kettle swishing the eggs about with a spoon. "I envy those eggs," he said. "I could do with a bit of boiling about now. If the kettle were larger, I might jump in. Though I would sooner it were wine than water. There are worse ways to die than warm and drunk. I knew a brother drowned himself in wine once. It was a poor vintage, though, and his corpse did not improve it."

"You drank the wine?"

"It's an awful thing to find a brother dead. You'd have need of a drink as well, Lord Snow." Edd stirred the kettle and added a pinch more nutmeg.

Restless, Jon squatted by the fire and poked at it with a stick. He could hear the Old Bear's voice inside the tent, punctuated by the raven's squawks and Qhorin Halfhand's quieter tones, but he could not make out the words. Alfyn Crowkiller dead, that's good. He was one of the bloodiest of the wildling raiders, taking his name from the black brothers he'd slain. So why does Qhorin sound so grave, after such a victory?

Jon had hoped that the arrival of men from the Shadow Tower would lift the spirits in the camp. Only last night, he was coming back through the dark from a piss when he heard five or six men talking in low voices around the embers of a fire. When he heard Chett muttering that it was past time they turned back, Jon stopped to listen. "It's an old man's folly, this ranging," he heard. "We'll find nothing but our graves in them mountains."

"There's giants in the Frostfangs, and wargs, and worse things," said Lark the Sisterman.

"I'll not be going there, I promise you."

"The Old Bear's not like to give you a choice."

“Might be we won’t give him one,” said Chett.

Just then one of the dogs had raised his head and growled, and he had to move away quickly, before he was seen. I was not meant to hear that, he thought. He considered taking the tale to Mormont, but he could not bring himself to inform on his brothers, even brothers such as Chett and the Sisterman. It was just empty talk, he told himself. They are cold and afraid, we all are. It was hard waiting here, perched on the stony summit above the forest, wondering what the morrow might bring. The unseen enemy is always the most fearsome.

Jon slid his new dagger from its sheath and studied the flames as they played against the shiny black glass. He had fashioned the wooden hilt himself, and wound hempen twine around it to make a grip. Ugly, but it served. Dolorous Edd opined that glass knives were about as useful as nipples on a knight’s breastplate, but Jon was not so certain. The dragonglass blade was sharper than steel, albeit far more brittle.

It must have been buried for a reason.

He had made a dagger for Grenn as well, and another for the Lord Commander. The warhorn he had given to Sam. On closer examination the horn had proved cracked, and even after he had cleaned all the dirt out, Jon had been unable to get any sound from it. The rim was chipped as well, but Sam liked old things, even worthless old things. “Make a drinking horn out of it,” Jon told him, “and every time you take a drink you’ll remember how you ranged beyond the Wall, all the way to the Fist of the First Men.” He gave Sam a spearhead and a dozen arrowheads as well, and passed the rest out among his other friends for luck.

The Old Bear had seemed pleased by the dagger, but he preferred a steel knife at his belt, Jon had noticed. Mormont could offer no answers as to who might have buried the cloak or what it might mean. Perhaps Qhorin will know The Halfhand had ventured deeper into the wild than any other living man.

“You want to serve, or shall I?”

Jon sheathed the dagger. “I’ll do it.” He wanted to hear what they were saying.

Edd cut three thick slices off a stale round of oat bread, stacked them on a wooden platter, covered them with bacon and bacon drippings, and filled a bowl with hard-cooked eggs. Jon took the bowl in one hand and the platter in the other and backed into the Lord Commander’s tent, Qhorin was seated cross-legged on the floor, his spine as straight as a spear. Candlelight flickered against the hard flat planes of his cheeks as he spoke. “...Rattleshirt, the Weeping Man, and every other chief great and small,” he was saying. “They have wargs as well, and mammoths, and more strength than we would have dreamed. Or so he claimed. I will not swear as to the truth of it. Ebben believes the man was telling us tales to make his life last a little longer.”

“True or false, the Wall must be warned,” the Old Bear said as Jon placed the platter between them. “And the king.”

“Which king?”

“All of them. The true and the false alike. If they would claim the realm, let them defend it.”

The Halfhand helped himself to an egg and cracked it on the edge of the bowl. "These kings will do what they will," he said, peeling away the shell. "Likely it will be little enough. The best hope is Winterfell. The Starks must rally the north."

"Yes. To be sure." The Old Bear unrolled a map, frowned at it, tossed it aside, opened another. He was pondering where the hammer would fall, Jon could see it. The Watch had once manned seventeen castles along the hundred leagues of the Wall, but they had been abandoned one by one as the brotherhood dwindled. Only three were now garrisoned, a fact that Mance Rayder knew as well as they did. "Ser Alliser Thorne will bring back fresh levies from King's Landing, we can hope. If we man Greyguard from the Shadow Tower and the Long Barrow from Eastwatch..."

"Greyguard has largely collapsed. Stonedoor would serve better, if the men could be found. Icemark and Deep Lake as well, mayhaps. With daily patrols along the battlements between."

"Patrols, aye. Twice a day, if we can. The Wall itself is a formidable obstacle. Undefended, it cannot stop them, yet it will delay them. The larger the host, the longer they'll require. From the emptiness they've left behind, they must mean to bring their women with them. Their young as well, and beasts... have you ever seen a goat climb a ladder? A rope? They will need to build a stair, or a great ramp... it will take a moon's turn at the least, perhaps longer. Mance will know his best chance is to pass beneath the Wall. Through a gate, or..."

"A breach."

Mormont's head came up sharply. "What?"

"They do not plan to climb the Wall nor to burrow beneath it, my lord. They plan to break it."

"The Wall is seven hundred feet high, and so thick at the base that it would take a hundred men a year to cut through it with picks and axes."

"Even so."

Mormont plucked at his beard, frowning. "How?"

"How else? Sorcery." Qhorin bit the egg in half. "Why else would Mance choose to gather his strength in the Frostfangs? Bleak and hard they are, and a long weary march from the Wall."

"I'd hoped he chose the mountains to hide his muster from the eyes of my rangers."

"Perhaps," said Qhorin, finishing the egg, "but there is more, I think. He is seeking something in the high cold places. He is searching for something he needs."

"Something?" Mormont's raven lifted its head and screamed. The sound was sharp as a knife in the closeness of the tent.

"Some power. What it is, our captive could not say. He was questioned perhaps too sharply, and died with much unsaid. I doubt he knew in any case."

Jon could hear the wind outside. It made a high thin sound as it shivered through the stones of the ringwall and tugged at the tent ropes. Mormont rubbed his mouth thoughtfully. "Some power," he repeated. "I must know."

"Then you must send scouts into the mountains."

"I am loath to risk more men."

“We can only die. Why else do we don these black cloaks, but to die in defense of the realm? I would send fifteen men, in three parties of five. One to probe the Milkwater, one the Skirling Pass, one to climb the Giant’s Stair. Jarman Buckwell, Thoren Smallwood, and myself to command. To learn what waits in those mountains.”

“Waits,” the raven cried. “Waits.”

Lord Commander Mormont sighed deep in his chest. “I see no other choice,” he conceded, “but if you do not return...”

“Someone will come down out of the Frostfangs, my lord,” the ranger said. “If us, all well and good. If not, it will be Mance Rayder, and you sit square in his path. He cannot march south and leave you behind, to follow and harry his rear. He must attack. This is a strong place.”

“Not that strong,” said Mormont.

“Belike we shall all die, then. Our dying will buy time for our brothers on the Wall. Time to garrison the empty castles and freeze shut the gates, time to summon lords and kings to their aid, time to hone their axes and repair their catapults. Our lives will be coin well spent.”

“Die,” the raven muttered, pacing along Mormont’s shoulders. “Die, die, die, die.” The old Bear sat slumped and silent, as if the burden of speech had grown too heavy for him to bear. But at last he said, “May the gods forgive me. Choose your men.”

Qhorin Halfhand turned his head. His eyes met Jon’s, and held them for a long moment. “Very well. I choose Jon Snow.”

Mormont blinked. “He is hardly more than a boy. And my steward besides. Not even a ranger.”

“Tollett can care for you as well, my lord.” Qhorin lifted his maimed, two-fingered hand. “The old gods are still strong beyond the Wall. The gods of the First Men... and the Starks.”

Mormont looked at Jon. “What is your will in this?”

“To go,” he said at once.

The old man smiled sadly. “I thought it might be.”

Dawn had broken when Jon stepped from the tent beside Qhorin Halfhand. The wind swirled around them, stirring their black cloaks and sending a scatter of red cinders flying from the fire.

“We ride at noon,” the ranger told him. “Best find that wolf of yours.”

TYRION

The queen intends to send Prince Tommen away.” They knelt alone in the hushed dimness of the sept, surrounded by shadows and flickering candles, but even so Lancel kept his voice low. “Lord Gyles will take him to Rosby, and conceal him there in the guise of a page. They plan to darken his hair and tell everyone that he is the son of a hedge knight.”

“Is it the mob she fears? Or me?”

“Both,” said Lancel.

“Ah.” Tyrion had known nothing of this ploy. Had Varys’s little birds failed him for once? Even spiders must nod, he supposed... or was the eunuch playing a deeper and more subtle game than he knew? “You have my thanks, ser.”

“Will you grant me the boon I asked of you?”

“Perhaps.” Lancel wanted his own command in the next battle. A splendid way to die before he finished growing that mustache, but young knights always think themselves invincible.

Tyrion lingered after his cousin had slipped away. At the Warrior’s altar, he used one candle to light another. Watch over my brother, you bloody bastard, he’s one of yours. He lit a second candle to the Stranger, for himself.

That night, when the Red Keep was dark, Bronn arrived to find him sealing a letter. “Take this to Ser Jacelyn Bywater.” The dwarf dribbled hot golden wax down onto the parchment.

“What does it say?” Bronn could not read, so he asked impudent questions.

“That he’s to take fifty of his best swords and scout the roseroad.” Tyrion pressed his seal into the soft wax.

“Stannis is more like to come up the kingsroad.”

“Oh, I know. Tell Bywater to disregard what’s in the letter and take his men north. He’s to lay a trap along the Rosby road. Lord Gyles will depart for his castle in a day or two, with a dozen men-at-arms, some servants, and my nephew. Prince Tommen may be dressed as a page.”

“You want the boy brought back, is that it?”

“No. I want him taken on to the castle.” Removing the boy from the city was one of his sister’s better notions, Tyrion had decided. At Rosby, Tommen would be safe from the mob, and keeping him apart from his brother also made things more difficult for Stannis; even if he took King’s Landing and executed Joffrey, he’d still have a Lannister claimant to contend with. “Lord Gyles is too sickly to run and too craven to fight. He’ll command his castellan to open the gates. Once inside the walls, Bywater is to expel the garrison and hold Tommen there safe. Ask him how he likes the sound of Lord Bywater.”

“Lord Bronn would sound better. I could grab the boy for you just as well. I’ll dandle him on my knee and sing him nursery songs if there’s a lordship in it.”

“I need you here,” said Tyrion. And I don’t trust you with my nephew. Should any ill befall Joffrey, the Lannister claim to the Iron Throne would rest on Tommen’s young shoulders. Ser Jacelyn’s gold cloaks would defend the boy; Bronn’s sellswords were more apt to sell him to his enemies.

“What should the new lord do with the old one?”

“Whatever he pleases, so long as he remembers to feed him. I don’t want him dying.” Tyrion pushed away from the table. “My sister will send one of the Kingsguard with the prince.”

Bronn was not concerned. “The Hound is Joffrey’s dog, he won’t leave him. Ironhand’s gold cloaks should be able to handle the others easy enough.”

“If it comes to killing, tell Ser Jacelyn I won’t have it done in front of Tommen.” Tyrion donned a heavy cloak of dark brown wool. “My nephew is tenderhearted.”

“Are you certain he’s a Lannister?”

“I’m certain of nothing but winter and battle,” he said. “Come. I’m riding with you part of the way.”

“Chataya’s?”

“You know me too well.”

They left through a postern gate in the north wall. Tyrion put his heels into his horse and clattered down Shadowblack Lane. A few furtive shapes darted into alleys at the sound of hoofbeats on the cobbles, but no one dared accost them. The council had extended his curfew; it was death to be taken on the streets after the evenfall bells had sung. The measure had restored a degree of peace to King’s Landing and quartered the number of corpses found in the alleys of a morning, yet Varys said the people cursed him for it. They should be thankful they have the breath to curse. A pair of gold cloaks confronted them as they were making their way along Coppersmith’s Wynd, but when they realized whom they’d challenged they begged the Hand’s pardons and waved them on. Bronn turned south for the Mud Gate and they parted company.

Tyrion rode on toward Chataya’s, but suddenly his patience deserted him. He twisted in the saddle, scanning the street behind. There were no signs of followers. Every window was dark or tightly shuttered. He heard nothing but the wind swirling down the alleys. If Cersei has someone stalking me tonight, he must be disguised as a rat. “Bugger it all,” he muttered. He was sick of caution. Wheeling his horse around, he dug in his spurs. If anyone’s after me, we’ll see how well they ride. He flew through the moonlight streets, clattering over cobbles, darting down narrow alleys and up twisty wynds, racing to his love.

As he hammered on the gate he heard music wafting faintly over the spiked stone walls. One of the Ibbenese ushered him inside. Tyrion gave the man his horse and said, “Who is that?” The diamond-shaped panes of the longhall windows shone with yellow light, and he could hear a man singing.

The Ibbenese shrugged. “Fatbelly singer.”

The sound swelled as he walked from the stable to the house. Tyrion had never been fond of singers, and he liked this one even less than the run of the breed, sight unseen. When he pushed open the door, the man broke off. “My lord Hand.” He knelt, balding and kettle-bellied, murmuring, “An honor, an honor.”

“M’lord.” Shae smiled at the sight of him. He liked that smile, the quick unthinking way it came to her pretty face. The girl wore her purple silk, belted with a cloth-of-silver sash. The colors favored her dark hair and the smooth cream of her skin.

“Sweetling,” he called her. “And who is this?”

The singer raised his eyes. “I am called Symon Silver Tongue, my lord. A player, a singer, a tale-teller-”

“And a great fool,” Tyrion finished. “What did you call me, when I entered?”

“Call? I only...” The silver in Symon’s tongue seemed to have turned to lead. “My lord Hand, I said, an honor...”

“A wiser man would have pretended not to recognize me. Not that I would have been fooled, but you ought to have tried. What am I to do with you now? You know of my sweet Shae, you know where she dwells, you know that I visit by night alone.”

“I swear, I’ll tell no one...”

“On that much we agree. Good night to you.” Tyrion led Shae up the stairs.

“My singer may never sing again now,” she teased. “You’ve scared the voice from him.”

“A little fear will help him reach those high notes.”

She closed the door to their bedchamber. “You won’t hurt him, will you?” She lit a scented candle and knelt to pull off his boots. “His songs cheer me on the nights you don’t come.”

“Would that I could come every night,” he said as she rubbed his bare feet. “How well does he sing?”

“Better than some. Not so good as others.”

Tyrion opened her robe and buried his face between her breasts. She always smelled clean to him, even in this reeking sty of a city. “Keep him if you like, but keep him close. I won’t have him wandering the city spreading tales in pot-shops.”

“He won’t-” she started.

Tyrion covered her mouth with his own. He’d had talk enough; he needed the sweet simplicity of the pleasure he found between Shae’s thighs. Here, at least, he was welcome, wanted.

Afterward, he eased his arm out from under her head, slipped on his tunic, and went down to the garden. A half-moon silvered the leaves of the fruit trees and shone on the surface of the stone bathing pond. Tyrion seated himself beside the water. Somewhere off to his right a cricket was chirping, a curiously homey sound. It is peaceful here, he thought, but for how long?

A whiff of something rank made him turn his head. Shae stood in the door behind him, dressed in the silvery robe he’d given her. I loved a maid as white as winter, with moonglow in her hair. Behind her stood one of the begging brothers, a portly man in filthy patched robes, his bare feet crusty with dirt, a bowl hung about his neck on a leather thong where a septon would have worn a crystal. The smell of him would have gagged a rat.

“Lord Varys has come to see you,” Shae announced.

The begging brother blinked at her, astonished. Tyrion laughed. “To be sure. How is it you knew him when I did not?”

She shrugged. “It’s still him. Only dressed different.”

“A different look, a different smell, a different way of walking,” said Tyrion. “Most men would be deceived.”

“And most women, maybe. But not whores. A whore learns to see the man, not his garb, or she turns up dead in an alley.”

Varys looked pained, and not because of the false scabs on his feet. Tyrion chuckled. “Shae, would you bring us some wine?” He might need a drink. Whatever brought the eunuch here in the dead of night was not like to be good.

“I almost fear to tell you why I’ve come, my lord,” Varys said when Shae had left them. “I bring dire tidings.”

“You ought to dress in black feathers, Varys, you’re as bad an omen as any raven.” Awkwardly, Tyrion pushed to his feet, half afraid to ask the next question. “Is it Jaime?” If they have harmed him, nothing will save them.

“No, my lord. A different matter. Ser Cortnay Penrose is dead. Storm’s End has opened its gates to Stannis Baratheon.”

Dismay drove all other thoughts from Tyrion’s mind. When Shae returned with the wine, he took one sip and flung the cup away to explode against the side of the house. She raised a hand to shield herself from the shards as the wine ran down the stones in long fingers, black in the moonlight. “Damn him!” Tyrion said.

Varys smiled, showing a mouth full of rotted teeth. “Who, my lord? Ser Cortnay or Lord Stannis?”

“Both of them.” Storm’s End was strong, it should have been able to hold out for half a year or more... time enough for his father to finish with Robb Stark. “How did this happen?”

Varys glanced at Shae. “My lord, must we trouble your sweet lady’s sleep with such grim and bloody talk?”

“A lady might be afraid,” said Shae, “but I’m not.”

“You should be,” Tyrion told her. “With Storm’s End fallen, Stannis will soon turn his attention toward King’s Landing.” He regretted flinging away that wine now. “Lord Varys, give us a moment, and I’ll ride back to the castle with you.”

“I shall wait in the stables.” He bowed and stomped off.

Tyrion drew Shae down beside him. “You are not safe here.”

“I have my walls, and the guards you gave me.”

“Sellswords,” Tyrion said. “They like my gold well enough, but will they die for it? As for these walls, a man could stand on another’s shoulders and be over in a heartbeat. A manse much like this one was burned during the riots. They killed the goldsmith who owned it for the crime of having a full larder, just as they tore the High Septon to pieces, raped Lollys half a hundred times, and smashed Ser Aron’s skull in. What do you think they would do if they got their hands on the Hand’s lady?”

“The Hand’s whore, you mean?” She looked at him with those big bold eyes of hers. “Though I would be your lady, m’lord. I’d dress in all the beautiful things you gave me, in satin and samite and cloth-of-gold, and I’d wear your jewels and hold your hand and sit by you at feasts. I could give you sons, I know I could... and I vow I’d never shame you.”

My love for you shames me enough. “A sweet dream, Shae. Now put it aside, I beg you. It can never be.”

“Because of the queen? I’m not afraid of her either.”

“I am.”

“Then kill her and be done with it. It’s not as if there was any love between you.”

Tyrion sighed. “She’s my sister. The man who kills his own blood is cursed forever in the sight of gods and men. Moreover, whatever you and I may think of Cersei, my father and brother hold her dear. I can scheme with any man in the Seven Kingdoms, but the gods have not equipped me to face Jaime with swords in hand.”

“The Young Wolf and Lord Stannis have swords and they don’t scare you.”

How little you know, sweetling. “Against them I have all the power of House Lannister. Against Jaime or my father, I have no more than a twisted back and a pair of stunted legs.”

“You have me.” Shae kissed him, her arms sliding around his neck as she pressed her body to his.

The kiss aroused him, as her kisses always did, but this time Tyrion gently disentangled himself. “Not now. Sweetling, I have... well, call it the seed of a plan. I think I might be able to bring you into the castle kitchens.”

Shae’s face went still. “The kitchens?”

“Yes. If I act through Varys, no one will be the wiser.”

She giggled. “M’lord, I’d poison you. Every man who’s tasted my cooking has told me what a good whore I am.”

“The Red Keep has sufficient cooks. Butchers and bakers too. You’d need to pose as a scullion.”

“A pot girl,” she said, “in scratchy brown roughspun. Is that how m’lord wants to see me?”

“M’lord wants to see you alive,” Tyrion said. “You can scarcely scour pots in silk and velvet.”

“Has m’lord grown tired of me?” She reached a hand under his tunic and found his cock. In two quick strokes she had it hard. “He still wants me.” She laughed. “Would you like to fuck your kitchen wench, m’lord? You can dust me with flour and suck gravy off my titties if you...”

“Stop it.” The way she was acting reminded him of Dancy, who had tried so hard to win her wager. He yanked her hand away to keep her from further mischief. “This is not the time for bed sport, Shae. Your life may be at stake.”

Her grin was gone. “If I’ve displeased m’lord, I never meant it, only... couldn’t you just give me more guards?”

Tyrion breathed a deep sigh. Remember how young she is, he told himself. He took her hand. “Your gems can be replaced, and new gowns can be sewn twice as lovely as the old. To me, you’re the most precious thing within these walls. The Red Keep is not safe either, but it’s a deal safer than here. I want you there.”

“In the kitchens.” Her voice was flat. “Scouring pots.”

“For a short while.”

“My father made me his kitchen wench,” she said, her mouth twisting. “That was why I ran off.”

“You told me you ran off because your father made you his whore,” he reminded her.

“That too. I didn’t like scouring his pots no more than I liked his cock in me.” She tossed her head. “Why can’t you keep me in your tower? Half the lords at court keep bedwarmers.”

“I was expressly forbidden to take you to court.”

“By your stupid father.” Shae pouted. “You’re old enough to keep all the whores you want. Does he take you for a beardless boy? What could he do, spank you?”

He slapped her. Not hard, but hard enough. “Damn you,” he said. “Damn you. Never mock me. Not you.”

For a moment Shae did not speak. The only sound was the cricket, chirping, chirping. “Beg pardon, m’lord,” she said at last, in a heavy wooden voice. “I never meant to be impudent.”

And I never meant to strike you. Gods be good, am I turning into Cersei? “That was ill done,” he said. “On both our parts. Shae, you do not understand.” Words he had never meant to speak came tumbling out of him like mummings from a hollow horse. “When I was thirteen, I wed a crofter’s daughter. Or so I thought her. I was blind with love for her, and thought she felt the same for me, but my father rubbed my face in the truth. My bride was a whore Jaime had hired to give me my first taste of manhood.” And I believed all of it, fool that I was. “To drive the lesson home, Lord Tywin gave my wife to a barracks of his guardsmen to use as they pleased, and commanded me to watch.” And to take her one last time, after the rest were done. one last time, with no trace of love or tenderness remaining. “So you will remember her as she truly is,” he said, and I should have defied him, but my cock betrayed me, and I did as I was bid. “After he was done with her, my father had the marriage undone. It was as if we had never been wed, the septons said.” He squeezed her hand. “Please, let’s have no more talk of the Tower of the Hand. You will be in the kitchens only a little while. Once we’re done with Stannis, you’ll have another manse, and silks as soft as your hands.”

Shae’s eyes had grown large but he could not read what lay behind them. “My hands won’t be soft if I clean ovens and scrape plates all day. Will you still want them touching you when they’re all red and raw and cracked from hot water and lye soap?”

“More than ever,” he said. “When I look at them, they’ll remind me how brave you were.”

He could not say if she believed him. She lowered her eyes. “I am yours to command, m’lord.”

It was as much acceptance as she could give tonight, he saw that plain enough. He kissed her cheek where he’d struck her, to take some sting from the blow. “I will send for you.”

Varys was waiting in the stables, as promised. His horse looked spavined and half-dead. Tyrion mounted up; one of the sellswords opened the gates. They rode out in silence. Why did I tell her about Tasha, gods help me? he asked himself, suddenly afraid. There were some secrets that should never be spoken, some shames a man should take to his grave. What did he want from her, forgiveness? The way she had looked at him, what did that mean? Did she hate the thought of scouring pots that much, or was it his confession? How could I tell her that and still think she

would love me? part of him said, and another part mocked, saying, Fool of a dwarf, it is only the gold and jewels the whore loves.

His scarred elbow was throbbing, jarred every time the horse set down a hoof. Sometimes he could almost fancy he heard the bones grinding together inside. Perhaps he should see a maester, get some potion for the pain... but since Pycelle had revealed himself for what he was, Tyrion Lannister mistrusted the maesters. The gods only knew who they were conspiring with, or what they had mixed in those potions they gave you. "Varys," he said. "I need to bring Shae into the castle without Cersei becoming aware." Briefly, he sketched out his kitchen scheme.

When he was done, the eunuch made a little clucking sound. "I will do as my lord commands, of course... but I must warn you, the kitchens are full of eyes and ears. Even if the girl falls under no particular suspicion, she will be subject to a thousand questions. Where was she born? Who were her parents? How did she come to King's Landing? The truth will never do, so she must lie... and lie, and lie." He glanced down at Tyrion. "And such a pretty young kitchen wench will incite lust as well as curiosity. She will be touched, pinched, patted, and fondled. Pot boys will crawl under her blankets of a night. Some lonely cook may seek to wed her. Bakers will knead her breasts with floured hands."

"I'd sooner have her fondled than stabbed," said Tyrion.

Varys rode on a few paces and said, "It might be that there is another way. As it happens, the maidservant who attends Lady Tanda's daughter has been filching her jewels. Were I to inform Lady Tanda, she would be forced to dismiss the girl at once. And the daughter would require a new maidservant."

"I see." This had possibilities, Tyrion saw at once. A lady's bedmaid wore finer garb than a scullion, and often even a jewel or two. Shae should be pleased by that. And Cersei thought Lady Tanda tedious and hysterical, and Lollys a bovine lackwit. She was not like to pay them any friendly calls.

"Lollys is timid and trusting," Varys said. "She will accept any tale she is told. Since the mob took her maidenhood she is afraid to leave her chambers, so Shae will be out of sight... but conveniently close, should you have need of comfort."

"The Tower of the Hand is watched, you know as well as I, Cersei would be certain to grow curious if Lollys's bedmaid starting paying me calls."

"I might be able to slip the child into your bedchamber unseen. Chataya's is not the only house to boast a hidden door."

"A secret access? To my chambers?" Tyrion was more annoyed than surprised. Why else would Maegor the Cruel have ordered death for all the builders who had worked on his castle, except to preserve such secrets? "Yes, I suppose there would be. Where will I find the door? In my solar? My bedchamber?"

"My friend, you would not force me to reveal all my little secrets, would you?"

"Henceforth think of them as our little secrets, Varys." Tyrion glanced up at the eunuch in his smelly mummer's garb. "Assuming you are on my side..."

"Can you doubt it?"

“Why no, I trust you implicitly.” A bitter laugh echoed off the shuttered windows. “I trust you like one of my own blood, in truth. Now tell me how Cortnay Penrose died.”

“It is said that he threw himself from a tower.”

“Threw himself? No, I will not believe that!”

“His guards saw no man enter his chambers, nor did they find any within afterward.”

“Then the killer entered earlier and hid under the bed,” Tyrion suggested, “or he climbed down from the roof on a rope. Perhaps the guards are lying. Who’s to say they did not do the thing themselves?”

“Doubtless you are right, my lord.”

His smug tone said otherwise. “But you do not think so? How was it done, then?”

For a long moment Varys said nothing. The only sound was the stately clack of horseshoes on cobbles. Finally the eunuch cleared his throat. “My lord, do you believe in the old powers?”

“Magic, you mean?” Tyrion said impatiently. “Bloodspells, curses, shapeshifting, those sorts of things?” He snorted. “Do you mean to suggest that Ser Cortnay was magicked to his death?”

“Ser Cortnay had challenged Lord Stannis to single combat on the morning he died. I ask you, is this the act of a man lost to despair? Then there is the matter of Lord Renly’s mysterious and most fortuitous murder, even as his battle lines were forming up to sweep his brother from the field.” The eunuch paused a moment. “My lord, you once asked me how it was that I was cut.”

“I recall,” said Tyrion. “You did not want to talk of it.”

“Nor do I, but...” This pause was longer than the one before, and when Varys spoke again his voice was different somehow. “I was an orphan boy apprenticed to a traveling folly. Our master owned a fat little cog and we sailed up and down the narrow sea performing in all the Free Cities and from time to time in Oldtown and King’s Landing.

“One day at Myr, a certain man came to our folly. After the performance, he made an offer for me that my master found too tempting to refuse. I was in terror. I feared the man meant to use me as I had heard men used small boys, but in truth the only part of me he had need of was my manhood. He gave me a potion that made me powerless to move or speak, yet did nothing to dull my senses. With a long hooked blade, he sliced me root and stem, chanting all the while. I watched him burn my manly parts on a brazier. The flames turned blue, and I heard a voice answer his call, though I did not understand the words they spoke.

“The mummers had sailed by the time he was done with me. Once I had served his purpose, the man had no further interest in me, so he put me out. When I asked him what I should do now, he answered that he supposed I should die. To spite him, I resolved to live. I begged, I stole, and I sold what parts of my body still remained to me. Soon I was as good a thief as any in Myr, and when I was older I learned that often the contents of a man’s letters are more valuable than the contents of his purse.

“Yet I still dream of that night, my lord. Not of the sorcerer, nor his blade, nor even the way my manhood shriveled as it burned. I dream of the voice. The voice from the flames. Was it a god, a demon, some conjurer’s trick? I could not tell you, and I know all the tricks. All I can say for a

certainty is that he called it, and it answered, and since that day I have hated magic and all those who practice it. If Lord Stannis is one such, I mean to see him dead.”

When he was done, they rode in silence for a time. Finally Tyrion said, “A harrowing tale. I’m sorry.”

The eunuch sighed. “You are sorry, but you do not believe me. No, my lord, no need to apologize. I was drugged and in pain and it was a very long time ago and far across the sea. No doubt I dreamed that voice. I’ve told myself as much a thousand times.”

“I believe in steel swords, gold coins, and men’s wits,” said Tyrion. “And I believe there once were dragons. I’ve seen their skulls, after all.”

“Let us hope that is the worst thing you ever see, my lord.”

“On that we agree.” Tyrion smiled. “And for Ser Cortnay’s death, well, we know Stannis hired sellsails from the Free Cities. Perhaps he bought himself a skilled assassin as well.”

“A very skilled assassin.”

“There are such. I used to dream that one day I’d be rich enough to send a Faceless Man after my sweet sister.”

“Regardless of how Ser Cortnay died,” said Varys, “he is dead, the castle fallen. Stannis is free to march.”

“Any chance we might convince the Dornishmen to descend on the Marches?” asked Tyrion.

“None.”

“A pity. Well, the threat may serve to keep the Marcher lords close to their castles, at least. What news of my father?”

“If Lord Tywin has won across the Red Fork, no word has reached me yet. If he does not hasten, he may be trapped between his foes. The Oakheart leaf and the Rowan tree have been seen north of the Mander.”

“No word from Littlefinger?”

“Perhaps he never reached Bitterbridge. Or perhaps he’s died there. Lord Tarly has seized Renly’s stores and put a great many to the sword; Florents, chiefly. Lord Caswell has shut himself up in his castle.”

Tyrion threw back his head and laughed.

Varys reined up, nonplussed. “My lord?”

“Don’t you see the jest, Lord Varys?” Tyrion waved a hand at the shuttered windows, at all the sleeping city. “Storm’s End is fallen and Stannis is coming with fire and steel and the gods alone know what dark powers, and the good folk don’t have Jaime to protect them, nor Robert nor Renly nor Rhaegar nor their precious Knight of Flowers. Only me, the one they hate.” He laughed again. “The dwarf, the evil counselor, the twisted little monkey demon. I’m all that stands between them and chaos.”

CATELYN

“Tell Father I have gone to make him proud.” Her brother swung up into his saddle, every inch the lord in his bright mail and flowing mud-and-water cloak. A silver trout ornamented the crest of his greathelm, twin to the one painted on his shield.

“He was always proud of you, Edmure. And he loves you fiercely. Believe that.”

“I mean to give him better reason than mere birth.” He wheeled his warhorse about and raised a hand. Trumpets sounded, a drum began to boom, the drawbridge descended in fits and starts, and Ser Edmure Tully led his men out from Riverrun with lances raised and banners streaming.

I have a greater host than yours, brother, Catelyn thought as she watched them go. A host of doubts and fears.

Beside her, Brienne’s misery was almost palpable. Catelyn had ordered garments sewn to her measure, handsome gowns to suit her birth and sex, yet still she preferred to dress in oddments of mail and boiled leather, a swordbelt cinched around her waist. She would have been happier riding to war with Edmure, no doubt, but even walls as strong as Riverrun’s required swords to hold them. Her brother had taken every able-bodied man for the fords, leaving Ser Desmond Grell to command a garrison made up of the wounded, the old, and the sick, along with a few squires and some untrained peasant boys still shy of manhood. This, to defend a castle crammed full of women and children.

When the last of Edmure’s foot had shuffled under the portcullis, Brienne asked, “What shall we do now, my lady?”

“Our duty.” Catelyn’s face was drawn as she started across the yard. I have always done my duty, she thought. Perhaps that was why her lord father had always cherished her best of all his children. Her two older brothers had both died in infancy, so she had been son as well as daughter to Lord Hoster until Edmure was born. Then her mother had died and her father had told her that she must be the lady of Riverrun now, and she had done that too. And when Lord Hoster promised her to Brandon Stark, she had thanked him for making her such a splendid match.

I gave Brandon my favor to wear, and never comforted Petyr once after he was wounded, nor bid him farewell when Father sent him off. And when Brandon was murdered and Father told me I must wed his brother, I did so gladly, though I never saw Ned’s face until our wedding day. I gave my maidenhood to this solemn stranger and sent him off to his war and his king and the woman who bore him his bastard, because I always did my duty.

Her steps took her to the sept, a seven-sided sandstone temple set amidst her mother’s gardens and filled with rainbow light. It was crowded when they entered; Catelyn was not alone in her need for prayer. She knelt before the painted marble image of the Warrior and lit a scented candle for Edmure and another for Robb off beyond the hills. Keep them safe and help them to victory, she prayed, and bring peace to the souls of the slain and comfort to those they leave behind.

The septon entered with his censer and crystal while she was at her prayers, so Catelyn lingered for the celebration. She did not know this septon, an earnest young man close to Edmure's age. He performed his office well enough, and his voice was rich and pleasant when he sang the praises to the Seven, but Catelyn found herself yearning for the thin quavering tones of Septon Osmynd, long dead. Osmynd would have listened patiently to the tale of what she had seen and felt in Renly's pavilion, and he might have known what it meant as well, and what she must do to lay to rest the shadows that stalked her dreams. Osmynd, my father, Uncle Brynden, old Maester Kym, they always seemed to know everything, but now there is only me, and it seems I know nothing, not even my duty. How can I do my duty if I do not know where it lies?

Catelyn's knees were stiff by the time she rose, though she felt no wiser. Perhaps she would go to the godswood tonight, and pray to Ned's gods as well. They were older than the Seven.

Outside, she found song of a very different sort. Rymund the Rhymer sat by the brewhouse amidst a circle of listeners, his deep voice ringing as he sang of Lord Deremond at the Bloody Meadow.

And there he stood with sword in hand, the last of Darry's ten...

Brienne paused to listen for a moment, broad shoulders hunched and thick arms crossed against her chest. A mob of ragged boys raced by, screeching and flailing at each other with sticks. Why do boys so love to play at war? Catelyn wondered if Rymund was the answer. The singer's voice swelled as he neared the end of his song.

And red the grass beneath his feet, and red his banners bright, and red the glow of setting sun that bathed him in its light. "Come on, come on," the great lord called, "my sword is hungry still. And with a cry of savage rage, They swarmed across the rill..."

"Fighting is better than this waiting," Brienne said. "You don't feel so helpless when you fight. You have a sword and a horse, sometimes an axe. When you're armored it's hard for anyone to hurt you."

"Knights die in battle," Catelyn reminded her.

Brienne looked at her with those blue and beautiful eyes. "As ladies die in childbed. No one sings songs about them."

"Children are a battle of a different sort." Catelyn started across the yard. "A battle without banners or warhorns, but no less fierce. Carrying a child, bringing it into the world... your mother will have told you of the pain..."

"I never knew my mother," Brienne said. "My father had ladies... a different lady every year, but..."

"Those were no ladies," Catelyn said. "As hard as birth can be, Brienne, what comes after is even harder. At times I feel as though I am being torn apart. Would that there were five of me, one for each child, so I might keep them all safe."

"And who would keep you safe, my lady?"

Her smile was wan and tired. "Why, the men of my House. Or so my lady mother taught me. My lord father, my brother, my uncle, my husband, they will keep me safe... but while they are away from me, I suppose you must fill their place, Brienne."

Brienne bowed her head. "I shall try, my lady."

Later that day, Maester Vyman brought a letter. She saw him at once, hoping for some word from Robb, or from Ser Rodrik in Winterfell, but the message proved to be from one Lord Meadows, who named himself castellan of Storm's End. It was addressed to her father, her brother, her son, "or whoever now holds Riverrun." Ser Cortnay Penrose was dead, the man wrote, and Storm's End had opened its gate to Stannis Baratheon, the trueborn and rightful heir. The castle garrison had sworn their swords to his cause, one and all, and no man of them had suffered harm.

"Save Cortnay Penrose," Catelyn murmured. She had never met the man, yet she grieved to hear of his passing. "Robb should know of this at once," she said. "Do we know where he is?"

"At last word he was marching toward the Crag, the seat of House Westerling," said Maester Vyman. "If I dispatched a raven to Ashemark, it may be that they could send a rider after him."

"Do so."

Catelyn read the letter again after the maester was gone. "Lord Meadows says nothing of Robert's bastard," she confided to Brienne. "I suppose he yielded the boy with the rest, though I confess, I do not understand why Stannis wanted him so badly."

"Perhaps he fears the boy's claim."

"A bastard's claim? No, it's something else... what does this child look like?"

"He is seven or eight, comely, with black hair and bright blue eyes. Visitors oft thought him Lord Renly's own son."

"And Renly favored Robert." Catelyn had a glimmer of understanding. "Stannis means to parade his brother's bastard before the realm, so men might see Robert in his face and wonder why there is no such likeness in Joffrey."

"Would that mean so much?"

"Those who favor Stannis will call it proof. Those who support Joffrey will say it means nothing." Her own children had more Tully about them than Stark. Arya was the only one to show much of Ned in her features. And Jon Snow, but he was never mine. She found herself thinking of Jon's mother, that shadowy secret love her husband would never speak of. Does she grieve for Ned as I do? Or did she hate him for leaving her bed for mine? Does she pray for her son as I have prayed for mine?

They were uncomfortable thoughts, and futile. If Jon had been born of Ashara Dayne of Starfall, as some whispered, the lady was long dead; if not, Catelyn had no clue who or where his mother might be. And it made no matter. Ned was gone now, and his loves and his secrets had all died with him.

Still, she was struck again by how strangely men behaved when it came to their bastards. Ned had always been fiercely protective of Jon, and Ser Cortnay Penrose had given up his life for this Eddard Storm, yet Roose Bolton's bastard had meant less to him than one of his dogs, to judge from the tone of the queer cold letter Edmure had gotten from him not three days past. He had crossed the Trident and was marching on Harrenhal as commanded, he wrote. "A strong castle, and well garrisoned, but His Grace shall have it, if I must kill every living soul within to make it

so.” He hoped His Grace would weigh that against the crimes of his bastard son, whom Ser Rodrik Cassel had put to death. “A fate he no doubt earned,” Bolton had written. “Tainted blood is ever treacherous, and Ramsay’s nature was sly, greedy, and cruel. I count myself well rid of him. The trueborn sons my young wife has promised me would never have been safe while he lived.”

The sound of hurrying footsteps drove the morbid thoughts from her head. Ser Desmond’s squire dashed panting into the room and knelt. “My lady... Lannisters... across the river.”

“Take a long breath, lad, and tell it slowly.”

He did as she bid him. “A column of armored men,” he reported. “Across the Red Fork. They are flying a purple unicorn below the lion of Lannister.”

Some son of Lord Brax. Brax had come to Riverrun once when she was a girl, to propose wedding one of his sons to her or Lysa. She wondered whether it was this same son out there now, leading the attack.

The Lannisters had ridden out of the southeast beneath a blaze of banners, Ser Desmond told her when she ascended to the battlements to join him. “A few outriders, no more,” he assured her. “The main strength of Lord Tywin’s host is well to the south. We are in no danger here.”

South of the Red Fork the land stretched away open and flat. From the watchtower Catelyn could see for miles. Even so, only the nearest ford was visible. Edmure had entrusted Lord Jason Mallister with its defense, as well as that of three others farther upriver. The Lannister riders were milling about uncertainly near the water, crimson and silver banners flapping in the wind. “No more than fifty, my lady,” Ser Desmond estimated.

Catelyn watched the riders spread out in a long line. Lord Jason’s men waited to receive them behind rocks and grass and hillocks. A trumpet blast sent the horsemen forward at a ponderous walk, splashing down into the current. For a moment they made a brave show, all bright armor and streaming banners, the sun flashing off the points of their lances.

“Now,” she heard Brienne mutter.

It was hard to make out what was happening, but the screams of the horses seemed loud even at this remove, and beneath them Catelyn heard the fainter clash of steel on steel. A banner vanished suddenly as its bearer was swept under, and soon after the first dead man drifted past their walls, borne along by the current. By then the Lannisters had pulled back in confusion. She watched as they re-formed, conferred briefly, and galloped back the way they had come. The men on the walls shouted taunts after them, though they were already too far off to hear.

Ser Desmond slapped his belly. “Would that Lord Hoster could have seen that. It would have made him dance.”

“My father’s dancing days are past, I fear,” Catelyn said, “and this fight is just begun. The Lannisters will come again. Lord Tywin has twice my brother’s numbers.”

“He could have ten times and it would not matter,” Ser Desmond said. “The west bank of the Red Fork is higher than the east, my lady, and well wooded. Our bowmen have good cover, and a clear field for their shafts... and should any breach occur, Edmure will have his best knights in reserve, ready to ride wherever they are most sorely needed. The river will hold them.”

“I pray that you are right,” Catelyn said gravely.

That night they came again. She had commanded them to wake her at once if the enemy returned, and well after midnight a serving girl touched her gently by the shoulder. Catelyn sat up at once. “What is it?”

“The ford again, my lady.”

Wrapped in a bedrobe, Catelyn climbed to the roof of the keep. From there she could see over the walls and the moonlit river to where the battle raged. The defenders had built watchfires along the bank, and perhaps the Lannisters thought to find them night-blind or unwary. If so, it was folly. Darkness was a chancy ally at best. As they waded in to breast their way across, men stepped in hidden pools and went down splashing, while others stumbled over stones or gashed their feet on the hidden caltrops. The Mallister bowmen sent a storm of fire arrows hissing across the river, strangely beautiful from afar. One man, pierced through a dozen times, his clothes afire, danced and whirled in the knee-deep water until at last he fell and was swept downstream. By the time his body came bobbing past Riverrun, the fires and his life had both been extinguished.

A small victory, Catelyn thought when the fighting had ended and the surviving foemen had melted back into the night, yet a victory nonetheless. As they descended the winding turret steps, Catelyn asked Brienne for her thoughts. “That was the brush of Lord Tywin’s fingertip, my lady,” the girl said. “He is probing, feeling for a weak point, an undefended crossing. If he does not find one, he will curl all his fingers into a fist and try and make one.” Brienne hunched her shoulders. “That’s what I’d do. Were I him.” Her hand went to the hilt of her sword and gave it a little pat, as if to make certain it was still there.

And may the gods help us then, Catelyn thought. Yet there was nothing she could do for it. That was Edmure’s battle out there on the river; hers was here inside the castle.

The next morning as she broke her fast, she sent for her father’s aged steward, Utherydes Wayn. “Have Ser Cleos Frey brought a flagon of wine. I mean to question him soon, and I want his tongue well loosened.”

“As you command, my lady.”

Not long after, a rider with the Mallister eagle sewn on his breast arrived with a message from Lord Jason, telling of another skirmish and another victory. Ser Flement Brax had tried to force a crossing at a different ford six leagues to the south. This time the Lannisters shortened their lances and advanced across the river behind on foot, but the Mallister bowmen had rained high arcing shots down over their shields, while the scorpions Edmure had mounted on the riverbank sent heavy stones crashing through to break up the formation. “They left a dozen dead in the water, only two reaching the shallows, where we dealt with them briskly,” the rider reported. He also told of fighting farther upstream, where Lord Karyl Vance held the fords. “Those thrusts too were turned aside, at grievous cost to our foes.”

Perhaps Edmure was wiser than I knew, Catelyn thought. His lords all saw the sense in his battle plans, why was I so blind? My brother is not the little boy I remember, no more than Robb is.

She waited until evening before going to pay her call upon Ser Cleos Frey, reasoning that the longer she delayed, the drunker he was likely to be. As she entered the tower cell, Ser Cleos stumbled to his knees. “My lady, I knew naught of any escape. The Imp said a Lannister must needs have a Lannister escort, on my oath as a knight-”

“Arise, ser.” Catelyn seated herself. “I know no grandson of Walder Frey would be an oathbreaker.” Unless it served his purpose. “You brought peace terms, my brother said.”

“I did.” Ser Cleos lurched to his feet. She was pleased to see how unsteady he was.

“Tell me,” she commanded, and he did.

When he was done, Catelyn sat frowning. Edmure had been right, these were no terms at all, except “Lannister will exchange Arya and Sansa for his brother?”

“Yes. He sat on the Iron Throne and swore it.”

“Before witnesses?”

“Before all the court, my lady. And the gods as well. I said as much to Ser Edmure, but he told me it was not possible, that His Grace Robb would never consent.”

“He told you true.” She could not even say that Robb was wrong. Arya and Sansa were children. The Kingslayer, alive and free, was as dangerous as any man in the realm. That road led nowhere. “Did you see my girls? Are they treated well?”

Ser Cleos hesitated. “I... yes, they seemed.”

He is fumbling for a lie, Catelyn realized, but the wine has fuddled his wits. “Ser Cleos,” she said coolly, “you forfeited the protection of your peace banner when your men played us false. Lie to me, and you’ll hang from the walls beside them. Believe that. I shall ask you once more—did you see my daughters?”

His brow was damp with sweat. “I saw Sansa at the court, the day Tyrion told me his terms. She looked most beautiful, my lady. Perhaps a, a bit wan. Drawn, as it were.”

Sansa, but not Arya. That might mean anything. Arya had always been harder to tame. Perhaps Cersei was reluctant to parade her in open court for fear of what she might say or do. They might have her locked safely out of sight. Or they might have killed her. Catelyn shoved the thought away. “His terms, you said... yet Cersei is Queen Regent.”

“Tyrion spoke for both of them. The queen was not there. She was indisposed that day, I was told.”

“Curious.” Catelyn thought back to that terrible trek through the Mountains of the Moon, and the way Tyrion Lannister had somehow seduced that sellsword from her service to his own. The dwarf is too clever by half. She could not imagine how he had survived the high road after Lysa had sent him from the Vale, yet it did not surprise her. He had no part in Ned’s murder, at the least. And he came to my defense when the clansmen attacked us. If I could trust his word...

She opened her hands to look down at the scars across her fingers. His dagger’s marks, she reminded herself. His dagger, in the hand of the killer he paid to open Bran’s throat. Though the dwarf denied it, to be sure. Even after Lysa locked him in one of her sky cells and threatened him with her moon door, he had still denied it. “He lied,” she said, rising abruptly. “The Lannisters are liars every one, and the dwarf is the worst of them. The killer was armed with his own knife.”

Ser Cleos stared. "I know nothing of any-"

"You know nothing," she agreed, sweeping from the cell. Brienne fell in beside her, silent. It is simpler for her, Catelyn thought with a pang of envy. She was like a man in that. For men the answer was always the same, and never farther away than the nearest sword. For a woman, a mother, the way was stonier and harder to know.

She took a late supper in the Great Hall with her garrison, to give them what encouragement she could. Rymund the Rhymer sang through all the courses, sparing her the need to talk. He closed with the song he had written about Robb's victory at Oxcross. "And the stars in the night were the eyes of his wolves, and the wind itself was their song. "

Between the verses, Rymund threw back his head and howled, and by the end, half of the hall was howling along with him, even Desmond Grell, who was well in his cups. Their voices rang off the rafters.

Let them have their songs, if it makes them brave, Catelyn thought, toying with her silver goblet.

"There was always a singer at Evenfall Hall when I was a girl," Brienne said quietly. "I learned all the songs by heart."

"Sansa did the same, though few singers ever cared to make the long journey north to Winterfell." I told her there would be singers at the king's court, though. I told her she would hear music of all sorts, that her father could find some master to help her learn the high harp. Oh, gods forgive me...

Brienne said, "I remember a woman... she came from some place across the narrow sea. I could not even say what language she sang in, but her voice was as lovely as she was. She had eyes the color of plums and her waist was so tiny my father could put his hands around it. His hands were almost as big as mine." She closed her long, thick fingers, as if to hide them.

"Did you sing for your father?" Catelyn asked.

Brienne shook her head, staring down at her trencher as if to find some answer in the gravy.

"For Lord Renly?"

The girl reddened. "Never, I... his fool, he made cruel japes sometimes, and I..."

"Someday you must sing for me."

"I... please, I have no gift." Brienne pushed back from the table. "Forgive me, my lady. Do I have your leave to go?"

Catelyn nodded. The tall, ungainly girl left the hall with long strides, almost unnoticed amidst the revelry. May the gods go with her, she thought as she returned listlessly to her supper.

It was three days later when the hammer blow that Brienne had foretold fell, and five days before they heard of it. Catelyn was sitting with her father when Edmure's messenger arrived. The man's armor was dented, his boots dusty, and he had a ragged hole in his surcoat, but the look on his face as he knelt was enough to tell her that the news was good. "Victory, my lady." He handed her Edmure's letter. Her hand trembled as she broke the seal.

Lord Tywin had tried to force a crossing at a dozen different fords, her brother wrote, but every thrust had been thrown back. Lord Lefford had been drowned, the Crakehall knight called

Strongboar taken captive, Ser Addam. Marbrand thrice forced to retreat... but the fiercest battle had been fought at Stone Mill, where Ser Gregor Clegane had led the assault. So many of his men had fallen that their dead horses threatened to dam the flow. In the end the Mountain and a handful of his best had gained the west bank, but Edmure had thrown his reserve at them, and they had shattered and reeled away bloody and beaten. Ser Gregor himself had lost his horse and staggered back across the Red Fork bleeding from a dozen wounds while a rain of arrows and stones fell all around him. "They shall not cross, Cat," Edmure scrawled, "Lord Tywin is marching to the southeast. A feint perhaps, or full retreat, it matters not. They shall not cross."

Ser Desmond Grell had been elated. "Oh, if only I might have been with him," the old knight said when she read him the letter. "Where is that fool Rymund? There's a song in this, by the gods, and one that even Edmure will want to hear. The mill that ground the Mountain down, I could almost make the words myself, had I the singer's gift."

"I'll hear no songs until the fighting's done," Catelyn said, perhaps too sharply. Yet she allowed Ser Desmond to spread the word, and agreed when he suggested breaking open some casks in honor of Stone Mill. The mood within Riverrun had been strained and somber; they would all be better for a little drink and hope.

That night the castle rang to the sounds of celebration. "Riverrun!" the smallfolk shouted, and "Tully! Tully!" They'd come frightened and helpless, and her brother had taken them in when most lords would have closed their gates. Their voices floated in through the high windows, and seeped under the heavy redwood doors. Rymund played his harp, accompanied by a pair of drummers and a youth with a set of reed pipes. Catelyn listened to girlish laughter, and the excited chatter of the green boys her brother had left her for a garrison. Good sounds... and yet they did not touch her. She could not share their happiness.

In her father's solar she found a heavy leatherbound book of maps and opened it to the riverlands. Her eyes found the path of the Red Fork and traced it by flickering candlelight. Marching to the southeast, she thought. By now they had likely reached the headwaters of the Blackwater Rush, she decided.

She closed the book even more uneasy than before. The gods had granted them victory after victory. At Stone Mill, at Oxcross, in the Battle of the Camps, at the Whispering Wood...

But if we are winning, why am I so afraid?

BRAN

The sound was the faintest of clinks, a scraping of steel over stone. He lifted his head from his paws, listening, sniffing at the night. The evening's rain had woken a hundred sleeping smells and made them ripe and strong again. Grass and thorns, blackberries broken on the ground, mud, worms, rotting leaves, a rat creeping through the bush. He caught the shaggy black scent of his brother's coat and the sharp coppery tang of blood from the squirrel he'd killed. Other squirrels moved through the branches above, smelling of wet fur and fear, their little claws scratching at the bark. The noise had sounded something like that.

And he heard it again, clink and scrape. It brought him to his feet. His ears pricked and his tail rose. He howled, a long deep shivery cry, a howl to wake the sleepers, but the piles of man-rock were dark and dead. A still wet night, a night to drive men into their holes. The rain had stopped, but the men still hid from the damp, huddled by the fires in their caves of piled stone.

His brother came sliding through the trees, moving almost as quiet as another brother he remembered dimly from long ago, the white one with the eyes of blood. This brother's eyes were pools of shadow, but the fur on the back of his neck was bristling. He had heard the sounds as well, and known they meant danger.

This time the clink and scrape were followed by a slithering and the soft swift patter of skinfeet on stone. The wind brought the faintest whiff of a man-smell he did not know. Stranger. Danger. Death.

He ran toward the sound, his brother racing beside him. The stone dens rose before them, walls slick and wet. He bared his teeth, but the man-rock took no notice. A gate loomed up, a black iron snake coiled tight about bar and post. When he crashed against it, the gate shuddered and the snake clanked and slithered and held. Through the bars he could look down the long stone burrow that ran between the walls to the stony field beyond, but there was no way through. He could force his muzzle between the bars, but no more. Many a time his brother had tried to crack the black bones of the gate between his teeth, but they would not break. They had tried to dig under, but there were great flat stones beneath, half-covered by earth and blown leaves.

Snarling, he paced back and forth in front of the gate, then threw himself at it once more. It moved a little and slammed him back. Locked, something whispered. Chained. The voice he did not hear, the scent without a smell. The other ways were closed as well. Where doors opened in the walls of man-rock, the wood was thick and strong. There was no way out.

There is, the whisper came, and it seemed as if he could see the shadow of a great tree covered in needles, slanting up out of the black earth to ten times the height of a man. Yet when he looked about, it was not there. The other side of the godswood, the sentinel, hurry, hurry...

Through the gloom of night came a muffled shout, cut short.

Swiftly, swiftly, he whirled and bounded back into the trees, wet leaves rustling beneath his paws, branches whipping at him as he rushed past. He could hear his brother following close. They plunged under the heart tree and around the cold pool, through the blackberry bushes, under a tangle of oaks and ash and hawthorn scrub, to the far side of the wood... and there it was,

the shadow he'd glimpsed without seeing, the slanting tree pointing at the rooftops. Sentinel, came the thought.

He remembered how it was to climb it then. The needles everywhere, scratching at his bare face and falling down the back of his neck, the sticky sap on his hands, the sharp piney smell of it. It was an easy tree for a boy to climb, leaning as it did, crooked, the branches so close together they almost made a ladder, slanting right up to the roof.

Growling, he sniffed around the base of the tree, lifted a leg and marked it with a stream of urine. A low branch brushed his face, and he snapped at it, twisting and pulling until the wood cracked and tore. His mouth was full of needles and the bitter taste of the sap. He shook his head and snarled.

His brother sat back on his haunches and lifted his voice in a ululating howl, his song black with mourning. The way was no way. They were not squirrels, nor the cubs of men, they could not wriggle up the trunks of trees, clinging with soft pink paws and clumsy feet. They were runners, hunters, prowlers.

Off across the night, beyond the stone that hemmed them close, the dogs woke and began to bark. One and then another and then all of them, a great clamor. They smelled it too; the scent of foes and fear.

A desperate fury filled him, hot as hunger. He sprang away from the wall loped off beneath the trees, the shadows of branch and leaf dappling his grey fur... and then he turned and raced back in a rush. His feet flew kicking up wet leaves and pine needles, and for a little time he was a hunter and an antlered stag was fleeing before him and he could see it, smell it, and he ran full out in pursuit. The smell of fear made his heart thunder and slaver ran from his jaws, and he reached the falling tree in stride and threw himself up the trunk, claws scrabbling at the bark for purchase. Upward he bounded, up, two bounds, three, hardly slowing, until he was among the lower limbs. Branches tangled his feet and whipped at his eyes, grey-green needles scattered as he shouldered through them, snapping. He had to slow. Something snagged at his foot and he wrenched it free, snarling. The trunk narrowed under him, the slope steeper, almost straight up, and wet. The bark tore like skin when he tried to claw at it. He was a third of the way up, halfway, more, the roof was almost within reach... and then he put down a foot and felt it slip off the curve of wet wood, and suddenly he was sliding, stumbling. He yowled in fear and fury, falling, falling, and twisted around while the ground rushed up to break him...

And then Bran was back abed in his lonely tower room, tangled in his blankets, his breath coming hard. "Summer," he cried aloud. "Summer." His shoulder seemed to ache, as if he had fallen on it, but he knew it was only the ghost of what the wolf was feeling. Jojen told it true. I am a beastling. Outside he could hear the faint barking of dogs. The sea has come. It's flowing over the walls, just as Jojen saw Bran grabbed the bar overhead and pulled himself up, shouting for help. No one came, and after a moment he remembered that no one would. They had taken the guard off his door. Ser Rodrik had needed every man of fighting age he could lay his hands on, so Winterfell had been left with only a token garrison.

The rest had left eight days past, six hundred men from Winterfell and the nearest holdfasts. Cley Cerwyn was bringing three hundred more to join them on the march, and Maester Luwin had sent ravens before them, summoning levies from White Harbor and the barrowlands and even the deep places inside the wolfswood. Torrhen's Square was under attack by some monstrous war chief named Dagmer Cleftjaw. Old Nan said he couldn't be killed, that once a foe had cut his head in two with an axe, but Dagmer was so fierce he'd just pushed the two halves back together and held them until they healed up. Could Dagmer have won? Torrhen's Square was many days from Winterfell, yet still...

Bran pulled himself from the bed, moving bar to bar until he reached the windows. His fingers fumbled a little as he swung back the shutters. The yard was empty, and all the windows he could see were black. Winterfell slept. "Hodor!" he shouted down, as loud as he could. Hodor would be asleep above the stables, but maybe if he yelled loud enough he'd hear, or somebody would. "Hodor, come fast! Osha! Meera, Jojen, anyone!" Bran cupped his hands around his mouth. "HOODOODOOOOR!"

But when the door crashed open behind him, the man who stepped through was no one Bran knew. He wore a leather jerkin sewn with overlapping iron disks, and carried a dirk in one hand and an axe strapped to his back. "What do you want?" Bran demanded, afraid. "This is my room. You get out of here."

Theon Greyjoy followed him into the bedchamber. "We're not here to harm you, Bran."

"Theon?" Bran felt dizzy with relief. "Did Robb send you? Is he here too?"

"Robb's far away. He can't help you now."

"Help me?" He was confused. "Don't scare me, Theon."

"I'm Prince Theon now. We're both princes, Bran. Who would have dreamed it? But I've taken your castle, my prince."

"Winterfell?" Bran shook his head. "No, you couldn't."

"Leave us, Werlag." The man with the dirk withdrew. Theon seated himself on the bed. "I sent four men over the walls with grappling claws and ropes, and they opened a postern gate for the rest of us. My men are dealing with yours even now. I promise you, Winterfell is mine."

Bran did not understand. "But you're Father's ward."

"And now you and your brother are my wards. As soon as the fighting's done, my men will be bringing the rest of your people together in the Great Hall. You and I are going to speak to them. You'll tell them how you've yielded Winterfell to me, and command them to serve and obey their new lord as they did the old."

"I won't," said Bran. "We'll fight you and throw you out. I never yielded, you can't make me say I did."

"This is no game, Bran, so don't play the boy with me, I won't stand for it. The castle is mine, but these people are still yours. If the prince would keep them safe, he'd best do as he's told." He rose and went to the door. "Someone will come dress you and carry you to the Great Hall. Think carefully on what you want to say."

The waiting made Bran feel even more helpless than before. He sat in the window seat, staring out at dark towers and walls black as shadow. Once he thought he heard shouting beyond the Guards Hall, and something that might have been the clash of swords, but he did not have Summer's ears to hear, nor his nose to smell. Awake, I am still broken, but when I sleep, when I'm Summer, I can run and fight and hear and smell.

He had expected that Hodor would come for him, or maybe one of the serving girls, but when the door next opened it was Maester Luwin, carrying a candle. "Bran," he said, "you... know what has happened? You have been told?" The skin was broken above his left eye, and blood ran down that side of his face.

"Theon came. He said Winterfell was his now."

The maester set down the candle and wiped the blood off his cheek. "They swam the moat. Climbed the walls with hook and rope. Came over wet and dripping, steel in hand." He sat on the chair by the door, as fresh blood flowed. "Alebelly was on the gate, they surprised him in the turret and killed him. Hayhead's wounded as well. I had time to send off two ravens before they burst in. The bird to White Harbor got away, but they brought down the other with an arrow." The maester stared at the rushes. "Ser Rodrik took too many of our men, but I am to blame as much as he is. I never saw this danger, I never..."

Jojen saw it, Bran thought. "You better help me dress."

"Yes, that's so." In the heavy ironbound chest at the foot of Bran's bed the maester found smallclothes, breeches, and tunic. "You are the Stark in Winterfell, and Robb's heir. You must look princely." Together they garbed him as befit a lord.

"Theon wants me to yield the castle," Bran said as the maester was fastening the cloak with his favorite wolf's-head clasp of silver and jet.

"There is no shame in that. A lord must protect his smallfolk. Cruel places breed cruel peoples, Bran, remember that as you deal with these ironmen. Your lord father did what he could to gentle Theon, but I fear it was too little and too late."

The ironman who came for them was a squat thick-bodied man with a coal-black beard that covered half his chest. He bore the boy easily enough, though he looked none too happy with the task. Rickon's bedchamber was a half turn down the steps. The four-year-old was cranky at being woken. "I want Mother," he said. "I want her. And Shaggydog too."

"Your mother is far away, my prince." Maester Luwin pulled a bedrobe over the child's head. "But I'm here, and Bran." He took Rickon by the hand and led him out.

Below, they came on Meera and Jojen being herded from their room by a bald man whose spear was three feet taller than he was. When Jojen looked at Bran, his eyes were green pools full of sorrow. Other ironmen had roused the Freys. "Your brother's lost his kingdom," Little Walder told Bran. "You're no prince now, just a hostage."

"So are you," Jojen said, "and me, and all of us."

"No one was talking to you, frog eater."

One of the ironmen went before them carrying a torch, but the rain had started again and soon drowned it out. As they hurried across the yard they could hear the direwolves howling in the godswood. I hope Summer wasn't hurt falling from the tree.

Theon Greyjoy was seated in the high seat of the Starks. He had taken off his cloak. Over a shirt of fine mail he wore a black surcoat emblazoned with the golden kraken of his House. His hands rested on the wolves' heads carved at the ends of the wide stone arms. "Theon's sitting in Robb's chair," Rickon said.

"Hush, Rickon." Bran could feel the menace around them, but his brother was too young. A few torches had been lit, and a fire kindled in the great hearth, but most of the hall remained in darkness. There was no place to sit with the benches stacked against the walls, so the castle folk stood in small groups, not daring to speak. He saw Old Nan, her toothless mouth opening and closing. Hayhead was carried in between two of the other guards, a bloodstained bandage wrapped about his bare chest. Poxym Tym wept inconsolably, and Beth Cassel cried with fear.

"What have we here?" Theon asked of the Reeds and Freys.

"These are Lady Catelyn's wards, both named Walder Frey," Maester Luwin explained. "And this is Jojen Reed and his sister Meera, son and daughter to Howland Reed of Greywater Watch, who came to renew their oaths of fealty to Winterfell."

"Some might call that ill-timed," said Theon, "though not for me. Here you are and here you'll stay." He vacated the high seat. "Bring the prince here, Lorren." The black-bearded man dumped Bran onto the stone as if he were a sack of oats.

People were still being driven into the Great Hall, prodded along with shouts and the butts of the spears. Gage and Osha arrived from the kitchens, spotted with flour from making the morning bread. Mikken they dragged in cursing. Farlen entered limping, struggling to support Palla. Her dress had been ripped in two; she held it up with a clenched fist and walked as if every step were agony. Septon Chayle rushed to lend a hand, but one of the ironmen knocked him to the floor.

The last man marched through the doors was the prisoner Reek, whose stench preceded him, ripe and pungent. Bran felt his stomach twist at the smell of him. "We found this one locked in a tower cell," announced his escort, a beardless youth with ginger-colored hair and sodden clothing, doubtless one of those who'd swum the moat. "He says they call him Reek."

"Can't think why," Theon said, smiling. "Do you always smell so bad, or did you just finish fucking a pig?"

"Haven't fucked no one since they took me, m'lord. Heke's me true name. I was in service to the Bastard o' the Dreadfort till the Starks give him an arrow in the back for a wedding gift."

Theon found that amusing. "Who did he marry?"

"The widow o' Hornwood, m'lord. "

"That crone? Was he blind? She has teats like empty wineskins, dry and withered."

"It wasn't her teats he wed her for, m'lord."

The ironmen slammed shut the tall doors at the foot of the hall. From the high seat, Bran could see about twenty of them. He probably left some guards on the gates and the armory. Even so, there couldn't be more than thirty.

Theon raised his hands for quiet. "You all know me—"

"Aye, we know you for a sack of steaming dung!" shouted Mikken, before the bald man drove the butt of his spear into his gut, then smashed him across the face with the shaft. The smith stumbled to his knees and spat out a tooth.

"Mikken, you be silent." Bran tried to sound stern and lordly, the way Robb did when he made a command, but his voice betrayed him and the words came out in a shrill squeak.

"Listen to your little lordling, Mikken," said Theon. "He has more sense than you do."

A good lord protects his people, he reminded himself. "I've yielded Winterfell to Theon."

"Louder, Bran. And call me prince."

He raised his voice. "I have yielded Winterfell to Prince Theon. All of you should do as he commands you."

"Damned if I will!" bellowed Mikken.

Theon ignored the outburst. "My father has donned the ancient crown of salt and rock, and declared himself King of the Iron Islands. He claims the north as well, by right of conquest. You are all his subjects."

"Bugger that." Mikken wiped the blood from his mouth. "I serve the Starks, not some treasonous squid of-aah." The butt of the spear smashed him face first into the stone floor.

"Smiths have strong arms and weak heads," observed Theon. "But if the rest of you serve me as loyally as you served Ned Stark, you'll find me as generous a lord as you could want."

On his hands and knees, Mikken spat blood. Please don't, Bran wished at him, but the blacksmith shouted, "If you think you can hold the north with this sorry lot o'—"

The bald man drove the point of his spear into the back of Mikken's neck. Steel slid through flesh and came out his throat in a welter of blood. A woman screamed, and Meera wrapped her arms around Rickon. It's blood he drowned on, Bran thought numbly. His own blood.

"Who else has something to say?" asked Theon Greyjoy.

"Hodor hodor hodor hodor," shouted Hodor, eyes wide.

"Someone kindly shut that halfwit up."

Two ironmen began to beat Hodor with the butts of their spears. The stableboy dropped to the floor, trying to shield himself with his hands.

"I will be as good a lord to you as Eddard Stark ever was." Theon raised his voice to be heard above the smack of wood on flesh. "Betray me, though, and you'll wish you hadn't. And don't think the men you see here are the whole of my power. Torrhen's Square and Deepwood Motte will soon be ours as well, and my uncle is sailing up the Saltspear to seize Moat Cailin. If Robb Stark can stave off the Lannisters, he may reign as King of the Trident hereafter, but House Greyjoy holds the north now."

"Stark's lords will fight you," the man Reek called out. "That bloated pig at White Harbor for one, and them Umbers and Karstarks too. You'll need men. Free me and I'm yours."

Theon weighed him a moment. "You're cleverer than you smell, but I could not suffer that stench."

"Well," said Reek, "I could wash some. If I was free."

"A man of rare good sense." Theon smiled. "Bend the knee."

One of the ironmen handed Reek a sword, and he laid it at Theon's feet and swore obedience to House Greyjoy and King Balon. Bran could not look. The green dream was coming true.

"M'lord Greyjoy!" Osha stepped past Mikken's body. "I was brought here captive too. You were there the day I was taken."

I thought you were a friend, Bran thought, hurt.

"I need fighters," Theon declared, "not kitchen sluts."

"It was Robb Stark put me in the kitchens. For the best part of a year, I've been left to scour kettles, scrape grease, and warm the straw for this one." She threw a look at Gage. "I've had a bellyful of it. Put a spear in my hand again."

"I got a spear for you right here," said the bald man who'd killed Mikken. He grabbed his crotch, grinning.

Osha drove her bony knee up between his legs. "You keep that soft pink thing." She wrested the spear from him and used the butt to knock him off his feet. "I'll have me the wood and iron." The bald man writhed on the floor while the other reavers sent up gales of laughter.

Theon laughed with the rest. "You'll do," he said. "Keep the spear; Stygg can find another. Now bend the knee and swear."

When no one else rushed forward to pledge service, they were dismissed with a warning to do their work and make no trouble. Hodor was given the task of bearing Bran back to his bed. His face was all ugly from the beating, his nose swollen and one eye closed. "Hodor," he sobbed between cracked lips as he lifted Bran in huge strong arms and bloody hands and carried him back out into the rain.

ARYA

There's ghosts, I know there is." Hot Pie was kneading bread, his arms floured up to his elbows. "Pia saw something in the buttery last night."

Arya made a rude noise. Pia was always seeing things in the buttery. Usually they were men. "Can I have a tart?" she asked. "You baked a whole tray."

"I need a whole tray. Ser Amory is partial to them."

She hated Ser Amory. "Let's spit on them."

Hot Pie looked around nervously. The kitchens were full of shadows and echoes, but the other cooks and scullions were all asleep in the cavernous lofts above the ovens. "He'll know."

"He will not," Arya said. "You can't taste spit."

"If he does, it's me they'll whip." Hot Pie stopped his kneading. "You shouldn't even be here. It's the black of night."

It was, but Arya never minded. Even in the black of night, the kitchens were never still; there was always someone rolling dough for the morning bread, stirring a kettle with a long wooden spoon, or butchering a hog for Ser Amory's breakfast bacon. Tonight it was Hot Pie.

"If Pinkeye wakes and finds you gone-" Hot Pie said.

"Pinkeye never wakes." His true name was Mebble, but everyone called him Pinkeye for his runny eyes. "Not once he's passed out." Each morning he broke his fast with ale. Each evening he fell into a drunken sleep after supper, wine-colored spit running down his chin. Arya would wait until she heard him snoring, then creep barefoot up the servant's stair, making no more noise than the mouse she'd been. She carried neither candle nor taper. Syrio had told her once that darkness could be her friend, and he was right. If she had the moon and the stars to see by, that was enough. "I bet we could escape, and Pinkeye wouldn't even notice I was gone," she told Hot Pie.

"I don't want to escape. It's better here than it was in them woods. I don't want to eat no worms. Here, sprinkle some flour on the board."

Arya cocked her head. "What's that?"

"What? I don't-"

"Listen with your ears, not your mouth. That was a warhorn. Two blasts, didn't you hear? And there, that's the portcullis chains, someone's going out or coming in. Want to go see?" The gates of Harrenhal had not been opened since the morning Lord Tywin had marched with his host.

"I'm making the morning bread," Hot Pie complained. "Anyhow I don't like it when it's dark, I told you."

"I'm going. I'll tell you after. Can I have a tart?"

"No."

She filched one anyway, and ate it on her way out. It was stuffed with chopped nuts and fruit and cheese, the crust flaky and still warm from the oven. Eating Ser Amory's tart made Arya feel daring. Barefoot surefoot lightfoot, she sang under her breath. I am the ghost in Harrenhal.

The horn had stirred the castle from sleep; men were coming out into the ward to see what the commotion was about. Arya fell in with the others. A line of ox carts were rumbling under the portcullis. Plunder, she knew at once. The riders escorting the carts spoke in a babble of queer tongues. Their armor glinted pale in the moonlight, and she saw a pair of striped black-and-white zorses. The Bloody Mummies. Arya withdrew a little deeper into the shadows, and watched as a huge black bear rolled by, caged in the back of a wagon. Other carts were loaded down with silver plate, weapons and shields, bags of flour, pens of squealing hogs and scrawny dogs and chickens. Arya was thinking how long it had been since she'd had a slice off a pork roast when she saw the first of the prisoners.

By his bearing and the proud way he held his head, he must have been a lord. She could see mail glinting beneath his torn red surcoat. At first Arya took him for a Lannister, but when he passed near a torch she saw his device was a silver fist, not a lion. His wrists were bound tightly, and a rope around one ankle tied him to the man behind him, and him to the man behind him, so the whole column had to shuffle along in a lurching lockstep. Many of the captives were wounded. If any halted, one of the riders would trot up and give him a lick of the whip to get him moving again. She tried to judge how many prisoners there were, but lost count before she got to fifty. There were twice that many at least. Their clothing was stained with mud and blood, and in the torchlight it was hard to make out all their badges and sigils, but some of those Arya glimpsed she recognized. Twin towers. Sunburst. Bloody man. Battle-axe. The battleaxe is for Cerwyn, and the white sun on black is Karstark. They're northmen. My father's men, and Robb's. She didn't like to think what that might mean.

The Bloody Mummies began to dismount. Stableboys emerged sleepy from their straw to tend their lathered horses. One of the riders was shouting for ale. The noise brought Ser Amory Lorch out onto the covered gallery above the ward, flanked by two torchbearers. Goat-helmed Vargo Hoat reined up below him. "My lord cathellan," the sellsword said. He had a thick, slobbery voice, as if his tongue was too big for his mouth.

"What's all this, Hoat?" Ser Amory demanded, frowning.

"Captives. Rooth Bolton thought to croth the river, but my Brafte Companions cut his van to pieceth. Killed many, and thent Bolton running. Thith ith their lord commander, Glover, and the one behind ith Ther Aenyth Frey."

Ser Amory Lorch stared down at the roped captives with his little pig eyes. Arya did not think he was pleased. Everyone in the castle knew that he and Vargo Hoat hated each other. "Very well," he said. "Ser Cadwyn, take these men to the dungeons."

The lord with the mailed fist on his surcoat raised his eyes. "We were promised honorable treatment-" he began.

"Silenth!" Vargo Hoat screamed at him, spraying spittle.

Ser Amory addressed the captives. "What Hoat promised you is nothing to me. Lord Tywin made me the castellan of Harrenhal, and I shall do with you as I please." He gestured to his guards. "The great cell under the Widow's Tower ought to hold them all. Any who do not care to go are free to die here."

As his men herded off the captives at spearpoint, Arya saw Pinkeye emerge from the stairwell, blinking at the torchlight. If he found her missing, he would shout and threaten to whip the bloody hide off her, but she was not afraid. He was no Weese. He was forever threatening to whip the bloody hide off this one or that one, but Arya never actually knew him to hit. Still, it would be better if he never saw her. She glanced around. The oxen were being unharnessed, the carts unloaded, while the Brave Companions clamored for drink and the curious gathered around the caged bear. In the commotion, it was not hard to slip off unseen. She went back the way she had come, wanting to be out of sight before someone noticed her and thought to put her to work.

Away from the gates and the stables, the great castle was largely deserted. The noise dwindled behind her. A swirling wind gusted, drawing a high shivery scream from the cracks in the Wailing Tower. Leaves had begun to fall from the trees in the godswood, and she could hear them moving through the deserted courtyards and between the empty buildings, making a faint skittery sound as the wind drove them across the stones. Now that Harrenhal was near empty once again, sound did queer things here. Sometimes the stones seemed to drink up noise, shrouding the yards in a blanket of silence. Other times, the echoes had a life of their own, so every footfall became the tread of a ghostly army, and every distant voice a ghostly feast. The funny sounds were one of the things that bothered Hot Pie, but not Arya.

Quiet as a shadow, she flitted across the middle bailey, around the Tower of Dread, and through the empty mews, where people said the spirits of dead falcons stirred the air with ghostly wings. She could go where she would. The garrison numbered no more than a hundred men, so small a troop that they were lost in Harrenhal. The Hall of a Hundred Hearths was closed off, along with many of the lesser buildings, even the Wailing Tower. Ser Amory Lorch resided in the castellan's chambers in Kingspyre, themselves as spacious as a lord's, and Arya and the other servants had moved to the cellars beneath him so they would be close at hand. While Lord Tywin had been in residence, there was always a man-at-arms wanting to know your business. But now there were only a hundred men left to guard a thousand doors, and no one seemed to know who should be where, or care much.

As she passed the armory, Arya heard the ring of a hammer. A deep orange glow shone through the high windows. She climbed to the roof and peeked down. Gendry was beating out a breastplate. When he worked, nothing existed for him but metal, bellows, fire. The hammer was like part of his arm. She watched the play of muscles in his chest and listened to the steel music he made. He's strong, she thought. As he took up the long-handled tongs to dip the breastplate into the quenching trough, Arya slithered through the window and leapt down to the floor beside him.

He did not seem surprised to see her. "You should be abed, girl." The breastplate hissed like a cat as he dipped it in the cold water. "What was all that noise?"

"Vargo Float's come back with prisoners. I saw their badges. There's a Glover, from Deepwood Motte, he's my father's man. The rest too, mostly." All of a sudden, Arya knew why her feet had brought her here. "You have to help me get them out."

Gendry laughed. "And how do we do that?"

“Ser Amory sent them down to the dungeon. The one under the Widow’s Tower, that’s just one big cell. You could smash the door open with your hammer-”

“While the guards watch and make bets on how many swings it will take me, maybe?”

Arya chewed her lips. “We’d need to kill the guards.”

“How are we supposed to do that?”

“Maybe there won’t be a lot of them.”

“If there’s two, that’s too many for you and me. You never learned nothing in that village, did you? You try this and Vargo Hoat will cut off your hands and feet, the way he does.” Gendry took up the tongs again.

“You’re afraid.”

“Leave me alone, girl.”

“Gendry, there’s a hundred northmen. Maybe more, I couldn’t count them all. That’s as many as Ser Amory has. Well, not counting the Bloody Mummer. We just have to get them out and we can take over the castle and escape.”

“Well, you can’t get them out, no more’n you could save Lommy.” Gendry turned the breastplate with the tongs to look at it closely. “And if we did escape, where would we go?”

“Winterfell,” she said at once. “I’d tell Mother how you helped me, and you could stay-”

“Would m’lady permit? Could I shoe your horses for you, and make swords for your lordly brothers?”

Sometimes he made her so angry. “You stop that!”

“Why should I wager my feet for the chance to sweat in Winterfell in place of Harrenhal? You know old Ben Blackthumb? He came here as a boy. Smithed for Lady Whent and her father before her and his father before him, and even for Lord Lothston who held Harrenhal before the Whents. Now he smiths for Lord Tywin, and you know what he says? A sword’s a sword, a helm’s a helm, and if you reach in the fire you get burned, no matter who you’re serving. Lucan’s a fair enough master. I’ll stay here.”

“The queen will catch you, then. She didn’t send gold cloaks after Ben Blackthumb!”

“Likely it wasn’t even me they wanted.”

“It was too, you know it. You’re somebody.”

“I’m a ‘prentice smith, and one day might be I’ll make a master armorer... if I don’t run off and lose my feet or get myself killed.” He turned away from her, picked up his hammer once more, and began to bang.

Arya’s hands curled into helpless fists. “The next helm you make, put mule’s ears on it in place of bull’s horns!” She had to flee, or else she would have started hitting him. He probably wouldn’t even feel it if I did. When they find who he is and cut off his stupid mulehead, he’ll be sorry he didn’t help. She was better off without him anyhow. He was the one who got her caught at the village.

But thinking of the village made her remember the march, and the storeroom, and the Tickler. She thought of the little boy who’d been hit in the face with the mace, of stupid old All-for-Joffrey, of Lommy Greenhands. I was a sheep, and then I was a mouse, I couldn’t do anything

but hide. Arya chewed her lip and tried to think when her courage had come back. Jaqen made me brave again. He made me a ghost instead of a mouse.

She had been avoiding the Lorathi since Weese's death. Chiswyck had been easy, anyone could push a man off the wallwalk, but Weese had raised that ugly spotted dog from a pup, and only some dark magic could have turned the animal against him. Yoren found Jaqen in a black cell, the same as Rorge and Biter, she remembered. Jaqen did something horrible and Yoren knew, that's why he kept him in chains. If the Lorathi was a wizard, Rorge and Biter could be demons he called up from some hell, not men at all.

Jaqen still owed her one death. In Old Nan's stories about men who were given magic wishes by a grumkin, you had to be especially careful with the third wish, because it was the last. Chiswyck and Weese hadn't been very important. The last death has to count, Arya told herself every night when she whispered her names. But now she wondered if that was truly the reason she had hesitated. So long as she could kill with a whisper, Arya need not be afraid of anyone... but once she used up the last death, she would only be a mouse again.

With Pinkeye awake, she dared not go back to her bed. Not knowing where else to hide, she made for the godswood. She liked the sharp smell of the pines and sentinels, the feel of grass and dirt between her toes, and the sound the wind made in the leaves. A slow little stream meandered through the wood, and there was one spot where it had eaten the ground away beneath a deadfall. There, beneath rotting wood and twisted splintered branches, she found her hidden sword.

Gendry was too stubborn to make one for her, so she had made her own by breaking the bristles off a broom. Her blade was much too light and had no proper grip, but she liked the sharp jagged splintery end.

Whenever she had a free hour she stole away to work at the drills Syrio had taught her, moving barefoot over the fallen leaves, slashing at branches and whacking down leaves. Sometimes she even climbed the trees and danced among the upper branches, her toes gripping the limbs as she moved back and forth, teetering a little less every day as her balance returned to her. Night was the best time; no one ever bothered her at night.

Arya climbed. Up in the kingdom of the leaves, she unsheathed and for a time forgot them all, Ser Amory and the Mummer's and her father's men alike, losing herself in the feel of rough wood beneath the soles of her feet and the swish of sword through air. A broken branch became Joffrey. She struck at it until it fell away. The queen and Ser Ilyn and Ser Meryn and the Hound were only leaves, but she killed them all as well, slashing them to wet green ribbons. When her arm grew weary, she sat with her legs over a high limb to catch her breath in the cool dark air, listening to the squeak of bats as they hunted. Through the leafy canopy she could see the bone-white branches of the heart tree. It looks just like the one in Winterfell from here. If only it had been... then when she climbed down she would have been home again, and maybe find her father sitting under the weirwood where he always sat.

Shoving her sword through her belt, she slipped down branch to branch until she was back on the ground. The light of the moon painted the limbs of the weirwood silvery white as she made her way toward it, but the five-pointed red leaves turned black by night. Arya stared at the face

carved into its trunk. It was a terrible face, its mouth twisted, its eyes flaring and full of hate. Is that what a god looked like? Could gods be hurt, the same as people? I should pray, she thought suddenly.

Arya went to her knees. She wasn't sure how she should begin. She clasped her hands together. Help me, you old gods, she prayed silently. Help me get those men out of the dungeon so we can kill Ser Amory, and bring me home to Winterfell. Make me a water dancer and a wolf and not afraid again, ever.

Was that enough? Maybe she should pray aloud if she wanted the old gods to hear. Maybe she should pray longer. Sometimes her father had prayed a long time, she remembered. But the old gods had never helped him. Remembering that made her angry. "You should have saved him," she scolded the tree. "He prayed to you all the time. I don't care if you help me or not. I don't think you could even if you wanted to."

"Gods are not mocked, girl."

The voice startled her. She leapt to her feet and drew her wooden sword. Jaqen H'ghar stood so still in the darkness that he seemed one of the trees. "A man comes to hear a name. One and two and then comes three. A man would have done."

Arya lowered the splintery point toward the ground. "How did you know I was here?"

"A man sees. A man hears. A man knows."

She regarded him suspiciously. Had the gods sent him? "How'd you make the dog kill Weese? Did you call Rorge and Biter up from hell? Is Jaqen H'ghar your true name?"

"Some men have many names. Weasel. Arry. Arya."

She backed away from him, until she was pressed against the heart tree. "Did Gendry tell?"

"A man knows," he said again. "My lady of Stark."

Maybe the gods had sent him in answer to her prayers. "I need you to help me get those men out of the dungeons. That Glover and those others, all of them. We have to kill the guards and open the cell somehow--"

"A girl forgets," he said quietly. "Two she has had, three were owed. If a guard must die, she needs only speak his name."

"But one guard won't be enough, we need to kill them all to open the cell." Arya bit her lip hard to stop from crying. "I want you to save the northmen like I saved you."

He looked down at her pitilessly. "Three lives were snatched from a god. Three lives must be repaid. The gods are not mocked." His voice was silk and steel.

"I never mocked." She thought for a moment. "The name... can I name anyone? And you'll kill him?"

Jaqen H'ghar inclined his head. "A man has said."

"Anyone?" she repeated. "A man, a woman, a little baby, or Lord Tywin, or the High Septon, or your father?"

"A man's sire is long dead, but did he live, and did you know his name, he would die at your command."

"Swear it," Arya said. "Swear it by the gods."

“By all the gods of sea and air, and even him of fire, I swear it.” He placed a hand in the mouth of the weirwood. “By the seven new gods and the old gods beyond count, I swear it.” He has sworn. “Even if I named the king.”

“Speak the name, and death will come. On the morrow, at the turn of the moon, a year from this day, it will come. A man does not fly like a bird, but one foot moves and then another and one day a man is there, and a king dies.” He knelt beside her, so they were face-to-face, “A girl whispers if she fears to speak aloud. Whisper it now. Is it Joffrey?”

Arya put her lips to his ear. “It’s Jaqen H’ghar.”

Even in the burning barn, with walls of flame towering all around and him in chains, he had not seemed so distraught as he did now. “A girl... she makes a jest.”

“You swore. The gods heard you swear.”

“The gods did hear,” There was a knife in his hand suddenly, its blade thin as her little finger. Whether it was meant for her or him, Arya could not say. “A girl will weep. A girl will lose her only friend.”

“You’re not my friend. A friend would help me.” She stepped away from him, balanced on the balls of her feet in case he threw his knife. “I’d never kill a friend.”

Jaqen’s smile came and went. “A girl might... name another name then, if a friend did help?”

“A girl might,” she said. “If a friend did help.”

The knife vanished. “Come.”

“Now?” She had never thought he would act so quickly.

“A man hears the whisper of sand in a glass. A man will not sleep until a girl unsays a certain name. Now, evil child.”

I’m not an evil child, she thought, I am a direwolf, and the ghost in Harrenhal. She put her broomstick back in its hiding place and followed him from the godswood.

Despite the hour, Harrenhal stirred with fitful life. Vargo Hoat’s arrival had thrown off all the routines. Ox carts, oxen, and horses had all vanished from the yard, but the bear cage was still there. It had been hung from the arched span of the bridge that divided the outer and middle wards, suspended on heavy chains, a few feet off the ground. A ring of torches bathed the area in light. Some of the boys from the stables were tossing stones to make the bear roar and grumble. Across the ward, light spilled through the door of the Barracks Hall, accompanied by the clatter of tankards and men calling for more wine. A dozen voices took up a song in a guttural tongue strange to Arya’s ears.

They’re drinking and eating before they sleep, she realized. Pinkeye would have sent to wake me, to help with the serving. He’ll know I’m not abed. But likely he was busy pouring for the Brave Companions and those of Ser Amory’s garrison who had joined them. The noise they were making would be a good distraction.

“The hungry gods will feast on blood tonight, if a man would do this thing,” Jaqen said. “Sweet girl, kind and gentle. Unsay one name and say another and cast this mad dream aside.”

“I won’t.”

“Just so.” He seemed resigned. “The thing will be done, but a girl must obey. A man has no time for talk.”

“A girl will obey,” Arya said. “What should I do?”

“A hundred men are hungry, they must be fed, the lord commands hot broth. A girl must run to the kitchens and tell her pie boy.”

“Broth “ she repeated. “Where will you be?”

“A girl will help make broth, and wait in the kitchens until a man comes for her. Go. Run.”

Hot Pie was pulling his loaves from the ovens when she burst into the kitchen, but he was no longer alone. They’d woken the cooks to feed Vargo Hoat and his Bloody Mummies. Serving men were carrying off baskets of Hot Pie’s bread and tarts, the chief cook was carving cold slices off a ham, spit boys were turning rabbits while the pot girls basted them with honey, women were chopping onions and carrots. “What do you want, Weasel?” the chief cook asked when he saw her.

“Broth,” she announced. “My lord wants broth.”

He jerked his carving knife at the black iron kettles hung over the flames. “What do you think that is? Though I’d soon as piss in it as serve it to that goat. Can’t even let a man have a night’s sleep.” He spat. “Well, never you mind, run back and tell him a kettle can’t be hurried.”

“I’m to wait here until it’s done.”

“Then stay out of the way. Or better yet, make yourself of use. Run to the buttery; his goatship will be wanting butter and cheese. Wake up Pia and tell her she’d best be nimble for once, if she wants to keep both of her feet.”

She ran as fast as she could. Pia was awake in the loft, moaning under one of the Mummies, but she slipped back into her clothes quick enough when she heard Arya shout. She filled six baskets with crocks of butter and big wedges of stinky cheese wrapped in cloth. “Here, help me with these,” she told Arya.

“I can’t. But you better hurry or Vargo Hoat will chop off your foot.” She darted off before Pia could grab her. On the way back, she wondered why none of the captives had their hands or feet chopped off. Maybe Vargo Hoat was afraid to make Robb angry. Though he didn’t seem the sort to be afraid of anyone.

Hot Pie was stirring the kettles with a long wooden spoon when Arya returned to the kitchens. She grabbed up a second spoon and started to help. For a moment she thought maybe she should tell him, but then she remembered the village and decided not to. He’d only yield again.

Then she heard the ugly sound of Rorge’s voice. “Cook,” he shouted. “We’ll take your bloody broth.” Arya let go of the spoon in dismay. I never told him to bring them. Rorge wore his iron helmet, with the nasal that half hid his missing nose. Jaqen and Biter followed him into the kitchen.

“The bloody broth isn’t bloody ready yet,” the cook said. “It needs to simmer. We only now put in the onions and-”

“Shut your hole, or I’ll shove a spit up your ass and we’ll baste you for a turn or two. I said broth and I said now.”

Hissing, Biter grabbed a handful of half-charred rabbit right off the spit, and tore into it with his pointed teeth while honey dripped between his fingers.

The cook was beaten. "Take your bloody broth, then, but if the goat asks why it tastes so thin, you tell him."

Biter licked the grease and honey off his fingers as Jaqen H'ghar donned a pair of heavy padded mitts. He gave a second pair to Arya. "A weasel will help." The broth was boiling hot, and the kettles were heavy. Arya and Jaqen wrestled one between them, Rorge carried one by himself, and Biter grabbed two more, hissing in pain when the handles burned his hands. Even so, he did not drop them. They lugged the kettles out of the kitchens and across the ward. Two guards had been posted at the door of the Widow's Tower. "What's this?" one said to Rorge.

"A pot of boiling piss, want some?"

Jaqen smiled disarmingly. "A prisoner must eat too."

"No one said nothing about-"

Arya cut him off. "It's for them, not you."

The second guard waved them past. "Bring it down, then."

Inside the door a winding stair led down to the dungeons. Rorge led the way, with Jaqen and Arya bringing up the rear. "A girl will stay out of the way," he told her.

The steps opened onto a dank stone vault, long, gloomy, and windowless. A few torches burned in sconces at the near end where a group of Ser Amory's guards sat around a scarred wooden table, talking and playing at tiles. Heavy iron bars separated them from where the captives were crowded together in the dark. The smell of the broth brought many up to the bars.

Arya counted eight guards. They smelled the broth as well. "There's the ugliest serving wench I ever saw," their captain said to Rorge. "What's in the kettle?"

"Your cock and balls. You want to eat or not?"

One of the guards had been pacing, one standing near the bars, a third sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, but the prospect of food drew all of them to the table.

"About bloody time they fed us."

"That onions I smell?"

"So where's the bread?"

"Fuck, we need bowls, cups, spoons-"

"No you don't." Rorge heaved the scalding hot broth across the table, full in their faces. Jaqen H'ghar did the same. Biter threw his kettles too, swinging them underarm so they spun across the dungeon, raining soup. One caught the captain in the temple as he tried to rise. He went down like a sack of sand and lay still. The rest were screaming in agony, praying, or trying to crawl off.

Arya pressed back against the wall as Rorge began to cut throats. Biter preferred to grab the men behind the head and under the chin and crack their necks with a single twist of his huge pale hands. Only one of the guards managed to get a blade out. Jaqen danced away from his slash, drew his own sword, drove the man back into a corner with a flurry of blows, and killed him

with a thrust to the heart. The Lorathi brought the blade to Arya still red with heart's blood and wiped it clean on the front of her shift. "A girl should be bloody too. This is her work."

The key to the cell hung from a hook on the wall above the table. Rorge took it down and opened the door. The first man through was the lord with the mailed fist on his surcoat. "Well done," he said. "I am Robett Glover."

"My lord." Jaqen gave him a bow.

Once freed, the captives stripped the dead guards of their weapons and darted up the steps with steel in hand. Their fellows crowded after them, bare-handed. They went swiftly, and with scarcely a word. None of them seemed quite so badly wounded as they had when Vargo Hoat had marched them through the gates of Harrenhal. "This of the soup, that was clever," the man Glover was saying. "I did not expect that. Was it Lord Hoat's idea?"

Rorge began to laugh. He laughed so hard that snot flew out the hole where his nose had been. Biter sat on top of one of the dead men, holding a limp hand as he gnawed at the fingers. Bones cracked between his teeth.

"Who are you men?" A crease appeared between Robett Glover's brows. "You were not with Hoat when he came to Lord Bolton's encampment. Are you of the Brave Companions?"

Rorge wiped the snot off his chin with the back of his hand. "We are now."

"This man has the honor to be Jaqen H'ghar, once of the Free City of Lorath. This man's discourteous companions are named Rorge and Biter. A lord will know which is Biter." He waved a hand toward Arya. "And here—"

"I'm Weasel," she blurted, before he could tell who she really was. She did not want her name said here, where Rorge might hear, and Biter, and all these others she did not know.

She saw Glover dismiss her. "Very well," he said. "Let's make an end to this bloody business."

When they climbed back up the winding stair, they found the door guards lying in pools of their own blood. Northmen were running across the ward. Arya heard shouts. The door of Barracks Hall burst open and a wounded man staggered out screaming. Three others ran after him and silenced him with spear and sword. There was fighting around the gatehouse as well. Rorge and Biter rushed off with Glover, but Jaqen H'ghar knelt beside Arya. "A girl does not understand?"

"Yes I do," she said, though she didn't, not truly.

The Lorathi must have seen it on her face. "A goat has no loyalty. Soon a wolf banner is raised here, I think. But first a man would hear a certain name unsaid."

"I take back the name." Arya chewed her lip. "Do I still have a third death?"

"A girl is greedy." Jaqen touched one of the dead guards and showed her his bloody fingers. "Here is three and there is four and eight more lie dead below. The debt is paid."

"The debt is paid," Arya agreed reluctantly. She felt a little sad. Now she was just a mouse again.

"A god has his due. And now a man must die." A strange smile touched the lips of Jaqen H'ghar.

"Die?" she said, confused. What did he mean? "But I unsaid the name. You don't need to die now."

“I do. My time is done.” Jaqen passed a hand down his face from forehead to chin, and where it went he changed. His cheeks grew fuller, his eyes closer; his nose hooked, a scar appeared on his right cheek where no scar had been before. And when he shook his head, his long straight hair, half red and half white, dissolved away to reveal a cap of tight black curls.

Arya’s mouth hung open. “Who are you?” she whispered, too astonished to be afraid. “How did you do that? Was it hard?”

He grinned, revealing a shiny gold tooth. “No harder than taking a new name, if you know the way.”

“Show me,” she blurted. “I want to do it too.”

“If you would learn, you must come with me.”

Arya grew hesitant. “Where?”

“Far and away, across the narrow sea.”

“I can’t. I have to go home. To Winterfell.”

“Then we must part,” he said, “for I have duties too.” He lifted her hand and pressed a small coin into her palm. “Here.”

“What is it?”

“A coin of great value.”

Arya bit it. It was so hard it could only be iron. “Is it worth enough to buy a horse?”

“It is not meant for the buying of horses.”

“Then what good is it?”

“As well ask what good is life, what good is death? If the day comes when you would find me again, give that coin to any man from Braavos, and say these words to him—valar morghulis.”

“Valar morghulis,” Arya repeated. It wasn’t hard. Her fingers closed tight over the coin. Across the yard, she could hear men dying. “Please don’t go, Jaqen.”

“Jaqen is as dead as Arry,” he said sadly, “and I have promises to keep. Valar morghulis, Arya Stark. Say it again.”

“Valar morghulis,” she said once more, and the stranger in Jaqen’s clothes bowed to her and stalked off through the darkness, cloak swirling. She was alone with the dead men. They deserved to die, Arya told herself, remembering all those Ser Amory Lorch had killed at the holdfast by the lake.

The cellars under Kingspyre were empty when she returned to her bed of straw. She whispered her names to her pillow, and when she was done she added, “Valar morghulis,” in a small soft voice, wondering what it meant.

Come dawn, Pinkeye and the others were back, all but one boy who’d been killed in the fighting for no reason that anyone could say. Pinkeye went up alone to see how matters stood by light of day, complaining all the while that his old bones could not abide steps. When he returned, he told them that Harrenhal had been taken. “Them Bloody Mummies killed some of Ser Amory’s lot in their beds, and the rest at table after they were good and drunk. The new lord will be here before the day’s out, with his whole host. He’s from the wild north up where that Wall is, and they say he’s a hard one. This lord or that lord, there’s still work to be done. Any

foolery and I'll whip the skin off your back." He looked at Arya when he said that, but never said a word to her about where she had been the night before.

All morning she watched the Bloody Mummers strip the dead of their valuables and drag the corpses to the Flowstone Yard, where a pyre was laid to dispose of them. Shagwell the Fool hacked the heads off two dead knights and pranced about the castle swinging them by the hair and making them talk. "What did you die of?" one head asked. "Hot weasel soup," replied the second.

Arya was set to mopping up dried blood. No one said a word to her beyond the usual, but every so often she would notice people looking at her strangely. Robett Glover and the other men they'd freed must have talked about what had happened down in the dungeon, and then Shagwell and his stupid talking heads started in about the weasel soup. She would have told him to shut up, but she was scared to. The fool was half-mad, and she'd heard that he'd once killed a man for not laughing at one of his japes. He better shut his mouth or I put him on my list with the rest, she thought as she scrubbed at a reddish-brown stain.

It was almost evenfall when the new master of Harrenhal arrived. He had a plain face, beardless and ordinary, notable only for his queer pale eyes. Neither plump, thin, nor muscular, he wore black ringmail and a spotted pink cloak. The sigil on his banner looked like a man dipped in blood. "On your knees for the Lord of the Dreadfort!" shouted his squire, a boy no older than Arya, and Harrenhal knelt.

Vargo Hoat came forward. "My lord, Harrenhal ith yourth."

The lord gave answer, but too softly for Arya to hear. Robett Glover and Ser Aenys Frey, freshly bathed and clad in clean new doublets and cloaks, came up to join them. After some brief talk, Ser Aenys led them over to Rorge and Biter. Arya was surprised to see them still here; somehow she would have expected them to vanish when Jaqen did. Arya heard the harsh sound of Rorge's voice, but not what he was saying. Then Shagwell pounced on her, dragging her out across the yard. "My lord, my lord," he sang, tugging at her wrist, "here's the weasel who made the soup!"

"Let go," Arya said, wriggling out of his grasp.

The lord regarded her. Only his eyes moved; they were very pale, the color of ice. "How old are you, child?"

She had to think for a moment to remember. "Ten."

"Ten, my lord," he reminded her. "Are you fond of animals?"

"Some kinds. My lord."

A thin smile twitched across his lips. "But not lions, it would seem. Nor manticores."

She did not know what to say to that, so she said nothing.

"They tell me you are called Weasel. That will not serve. What name did your mother give you?"

She bit her lip, groping for another name. Lommy had called her Lumpyhead, Sansa used Horseface, and her father's men once dubbed her Arya Underfoot, but she did not think any of those were the sort of name he wanted.

“Nymeria,” she said. “Only she called me Nan for short.”

“You will call me my lord when you speak to me, Nan,” the lord said mildly. “You are too young to be a Brave Companion, I think, and of the wrong sex. Are you afraid of leeches, child?”

“They’re only leeches. My lord.”

“My squire could take a lesson from you, it would seem. Frequent leechings are the secret of a long life. A man must purge himself of bad blood. You will do, I think. For so long as I remain at Harrenhal, Nan, you shall be my cupbearer, and serve me at table and in chambers.”

This time she knew better than to say that she’d sooner work in the stables. “Yes, your lord. I mean, my lord.”

The lord waved a hand. “Make her presentable,” he said to no one in particular, “and make certain she knows how to pour wine without spilling it.” Turning away, he lifted a hand and said, “Lord Hoat, see to those banners above the gatehouse.”

Four Brave Companions climbed to the ramparts and hauled down the lion of Lannister and Ser Amory’s own black manticore. In their place they raised the flayed man of the Dreadfort and the direwolf of Stark. And that evening, a page named Nan poured wine for Roose Bolton and Vargo Hoat as they stood on the gallery, watching the Brave Companions parade Ser Amory Lorch naked through the middle ward. Ser Amory pleaded and sobbed and clung to the legs of his captors, until Rorge pulled him loose, and Shagwell kicked him down into the bear pit.

The bear is all in black, Arya thought. Like Yoren. She filled Roose Bolton’s cup, and did not spill a drop.

DAENERYS

In this city of splendors, Dany had expected the House of the Undying Ones to be the most splendid of all, but she emerged from her palanquin to behold a grey and ancient ruin.

Long and low, without towers or windows, it coiled like a stone serpent through a grove of black-barked trees whose inky blue leaves made the stuff of the sorcerous drink the Qartheen called shade of the evening. No other buildings stood near. Black tiles covered the palace roof, many fallen or broken; the mortar between the stones was dry and crumbling. She understood now why Xaro Xhoan Daxos called it the Palace of Dust. Even Drogon seemed disquieted by the sight of it. The black dragon hissed, smoke seeping out between his sharp teeth.

“Blood of my blood,” Jhogo said in Dothraki, “this is an evil place, a haunt of ghosts and maegi. See how it drinks the morning sun? Let us go before it drinks us as well.”

Ser Jorah Mormont came up beside them. “What power can they have if they live in that?”

“Heed the wisdom of those who love you best,” said Xaro Xhoan Daxos, lounging inside the palanquin. “Warlocks are bitter creatures who eat dust and drink of shadows. They will give you naught. They have naught to give.”

Aggo put a hand on his arakh. “Khaleesi, it is said that many go into the Palace of Dust, but few come out.”

“It is said,” Jhogo agreed.

“We are blood of your blood,” said Aggo, “sworn to live and die as you do. Let us walk with you in this dark place, to keep you safe from harm.”

“Some places even a khal must walk alone,” Dany said.

“Take me, then,” Ser Jorah urged. “The risk-”

“Queen Daenerys must enter alone, or not at all.” The warlock Pyat Pree stepped out from under the trees. Has he been there all along? Dany wondered. “Should she turn away now, the doors of wisdom shall be closed to her forevermore.”

“My pleasure barge awaits, even now,” Xaro Xhoan Daxos called out. “Turn away from this folly, most stubborn of queens. I have flutists who will soothe your troubled soul with sweet music, and a small girl whose tongue will make you sigh and melt.”

Ser Jorah Mormont gave the merchant prince a sour look. “Your Grace, remember Mirri Maz Duur.”

“I do,” Dany said, suddenly decided. “I remember that she had knowledge. And she was only a maegi.”

Pyat Pree smiled thinly. “The child speaks as sagely as a crone. Take my arm, and let me lead you.”

“I am no child.” Dany took his arm nonetheless.

It was darker than she would have thought under the black trees, and the way was longer. Though the path seemed to run straight from the street to the door of the palace, Pyat Pree soon turned aside. When she questioned him, the warlock said only, “The front way leads in, but never

out again. Heed my words, my queen. The House of the Undying Ones was not made for mortal men. If you value your soul, take care and do just as I tell you.”

“I will do as you say,” Dany promised.

“When you enter, you will find yourself in a room with four doors: the one you have come through and three others. Take the door to your right. Each time, the door to your right. If you should come upon a stairwell, climb. Never go down, and never take any door but the first door to your right.”

“The door to my right,” Dany repeated. “I understand. And when I leave, the opposite?”

“By no means,” Pyat Pree said. “Leaving and coming, it is the same. Always up. Always the door to your right. Other doors may open to you. Within, you will see many things that disturb you. Visions of loveliness and visions of horror, wonders and terrors. Sights and sounds of days gone by and days to come and days that never were. Dwellers and servitors may speak to you as you go. Answer or ignore them as you choose, but enter no room until you reach the audience chamber.”

“I understand.”

“When you come to the chamber of the Undying, be patient. Our little lives are no more than a flicker of a moth’s wing to them. Listen well, and write each word upon your heart.”

When they reached the door—a tall oval mouth, set in a wall fashioned in the likeness of a human face—the smallest dwarf Dany had ever seen was waiting on the threshold. He stood no higher than her knee, his face pinched and pointed, snoutish, but he was dressed in delicate livery of purple and blue, and his tiny pink hands held a silver tray. Upon it rested a slender crystal glass filled with a thick blue liquid: shade of the evening, the wine of warlocks. “Take and drink,” urged Pyat Pree.

“Will it turn my lips blue?”

“One flute will serve only to unstop your ears and dissolve the caul from off your eyes, so that you may hear and see the truths that will be laid before you.”

Dany raised the glass to her lips. The first sip tasted like ink and spoiled meat, foul, but when she swallowed it seemed to come to life within her. She could feel tendrils spreading through her chest, like fingers of fire coiling around her heart, and on her tongue was a taste like honey and anise and cream, like mother’s milk and Drogo’s seed, like red meat and hot blood and molten gold. It was all the tastes she had ever known, and none of them... and then the glass was empty.

“Now you may enter,” said the warlock. Dany put the glass back on the servitor’s tray, and went inside.

She found herself in a stone anteroom with four doors, one on each wall. With never a hesitation, she went to the door on her right and stepped through. The second room was a twin to the first. Again she turned to the right-hand door. When she pushed it open she faced yet another small antechamber with four doors. I am in the presence of sorcery.

The fourth room was oval rather than square and walled in wormeaten wood in place of stone. Six passages led out from it in place of four. Dany chose the rightmost, and entered a long, dim, high-ceilinged hall. Along the right hand was a row of torches burning with a smoky orange

light, but the only doors were to her left. Drogon unfolded wide black wings and beat the stale air. He flew twenty feet before thudding to an undignified crash. Dany strode after him.

The mold-eaten carpet under her feet had once been gorgeously colored, and whorls of gold could still be seen in the fabric, glinting broken amidst the faded grey and mottled green. What remained served to muffle her footfalls, but that was not all to the good. Dany could hear sounds within the walls, a faint scurrying and scrabbling that made her think of rats. Drogon heard them too. His head moved as he followed the sounds, and when they stopped he gave an angry scream. Other sounds, even more disturbing, came through some of the closed doors. One shook and thumped, as if someone were trying to break through. From another came a dissonant piping that made the dragon lash his tail wildly from side to side. Dany hurried quickly past.

Not all the doors were closed. I will not look, Dany told herself, but the temptation was too strong.

In one room, a beautiful woman sprawled naked on the floor while four little men crawled over her. They had rattish pointed faces and tiny pink hands, like the servitor who had brought her the glass of shade. One was pumping between her thighs. Another savaged her breasts, worrying at the nipples with his wet red mouth, tearing and chewing.

Farther on she came upon a feast of corpses. Savagely slaughtered, the feasters lay strewn across overturned chairs and hacked trestle tables, asprawl in pools of congealing blood. Some had lost limbs, even heads. Severed hands clutched bloody cups, wooden spoons, roast fowl, heels of bread. In a throne above them sat a dead man with the head of a wolf. He wore an iron crown and held a leg of lamb in one hand as a king might hold a scepter, and his eyes followed Dany with mute appeal.

She fled from him, but only as far as the next open door. I know this room, she thought. She remembered those great wooden beams and the carved animal faces that adorned them. And there outside the window, a lemon tree! The sight of it made her heart ache with longing. It is the house with the red door, the house in Braavos. No sooner had she thought it than old Ser Willem came into the room, leaning heavily on his stick. "Little princess, there you are," he said in his gruff kind voice. "Come," he said, "come to me, my lady, you're home now, you're safe now." His big wrinkled hand reached for her, soft as old leather, and Dany wanted to take it and hold it and kiss it, she wanted that as much as she had ever wanted anything. Her foot edged forward, and then she thought, He's dead, he's dead, the sweet old bear, he died a long time ago. She backed away and ran.

The long hall went on and on and on, with endless doors to her left and only torches to her right. She ran past more doors than she could count, closed doors and open ones, doors of wood and doors of iron, carved doors and plain ones, doors with pulls and doors with locks and doors with knockers. Drogon lashed against her back, urging her on, and Dany ran until she could run no more.

Finally a great pair of bronze doors appeared to her left, grander than the rest. They swung open as she neared, and she had to stop and look. Beyond loomed a cavernous stone hall, the largest she had ever seen. The skulls of dead dragons looked down from its walls. Upon a towering

barbed throne sat an old man in rich robes, an old man with dark eyes and long silver-grey hair. "Let him be king over charred bones and cooked meat," he said to a man below him. "Let him be the king of ashes." Drogon shrieked, his claws digging through silk and skin, but the king on his throne never heard, and Dany moved on.

Viserys, was her first thought the next time she paused, but a second glance told her otherwise. The man had her brother's hair, but he was taller, and his eyes were a dark indigo rather than lilac. "Aegon," he said to a woman nursing a newborn babe in a great wooden bed. "What better name for a king?"

"Will you make a song for him?" the woman asked.

"He has a song," the man replied. "He is the prince that was promised, and his is the song of ice and fire." He looked up when he said it and his eyes met Dany's, and it seemed as if he saw her standing there beyond the door. "There must be one more," he said, though whether he was speaking to her or the woman in the bed she could not say. "The dragon has three heads." He went to the window seat, picked up a harp, and ran his fingers lightly over its silvery strings. Sweet sadness filled the room as man and wife and babe faded like the morning mist, only the music lingering behind to speed her on her way.

It seemed as though she walked for another hour before the long hall finally ended in a steep stone stair, descending into darkness. Every door, open or closed, had been to her left. Dany looked back behind her. The torches were going out, she realized with a start of fear. Perhaps twenty still burned. Thirty at most. One more guttered out even as she watched, and the darkness came a little farther down the hall, creeping toward her. And as she listened it seemed as if she heard something else coming, shuffling and dragging itself slowly along the faded carpet. Terror filled her. She could not go back and she was afraid to stay here, but how could she go on? There was no door on her right, and the steps went down, not up.

Yet another torch went out as she stood pondering, and the sounds grew faintly louder. Drogon's long neck snaked out and he opened his mouth to scream, steam rising from between his teeth. He hears it too. Dany turned to the blank wall once more, but there was nothing. Could there be a secret door, a door I cannot see? Another torch went out. Another. The first door on the right, he said, always the first door on the right. The first door on the right...

It came to her suddenly.... is the last door on the left!

She flung herself through. Beyond was another small room with four doors. To the right she went, and to the right, and to the right, and to the right, and to the right, and to the right, and to the right, until she was dizzy and out of breath once more.

When she stopped, she found herself in yet another dank stone chamber... but this time the door opposite was round, shaped like an open mouth, and Pyat Pree stood outside in the grass beneath the trees. "Can it be that the Undying are done with you so soon?" he asked in disbelief when he saw her.

"So soon?" she said, confused. "I've walked for hours, and still not found them."

"You have taken a wrong turning. Come, I will lead you." Pyat Pree held out his hand.

Dany hesitated. There was a door to her right, still closed...

“That’s not the way,” Pyat Pree said firmly, his blue lips prim with disapproval. “The Undying Ones will not wait forever.”

“Our little lives are no more than a flicker of a moth’s wing to them,” Dany said, remembering. “Stubborn child. You will be lost, and never found.”

She walked away from him, to the door on the right.

“No,” Pyat screeched. “No, to me, come to me, to meeeeeee.” His face crumbled inward, changing to something pale and wormlike.

Dany left him behind, entering a stairwell. She began to climb. Before long her legs were aching. She recalled that the House of the Undying Ones had seemed to have no towers.

Finally the stair opened. To her right, a set of wide wooden doors had been thrown open. They were fashioned of ebony and weirwood, the black and white grains swirling and twisting in strange interwoven patterns. They were very beautiful, yet somehow frightening. The blood of the dragon must not be afraid. Dany said a quick prayer, begging the Warrior for courage and the Dothraki horse god for strength. She made herself walk forward.

Beyond the doors was a great hall and a splendor of wizards. Some wore sumptuous robes of ermine, ruby velvet, and cloth of gold. Others fancied elaborate armor studded with gemstones, or tall pointed hats speckled with stars. There were women among them, dressed in gowns of surpassing loveliness. Shafts of sunlight slanted through windows of stained glass, and the air was alive with the most beautiful music she had ever heard.

A kingly man in rich robes rose when he saw her, and smiled. “Daenerys of House Targaryen, be welcome. Come and share the food of forever. We are the Undying of Qarth.”

“Long have we awaited you,” said a woman beside him, clad in rose and silver. The breast she had left bare in the Qartheen fashion was as perfect as a breast could be.

“We knew you were to come to us,” the wizard king said. “A thousand years ago we knew, and have been waiting all this time. We sent the comet to show you the way.”

“We have knowledge to share with you,” said a warrior in shining emerald armor, “and magic weapons to arm you with. You have passed every trial. Now come and sit with us, and all your questions shall be answered.”

She took a step forward. But then Drogon leapt from her shoulder. He flew to the top of the ebony-and-weirwood door, perched there, and began to bite at the carved wood.

“A willful beast,” laughed a handsome young man. “Shall we teach you the secret speech of dragonkind? Come, come.”

Doubt seized her. The great door was so heavy it took all of Dany’s strength to budge it, but finally it began to move. Behind was another door, hidden. It was old grey wood, splintery and plain... but it stood to the right of the door through which she’d entered. The wizards were beckoning her with voices sweeter than song. She ran from them, Drogon flying back down to her. Through the narrow door she passed, into a chamber awash in gloom.

A long stone table filled this room. Above it floated a human heart, swollen and blue with corruption, yet still alive. It beat, a deep ponderous throb of sound, and each pulse sent out a wash of indigo light. The figures around the table were no more than blue shadows. As Dany

walked to the empty chair at the foot of the table, they did not stir, nor speak, nor turn to face her. There was no sound but the slow, deep beat of the rotting heart.

...mother of dragons... came a voice, part whisper and part moan... dragons... dragons... dragons... other voices echoed in the gloom. Some were male and some female. One spoke with the timbre of a child. The floating heart pulsed from dimness to darkness. It was hard to summon the will to speak, to recall the words she had practiced so assiduously. "I am Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros." Do they hear me? Why don't they move? She sat, folding her hands in her lap. "Grant me your counsel, and speak to me with the wisdom of those who have conquered death."

Through the indigo murk, she could make out the wizened features of the Undying One to her right, an old old man, wrinkled and hairless. His flesh was a ripe violet-blue, his lips and nails bluer still, so dark they were almost black. Even the whites of his eyes were blue. They stared unseeing at the ancient woman on the opposite side of the table, whose gown of pale silk had rotted on her body. One withered breast was left bare in the Qartheen manner, to show a pointed blue nipple hard as leather.

She is not breathing. Dany listened to the silence. None of them are breathing, and they do not move, and those eyes see nothing. Could it be that the Undying Ones were dead?

Her answer was a whisper as thin as a mouse's whisker... we live... live... live... it sounded. Myriad other voices whispered echoes... and know... know... know... know...

"I have come for the gift of truth," Dany said. "In the long hall, the things I saw... were they true visions, or lies? Past things, or things to come? What did they mean?"

...the shape of shadows... morrows not yet made... drink from the cup of ice... drink from the cup of fire...

...mother of dragons... child of three...

"Three?" She did not understand.

...three heads has the dragon... the ghost chorus yarnmered inside her skull with never a lip moving, never a breath stirring the still blue air... mother of dragons... child of storm... The whispers became a swirling song... three fires must you light... one for life and one for death and one to love... Her own heart was beating in unison to the one that floated before her, blue and corrupt... three mounts must you ride... one to bed and one to dread and one to love... The voices were growing louder, she realized, and it seemed her heart was slowing, and even her breath... three treasons will you know... once for blood and once for gold and once for love...

"I don't..." Her voice was no more than a whisper, almost as faint as theirs. What was happening to her? "I don't understand," she said, more loudly. Why was it so hard to talk here? "Help me. Show me."

...help her... the whispers mocked... show her...

Then phantoms shivered through the murk, images in indigo. Viserys screamed as the molten gold ran down his cheeks and filled his mouth. A tall lord with copper skin and silver-gold hair stood beneath the banner of a fiery stallion, a burning city behind him. Rubies flew like drops of blood from the chest of a dying prince, and he sank to his knees in the water and with his last

breath murmured a woman's name.... mother of dragons, daughter of death... Glowing like sunset, a red sword was raised in the hand of a blue-eyed king who cast no shadow. A cloth dragon swayed on poles amidst a cheering crowd. From a smoking tower, a great stone beast took wing, breathing shadow fire.... mother of dragons, slayer of lies... Her silver was trotting through the grass, to a darkling stream beneath a sea of stars. A corpse stood at the prow of a ship, eyes bright in his dead face, grey lips smiling sadly. A blue flower grew from a chink in a wall of ice, and filled the air with sweetness.... mother of dragons, bride of fire...

Faster and faster the visions came, one after the other, until it seemed as if the very air had come alive. Shadows whirled and danced inside a tent, boneless and terrible. A little girl ran barefoot toward a big house with a red door. Mirri Maz Duur shrieked in the flames, a dragon bursting from her brow. Behind a silver horse the bloody corpse of a naked man bounced and dragged. A white lion ran through grass taller than a man. Beneath the Mother of Mountains, a line of naked crones crept from a great lake and knelt shivering before her, their grey heads bowed. Ten thousand slaves lifted bloodstained hands as she raced by on her silver, riding like the wind. "Mother!" they cried. "Mother, mother!" They were reaching for her, touching her, tugging at her cloak, the hem of her skirt, her foot, her leg, her breast. They wanted her, needed her, the fire, the life, and Dany gasped and opened her arms to give herself to them...

But then black wings buffeted her round the head, and a scream of fury cut the indigo air, and suddenly the visions were gone, ripped away, and Dany's gasp turned to horror. The Undying were all around her, blue and cold, whispering as they reached for her, pulling, stroking, tugging at her clothes, touching her with their dry cold hands, twining their fingers through her hair. All the strength had left her limbs. She could not move. Even her heart had ceased to beat. She felt a hand on her bare breast, twisting her nipple. Teeth found the soft skin of her throat. A mouth descended on one eye, licking, sucking, biting...

Then indigo turned to orange, and whispers turned to screams. Her heart was pounding, racing, the hands and mouths were gone, heat washed over her skin, and Dany blinked at a sudden glare. Perched above her, the dragon spread his wings and tore at the terrible dark heart, ripping the rotten flesh to ribbons, and when his head snapped forward, fire flew from his open jaws, bright and hot. She could hear the shrieks of the Undying as they burned, their high thin papery voices crying out in tongues long dead. Their flesh was crumbling parchment, their bones dry wood soaked in tallow. They danced as the flames consumed them; they staggered and writhed and spun and raised blazing hands on high, their fingers bright as torches.

Dany pushed herself to her feet and bulled through them. They were light as air, no more than husks, and they fell at a touch. The whole room was ablaze by the time she reached the door. "Drogon," she called, and he flew to her through the fire.

Outside a long dim passageway stretched serpentine before her, lit by the flickering orange glare from behind. Dany ran, searching for a door, a door to her right, a door to her left, any door, but there was nothing, only twisty stone walls, and a floor that seemed to move slowly under her feet, writhing as if to trip her. She kept her feet and ran faster, and suddenly the door was there ahead of her, a door like an open mouth.

When she spilled out into the sun, the bright light made her stumble. Pyat Pree was gibbering in some unknown tongue and hopping from one foot to the other. When Dany looked behind her, she saw thin tendrils of smoke forcing their way through cracks in the ancient stone walls of the Palace of Dust, and rising from between the black tiles of the roof.

Howling curses, Pyat Pree drew a knife and danced toward her, but Drogon flew at his face. Then she heard the crack of Jhogo's whip, and never was a sound so sweet. The knife went flying, and an instant later Rakharo was slamming Pyat to the ground. Ser Jorah Mormont knelt beside Dany in the cool green grass and put his arm around her shoulder.

TYRION

If you die stupidly, I'm going to feed your body to the goats," Tyrion threatened as the first load of Stone Crows pushed off from the quay.

Shagga laughed. "The Halfman has no goats."

"I'll get some just for YOU."

Dawn was breaking, and pale ripples of light shimmered on the surface of the river, shattering under the poles and reforming when the ferry had passed. Timett had taken his Burned Men into the kingswood two days before. Yesterday the Black Ears and Moon Brothers followed, today the Stone Crows.

"Whatever you do, don't try and fight a battle," Tyrion said. "Strike at their camps and baggage train. Ambush their scouts and hang the bodies from trees ahead of their line of march, loop around and cut down stragglers. I want night attacks, so many and so sudden that they'll be afraid to sleep."

Shagga laid a hand atop Tyrion's head. "All this I learned from Dolf son of Holger before my beard had grown. This is the way of war in the Mountains of the Moon."

"The kingswood is not the Mountains of the Moon, and you won't be fighting Milk Snakes and Painted Dogs. And listen to the guides I'm sending, they know this wood as well as you know your mountains. Heed their counsel and they'll serve you well."

"Shagga will listen to the Halfman's pets," the clansman promised solemnly. And then it was time for him to lead his garron onto the ferry. Tyrion watched them push off and pole out toward the center of the Blackwater. He felt a queer twinge in the pit of his stomach as Shagga faded in the morning mist. He was going to feel naked without his clansmen.

He still had Bronn's hirelings, near eight hundred of them now, but sellswords were notoriously fickle. Tyrion had done what he could to buy their continued loyalty, promising Bronn and a dozen of his best men lands and knighthoods when the battle was won. They'd drunk his wine, laughed at his jests, and called each other ser until they were all staggering... all but Bronn himself, who'd only smiled that insolent dark smile of his and afterward said, "They'll kill for that knighthood, but don't ever think they'll die for it."

Tyrion had no such delusion.

The gold cloaks were almost as uncertain a weapon. Six thousand men in the City Watch, thanks to Cersei, but only a quarter of them could be relied upon. "There's few out-and-out traitors, though there's some, even your spider hasn't found them all," Bywater had warned him. "But there's hundreds greener than spring grass, men who joined for bread and ale and safety. No man likes to look craven in the sight of his fellows, so they'll fight brave enough at the start, when it's all warhorns and blowing banners. But if the battle looks to be going sour they'll break, and they'll break bad. The first man to throw down his spear and run will have a thousand more trodding on his heels."

To be sure, there were seasoned men in the City Watch, the core of two thousand who'd gotten their gold cloaks from Robert, not Cersei. Yet even those... a watchman was not truly a soldier,

Lord Tywin Lannister had been fond of saying. Of knights and squires and men-at-arms, Tyrion had no more than three hundred. Soon enough, he must test the truth of another of his father's sayings: One man on a wall was worth ten beneath it.

Bronn and the escort were waiting at the foot of the quay, amidst swarming beggars, strolling whores, and fishwives crying the catch. The fishwives did more business than all the rest combined. Buyers flocked around the barrels and stalls to haggle over winkles, clams, and river pike. With no other food coming into the city, the price of fish was ten times what it had been before the war, and still rising. Those who had coin came to the riverfront each morning and each evening, in hopes of bringing home an eel or a pot of red crabs; those who did not slipped between the stalls hoping to steal, or stood gaunt and forlorn beneath the walls.

The gold cloaks cleared a path through the press, shoving people aside with the shafts of their spears. Tyrion ignored the muttered curses as best he could. A fish came sailing out of the crowd, slimy and rotten. It landed at his feet and flew to pieces. He stepped over it gingerly and climbed into his saddle. Children with swollen bellies were already fighting over pieces of the stinking fish.

Mounted, he gazed along the riverfront. Hammers rang in the morning air as carpenters swarmed over the Mud Gate, extending wooden hoardings from the battlements. Those were coming well. He was a deal less pleased by the clutter of ramshackle structures that had been allowed to grow up behind the quays, attaching themselves to the city walls like barnacles on the hull of a ship; bait shacks and pot-shops, warehouses, merchants' stalls, alehouses, the cribs where the cheaper sort of whores spread their legs. It has to go, every bit of it. As it was, Stannis would hardly need scaling ladders to storm the walls.

He called Bronn to his side. "Assemble a hundred men and burn everything you see here between the water's edge and the city walls." He waved his stubby fingers, taking in all the waterfront squalor. "I want nothing left standing, do you understand?"

The black-haired sellsword turned his head, considering the task. "Them as own all this won't like that much."

"I never imagined they would. So be it; they'll have something else to curse the evil monkey demon for."

"Some may fight."

"See that they lose."

"What do we do with those that live here?"

"Let them have a reasonable time to remove their property, and then move them out. Try not to kill any of them, they're not the enemy. And no more rapes! Keep your men in line, damn it."

"They're sellswords, not septons," said Bronn. "Next you'll be telling me you want them sober."

"It couldn't hurt."

Tyrion only wished he could as easily make city walls twice as tall and three times as thick. Though perhaps it did not matter. Massive walls and tall towers had not saved Storm's End, nor Harrenhal, nor even Winterfell.

He remembered Winterfell as he had last seen it. Not as grotesquely huge as Harrenhal, nor as solid and impregnable to look at as Storm's End, yet there had been a great strength in those stones, a sense that within those walls a man might feel safe. The news of the castle's fall had come as a wrenching shock. "The gods give with one hand and take with the other," he muttered under his breath when Varys told him. They had given the Starks Harrenhal and taken Winterfell, a dismal exchange.

No doubt he should be rejoicing. Robb Stark would have to turn north now. If he could not defend his own home and hearth, he was no sort of king at all. It meant reprieve for the west, for House Lannister, and yet...

Tyrion had only the vaguest memory of Theon Greyjoy from his time with the Starks. A callow youth, always smiling, skilled with a bow; it was hard to imagine him as Lord of Winterfell. The Lord of Winterfell would always be a Stark.

He remembered their godswood; the tall sentinels armored in their grey-green needles, the great oaks, the hawthorn and ash and soldier pines, and at the center the heart tree standing like some pale giant frozen in time. He could almost smell the place, earthy and brooding, the smell of centuries, and he remembered how dark the wood had been even by day. That wood was Winterfell. It was the north. I never felt so out of place as I did when I walked there, so much an unwelcome intruder. He wondered if the Greyjoys would feel it too. The castle might well be theirs, but never that godswood. Not in a year, or ten, or fifty.

Tyrion Lannister walked his horse slowly toward the Mud Gate. Winterfell is nothing to you, he reminded himself. Be glad the place has fallen, and look to your own walls. The gate was open. Inside, three great trebuchets stood side by side in the market square, peering over the battlements like three huge birds. Their throwing arms were made from the trunks of old oaks, and banded with iron to keep them from splitting. The gold cloaks had named them the Three Whores, because they'd be giving Lord Stannis such a lusty welcome. Or so we hope.

Tyrion put his heels into his horse and trotted through the Mud Gate, breasting the human tide. Once beyond the Whores, the press grew thinner and the street opened up around him.

The ride back to the Red Keep was uneventful, but at the Tower of the Hand he found a dozen angry trader captains waiting in his audience chamber to protest the seizure of their ships. He gave them a sincere apology and promised compensation once the war was done. That did little to appease them. "What if you should lose, my lord?" one Braavosi asked.

"Then apply to King Stannis for your compensation."

By the time he rid himself of them, bells were ringing and Tyrion knew he would be late for the installation. He waddled across the yard almost at a run and crowded into the back of the castle sept as Joffrey fastened white silk cloaks about the shoulders of the two newest members of his Kingsguard. The rite seemed to require that everyone stand, so Tyrion saw nothing but a wall of courtly arses. On the other hand, once the new High Septon was finished leading the two knights through their solemn vows and anointing them in the names of the Seven, he would be well positioned to be first out the doors.

He approved of his sister's choice of Ser Balon Swann to take the place of the slain Preston Greenfield. The Swanns were Marcher lords, proud, powerful, and cautious. Pleading illness, Lord Gulian Swann had remained in his castle, taking no part in the war, but his eldest son had ridden with Renly and now Stannis, while Balon, the younger, served at King's Landing. If he'd had a third son, Tyrion suspected he'd be off with Robb Stark. It was not perhaps the most honorable course, but it showed good sense; whoever won the iron Throne, the Swanns intended to survive. In addition to being well born, young Ser Balon was valiant, courtly, and skilled at arms; good with a lance, better with a morningstar, superb with the bow. He would serve with honor and courage.

Alas, Tyrion could not say the same for Cersei's second choice. Ser Osmund Kettleblack looked formidable enough. He stood six feet and six inches, most of it sinew and muscle, and his hook nose, bushy eyebrows, and spade-shaped brown beard gave his face a fierce aspect, so long as he did not smile. Lowborn, no more than a hedge knight, Kettleblack was utterly dependent on Cersei for his advancement, which was doubtless why she'd picked him. "Ser Osmund is as loyal as he is brave," she'd told Joffrey when she put forward his name. It was true, unfortunately. The good Ser Osmund had been selling her secrets to Bronn since the day she'd hired him, but Tyrion could scarcely tell her that.

He supposed he ought not complain. The appointment gave him another ear close to the king, unbeknownst to his sister. And even if Ser Osmund proved an utter craven, he would be no worse than Ser Boros Blount, currently residing in a dungeon at Rosby. Ser Boros had been escorting Tommen and Lord Gyles when Ser Jacelyn Bywater and his gold cloaks had surprised them, and had yielded up his charge with an alacrity that would have enraged old Ser Barristan Selmy as much as it did Cersei; a knight of the Kingsguard was supposed to die in defense of the king and royal family. His sister had insisted that Joffrey strip Blount of his white cloak on the grounds of treason and cowardice. And now she replaces him with another man just as hollow.

The praying, vowing, and anointing seemed to take most of the morning. Tyrion's legs soon began to ache. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, restless. Lady Tanda stood several rows up, he saw, but her daughter was not with her. He had been half hoping to catch a glimpse of Shae. Varys said she was doing well, but he would prefer to see for himself.

"Better a lady's maid than a pot girl," Shae had said when Tyrion told her the eunuch's scheme. "Can I take my belt of silver flowers and my gold collar with the black diamonds you said looked like my eyes? I won't wear them if you say I shouldn't."

Loath as he was to disappoint her, Tyrion had to point out that while Lady Tanda was by no means a clever woman, even she might wonder if her daughter's bedmaid seemed to own more jewelry than her daughter. "Choose two or three dresses, no more," he commanded her. "Good wool, no silk, no samite, and no fur. The rest I'll keep in my own chambers for when you visit me." It was not the answer Shae had wanted, but at least she was safe.

When the investiture was finally done Joffrey marched out between Ser Balon and Ser Osmund in their new white cloaks, while Tyrion lingered for a word with the new High Septon (who was his choice, and wise enough to know who put the honey on his bread). "I want the gods on our

side,” Tyrion told him bluntly. “Tell them that Stannis has vowed to burn the Great Sept of Baelor.”

“Is it true, my lord?” asked the High Septon, a small, shrewd man with a wispy white beard and wizened face.

Tyrion shrugged. “It may be. Stannis burned the godswood at Storm’s End as an offering to the Lord of Light. If he’d offend the old gods, why should he spare the new? Tell them that. Tell them that any man who thinks to give aid to the usurper betrays the gods as well as his rightful king.”

“I shall, my lord. And I shall command them to pray for the health of the king and his Hand as well.”

Hallyne the Pyromancer was waiting on him when Tyrion returned to his solar, and Maester Frenken had brought messages. He let the alchemist wait a little longer while he read what the ravens had brought him. There was an old letter from Doran Martell, warning him that Storm’s End had fallen, and a much more intriguing one from Balon Greyjoy on Pyke, who styled himself King of the isles and the North. He invited King Joffrey to send an envoy to the Iron Islands to fix the borders between their realms and discuss a possible alliance.

Tyrion read the letter three times and set it aside. Lord Balon’s longships would have been a great help against the fleet sailing up from Storm’s End, but they were thousands of leagues away on the wrong side of Westeros, and Tyrion was far from certain that he wanted to give away half the realm. Perhaps I should spill this one in Cersei’s lap, or take it to the council.

Only then did he admit Hallyne with the latest tallies from the alchemists. “This cannot be true,” said Tyrion as he pored over the ledgers. “Almost thirteen thousand jars? Do you take me for a fool? I’m not about to pay the king’s gold for empty jars and pots of sewage sealed with wax, I warn you.”

“No, no,” Hallyne squeaked, “the sums are accurate, I swear. We have been, hmmm, most fortunate, my lord Hand. Another cache of Lord Rossart’s was found, more than three hundred jars. Under the Dragonpit! Some whores have been using the ruins to entertain their patrons, and one of them fell through a patch of rotted floor into a cellar. When he felt the jars, he mistook them for wine. He was so drunk he broke the seal and drank some.”

“There was a prince who tried that once,” said Tyrion dryly. “I haven’t seen any dragons rising over the city, so it would seem it didn’t work this time either.” The Dragonpit atop the hill of Rhaenys had been abandoned for a century and a half. He supposed it was as good a place as any to store wildfire, and better than most, but it would have been nice if the late Lord Rossart had told someone. “Three hundred jars, you say? That still does not account for these totals. You are several thousand jars ahead of the best estimate you gave me when last we met.”

“Yes, yes, that’s so.” Hallyne mopped at his pale brow with the sleeve of his black-and-scarlet robe. “We have been working very hard, my lord Hand, hmmm.”

“That would doubtless explain why you are making so much more of the substance than before.” Smiling, Tyrion fixed the pyromancer with his mismatched stare. “Though it does raise the question of why you did not begin working hard until now.”

Hallyne had the complexion of a mushroom, so it was hard to see how he could turn any paler, yet somehow he managed. “We were, my lord Hand, my brothers and I have been laboring day and night from the first, I assure you. It is only, hmmm, we have made so much of the substance that we have become, hmmm, more practiced as it were, and also”-the alchemist shifted uncomfortably-” certain spells, hmmm, ancient secrets of our order, very delicate, very troublesome, but necessary if the substance is to be, hmmm, all it should be...”

Tyrion was growing impatient. Ser Jacelyn Bywater was likely here by now, and Ironhand disliked waiting. “Yes, you have secret spells; how splendid. What of them?”

“They, hmmm, seem to be working better than they were.” Hallyne smiled weakly. “You don’t suppose there are any dragons about, do you?”

“Not unless you found one under the Dragonpit. Why?”

“Oh, pardon, I was just remembering something old Wisdom Pollitor told me once, when I was an acolyte. I’d asked him why so many of our spells seemed, well, not as effectual as the scrolls would have us believe, and he said it was because magic had begun to go out of the world the day the last dragon died.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I’ve seen no dragons. I have noticed the King’s justice lurking about, however. Should any of these fruits you’re selling me turn out to be filled with anything but wildfire, you’ll be seeing him as well.”

Hallyne fled so quickly that he almost bowled over Ser Jacelyn-no, Lord Jacelyn, he must remember that. Ironhand was mercifully direct, as ever. He’d returned from Rosby to deliver a fresh levy of spearmen recruited from Lord Gyles’s estates and resume his command of the City Watch. “How does my nephew fare?” Tyrion asked when they were done discussing the city’s defenses.

“Prince Tommen is hale and happy, my lord. He has adopted a fawn some of my men brought home from a hunt. He had one once before, he says, but Joffrey skinned her for a jerkin. He asks about his mother sometimes, and often begins letters to the Princess Myrcella, though he never seems to finish any. His brother, however, he does not seem to miss at all.”

“You have made suitable arrangements for him, should the battle be lost?”

“My men have their instructions.”

“Which are?”

“You commanded me to tell no one, my lord.”

That made him smile. “I’m pleased you remember.” Should King’s Landing fall, he might well be taken alive. Better if he did not know where Joffrey’s heir might be found.

Varys appeared not long after Lord Jacelyn had left. “Men are such faithless creatures,” he said by way of greeting.

Tyrion sighed. “Who’s the traitor today?”

The eunuch handed him a scroll. “So much villainy, it sings a sad song for our age. Did honor die with our fathers?”

“My father is not dead yet.” Tyrion scanned the list. “I know some of these names. These are rich men. Traders, merchants, craftsmen. Why should they conspire against us?”

“It seems they believe that Lord Stannis must win, and wish to share his victory. They call themselves the Antler Men, after the crowned stag.”

“Someone should tell them that Stannis changed his sigil. Then they can be the Hot Hearts.” It was no matter for jests, though; it appeared that these Antler Men had armed several hundred followers, to seize the Old Gate once battle was joined, and admit the enemy to the city. Among the names on the list was the master armorer Salloreon. “I suppose this means I won’t be getting that terrifying helm with the demon horns,” Tyrion complained as he scrawled the order for the man’s arrest.

THEON

One moment he was asleep; the next, awake.

Kyra nestled against him, one arm draped lightly over his, her breasts brushing his back. He could hear her breathing, soft and steady. The sheet was tangled about them. It was the black of night. The bedchamber was dark and still.

What is it? Did I hear something? Someone?

Wind sighed faintly against the shutters. Somewhere, far off, he heard the yowl of a cat in heat. Nothing else. Sleep, Greyjoy, he told himself. The castle is quiet, and you have guards posted. At your door, at the gates, on the armory.

He might have put it down to a bad dream, but he did not remember dreaming. Kyra had worn him out. Until Theon had sent for her, she had lived all of her eighteen years in the winter town without ever setting foot inside the walls of the castle. She came to him wet and eager and lithe as a weasel, and there had been a certain undeniable spice to fucking a common tavern wench in Lord Eddard Stark's own bed.

She murmured sleepily as Theon slid out from under her arm and got to his feet. A few embers still smoldered in the hearth. Wex slept on the floor at the foot of the bed, rolled up inside his cloak and dead to the world. Nothing moved. Theon crossed to the window and threw open the shutters. Night touched him with cold fingers, and gooseprickles rose on his bare skin. He leaned against the stone sill and looked out on dark towers, empty yards, black sky, and more stars than a man could ever count if he lived to be a hundred. A half-moon floated above the Bell Tower and cast its reflection on the roof of the glass gardens. He heard no alarms, no voices, not so much as a footfall.

All's well, Greyjoy. Hear the quiet? You ought to be drunk with joy. You took Winterfell with fewer than thirty men, a feat to sing of. Theon started back to bed. He'd roll Kyra on her back and fuck her again, that ought to banish these phantoms. Her gasps and giggles would make a welcome respite from this silence.

He stopped. He had grown so used to the howling of the direwolves that he scarcely heard it anymore... but some part of him, some hunter's instinct, heard its absence.

Urzen stood outside his door, a sinewy man with a round shield slung over his back. "The wolves are quiet," Theon told him. "Go see what they're doing, and come straight back." The thought of the direwolves running loose gave him a queasy feeling. He remembered the day in the wolfswood when the wildlings had attacked Bran. Summer and Grey Wind had torn them to pieces.

When he prodded Wex with the toe of his boot, the boy sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Make certain Bran Stark and his little brother are in their beds, and be quick about it."

"M'lord?" Kyra called sleepily.

"Go back to sleep, this does not concern you." Theon poured himself a cup of wine and drank it down. All the time he was listening, hoping to hear a howl. Too few men, he thought sourly. I have too few men. If Asha does not come...

Wex returned the quickest, shaking his head side to side. Cursing, Theon found his tunic and breeches on the floor where he had dropped them in his haste to get at Kyra. Over the tunic he donned a jerkin of iron-studded leather, and he belted a longsword and dagger at his waist. His hair was wild as the wood, but he had larger concerns.

By then Urzen was back. "The wolves be gone."

Theon told himself he must be as cold and deliberate as Lord Eddard. "Rouse the castle," he said. "Herd them out into the yard, everyone, we'll see who's missing. And have Lorren make a round of the gates. Wex, with me."

He wondered if Stygg had reached Deepwood Motte yet. The man was not as skilled a rider as he claimed—none of the ironmen were much good in the saddle—but there'd been time enough. Asha might well be on her way. And if she learns that I have lost the Starks... It did not bear thinking about.

Bran's bedchamber was empty, as was Rickon's half a turn below. Theon cursed himself. He should have kept a guard on them, but he'd deemed it more important to have men walking the walls and protecting the gates than to nursemaid a couple of children, one a cripple.

Outside he heard sobbing as the castle folk were pulled from their beds and driven into the yard. I'll give them reason to sob. I've used them gently, and this is how they repay me. He'd even had two of his own men whipped bloody for raping that kennel girl, to show them he meant to be just. They still blame me for the rape, though. And the rest. He deemed that unfair. Mikken had killed himself with his mouth, just as Benfred had. As for Chayle, he had to give someone to the Drowned God, his men expected it. "I bear you no ill will," he'd told the septon before they threw him down the well, "but you and your gods have no place here now." You'd think the others might be grateful he hadn't chosen one of them, but no. He wondered how many of them were part of this plot against him.

Urzen returned with Black Lorren. "The Hunter's Gate," Lorren said. "Best come see."

The Hunter's Gate was conveniently sited close to the kennels and kitchens. It opened directly on fields and forests, allowing riders to come and go without first passing through the winter town, and so was favored by hunting parties. "Who had the guard here?" Theon demanded.

"Drennan and Squint."

Drennan was one of the men who'd raped Palla. "If they've let the boys escape, I'll have more than a little skin off their back this time, I swear it."

"No need for that," Black Lorren said curtly.

Nor was there. They found Squint floating facedown in the moat, his entrails drifting behind him like a nest of pale snakes. Drennan lay half naked in the gatehouse, in the snug room where the drawbridge was worked. His throat had been opened ear to ear. A ragged tunic concealed the half-healed scars on his back, but his boots were scattered amidst the rushes, and his breeches tangled about his feet. There was cheese on a small table near the door, beside an empty flagon. And two cups.

Theon picked one up and sniffed at the dregs of wine in the bottom. "Squint was up on the wallwalk, no?"

“Aye,” said Lorren.

Theon flung the cup into the hearth. “I’d say Drennan was pulling down his breeches to stick it in the woman when she stuck it in him. His own cheese knife, by the look of it. Someone find a pike and fish the other fool out of the moat.”

The other fool was in a deal worse shape than Drennan. When Black Lorren drew him out of the water, they saw that one of his arms had been wrenched off at the elbow, half of his neck was missing, and there was a ragged hole where his navel and groin once had been. The pike tore through his bowels as Lorren was pulling him in. The stench was awful.

“The direwolves,” Theon said. “Both of them, at a guess.” Disgusted, he walked back to the drawbridge. Winterfell was encircled by two massive granite walls, with a wide moat between them. The outer wall stood eighty feet high, the inner more than a hundred. Lacking men, Theon had been forced to abandon the outer defenses and post his guards along the higher inner walls. He dared not risk having them on the wrong side of the moat should the castle rise against him.

There had to be two or more, he decided. While the woman was entertaining Drennan, the others freed the wolves.

Theon called for a torch and led them up the steps to the wallwalk. He swept the flame low before him, looking for... there. On the inside of the rampart and in the wide crenel between two upthrust merlons. “Blood,” he announced, “clumsily mopped up. At a guess, the woman killed Drennan and lowered the drawbridge. Squint heard the clank of chains, came to have a look, and got this far. They pushed the corpse through the crenel into the moat so he wouldn’t be found by another sentry.”

Urzen peered along the walls. “The other watch turrets are not far. I see torches burning-”

“Torches, but no guards,” Theon said testily. “Winterfell has more turrets than I have men.”

“Four guards at the main gate,” said Black Lorren, “and five walking the walls beside Squint.” Urzen said, “If he had sounded his horn-”

I am served by fools. “Try and imagine it was you up here, Urzen. It’s dark and cold. You have been walking sentry for hours, looking forward to the end of your watch. Then you hear a noise and move toward the gate, and suddenly you see eyes at the top of the stair, glowing green and gold in the torchlight. Two shadows come rushing toward you faster than you can believe. You catch a glimpse of teeth, start to level your spear, and they slam into you and open your belly, tearing through leather as if it were cheesecloth.” He gave Urzen a hard shove. “And now you’re down on your back, your guts are spilling out, and one of them has his teeth around your neck.” Theon grabbed the man’s scrawny throat, tightened his fingers, and smiled. “Tell me, at what moment during all of this do you stop to blow your fucking horn?” He shoved Urzen away roughly, sending him stumbling back against a merlon. The man rubbed his throat. I should have had those beasts put down the day we took the castle, he thought angrily. I’d seen them kill, I knew how dangerous they were.

“We must go after them,” Black Lorren said.

“Not in the dark.” Theon did not relish the idea of chasing direwolves through the wood by night; the hunters could easily become the hunted. “We’ll wait for daylight. Until then, I had best go speak with my loyal subjects.”

Down in the yard, a uneasy crowd of men, women, and children had been pushed up against the wall. Many had not been given time to dress; they covered themselves with woolen blankets, or huddled naked under cloaks or bedrobes. A dozen ironmen hemmed them in, torches in one hand and weapons in the other. The wind was gusting, and the flickering orange light reflected dully off steel helmets, thick beards, and unsmiling eyes.

Theon walked up and down before the prisoners, studying the faces. They all looked guilty to him. “How many are missing?”

“Six.” Reek stepped up behind him, smelling of soap, his long hair moving in the wind. “Both Starks, that bog boy and his sister, the halfwit from the stables, and your wildling woman.”

Osha. He had suspected her from the moment he saw that second cup. I should have known better than to trust that one. She’s as unnatural as Asha. Even their names sound alike.

“Has anyone had a look at the stables?”

“Aggar says no horses are missing.”

“Dancer is still in his stall?”

“Dancer?” Reek frowned. “Aggar says the horses are all there. Only the halfwit is missing.”

They’re afoot, then. That was the best news he’d heard since he woke. Bran would be riding in his basket on Hodor’s back, no doubt. Osha would need to carry Rickon; his little legs wouldn’t take him far on their own. Theon was confident that he’d soon have them back in his hands.

“Bran and Rickon have fled,” he told the castle folk, watching their eyes. “Who knows where they’ve gone?” No one answered. “They could not have escaped without help,” Theon went on.

“Without food, clothing, weapons.” He had locked away every sword and axe in Winterfell, but no doubt some had been hidden from him. “I’ll have the names of all those who aided them. All those who turned a blind eye.” The only sound was the wind. “Come first light, I mean to bring them back.”

He hooked his thumbs through his swordbelt. “I need huntsmen. Who wants a nice warm wolfskin to see them through the winter? Gage?” The cook had always greeted him cheerfully when he returned from the hunt, to ask whether he’d brought anything choice for the table, but he had nothing to say now.

Theon walked back the way he had come, searching their faces for the least sign of guilty knowledge. “The wild is no place for a cripple. And Rickon, young as he is, how long will he last out there? Nan, think how frightened he must be.”

The old woman had nattered at him for ten years, telling her endless stories, but now she gaped at him as if he were some stranger. “I might have killed every man of you and given your women to my soldiers for their pleasure, but instead I protected you. Is this the thanks you offer?”

Joseth who’d groomed his horses, Farlen who’d taught him all he knew of hounds, Barth the brewer’s wife who’d been his first—not one of them would meet his eyes. They hate me, he realized.

Reek stepped close. “Strip off their skins,” he urged, his thick lips glistening. “Lord Bolton, he used to say a naked man has few secrets, but a flayed man’s got none.”

The flayed man was the sigil of House Bolton, Theon knew; ages past, certain of their lords had gone so far as to cloak themselves in the skins of dead enemies. A number of Starks had ended thus. Supposedly all that had stopped a thousand years ago, when the Boltons had bent their knees to Winterfell. Or so they say, but old ways die hard, as well I know.

“There will be no flaying in the north so long as I rule in Winterfell,” Theon said loudly. I am your only protection against the likes of him, he wanted to scream. He could not be that blatant, but perhaps some were clever enough to take the lesson.

The sky was greying over the castle walls. Dawn could not be far off. “Joseth, saddle Smiler and a horse for yourself. Murch, Gariss, Poxym Tym, you’ll come as well.” Murch and Gariss were the best huntsmen in the castle, and Tyrn was a fine bowman. “Aggar, Rednose, Gelmarr, Reek, Wex.” He needed his own to watch his back. “Farlen, I’ll want hounds, and you to handle them.”

The grizzled kennelmaster crossed his arms. “And why would I care to hunt down my own trueborn lords, and babes at that?”

Theon moved close. “I am your trueborn lord now, and the man who keeps Palla safe.”

He saw the defiance die in Farlen’s eyes. “Aye, m’lord.”

Stepping back, Theon glanced about to see who else he might add. “Maester Luwin,” he announced.

“I know nothing of hunting.”

No, but I don’t trust you in the castle in my absence. “Then it’s past time you learned.”

“Let me come too. I want that wolfskin cloak.” A boy stepped forward, no older than Bran. It took Theon a moment to remember him. “I’ve hunted lots of times before,” Walder Frey said. “Red deer and elk, and even boar.”

His cousin laughed at him. “He rode on a boar hunt with his father, but they never let him near the boar.”

Theon look at the boy doubtfully. “Come if you like, but if you can’t keep up, don’t think that I’ll nurse you along.” He turned back to Black Lorren. “Winterfell is yours in my absence. If we do not return, do with it as you will.” That bloody well ought to have them praying for my success.

They assembled by the Hunter’s Gate as the first pale rays of the sun brushed the top of the Bell Tower, their breath frosting in the cold morning air. Gelmarr had equipped himself with a longaxe whose reach would allow him to strike before the wolves were on him. The blade was heavy enough to kill with a single blow. Aggar wore steel greaves. Reek arrived carrying a boar spear and an overstuffed washerwoman’s sack bulging with god knows what. Theon had his bow; he needed nothing else. Once he had saved Bran’s life with an arrow. He hoped he would not need to take it with another, but if it came to that, he would.

Eleven men, two boys, and a dozen dogs crossed the moat. Beyond the outer wall, the tracks were plain to read in the soft ground; the pawprints of the wolves, Hodor’s heavy tread, the shallower marks left by the feet of the two Reeds. Once under the trees, the stony ground and fallen leaves made the trail harder to see, but by then Farlen’s red bitch had the scent. The rest of

the dogs were close behind, the hounds sniffing and barking, a pair of monstrous mastiffs bringing up the rear. Their size and ferocity might make the difference against a cornered direwolf.

He'd have guessed that Osha might run south to Ser Rodrik, but the trail led north by northwest, into the very heart of the wolfwood. Theon did not like that one bit. It would be a bitter irony if the Starks made for Deepwood Motte and delivered themselves right into Asha's hands. I'd sooner have them dead, he thought bitterly. It is better to be seen as cruel than foolish.

Wisps of pale mist threaded between the trees. Sentinels and soldier pines grew thick about here, and there was nothing as dark and gloomy as an evergreen forest. The ground was uneven, and the fallen needles disguised the softness of the turf and made the footing treacherous for the horses, so they had to go slowly. Not as slowly as a man carrying a cripple, though, or a bony harridan with a four-year-old on her back. He told himself to be patient. He'd have them before the day was out.

Maester Luwin trotted up to him as they were following a game trail along the lip of a ravine. "Thus far hunting seems indistinguishable from riding through the woods, my lord."

Theon smiled. "There are similarities. But with hunting, there's blood at the end."

"Must it be so? This flight was great folly, but will you not be merciful? These are your foster brothers we seek."

"No Stark but Robb was ever brotherly toward me, but Bran and Rickon have more value to me living than dead."

"The same is true of the Reeds. Moat Cailin sits on the edge of the bogs. Lord Howland can make your uncle's occupation a visit to hell if he chooses, but so long as you hold his heirs he must stay his hand."

Theon had not considered that. In truth, he had scarcely considered the mudmen at all, beyond eyeing Meera once or twice and wondering if she was still a maiden. "You may be right. We will spare them if we can."

"And Hodor too, I hope. The boy is simple, you know that. He does as he is told. How many times has he groomed your horse, soaped your saddle, scoured your mail?"

Hodor was nothing to him. "if he does not fight us, we will let him live." Theon pointed a finger. "But say one word about sparing the wildling, and you can die with her. She swore me an oath, and pissed on it."

The maester inclined his head. "I make no apologies for oathbreakers. Do what you must. I thank you for your mercy."

Mercy, thought Theon as Luwin dropped back. There's a bloody trap. Too much and they call you weak, too little and you're monstrous. Yet the maester had given him good counsel, he knew. His father thought only in terms of conquest, but what good was it to take a kingdom if you could not hold it? Force and fear could carry you only so far. A pity Ned Stark had taken his daughters south; otherwise Theon could have tightened his grip on Winterfell by marrying one of them. Sansa was a pretty little thing too, and by now likely even ripe for bedding. But she was a thousand leagues away, in the clutches of the Lannisters. A shame.

The wood grew ever wilder. The pines and sentinels gave way to huge dark oaks. Tangles of hawthorn concealed treacherous gullies and cuts. Stony hills rose and fell. They passed a crofter's cottage, deserted and overgrown, and skirted a flooded quarry where the still water had a sheen as grey as steel. When the dogs began to bay, Theon figured the fugitives were near at hand. He spurred Smiler and followed at a trot, but what he found was only the carcass of a young elk... or what remained of it.

He dismounted for a closer look. The kill was still fresh, and plainly the work of wolves. The dogs sniffed round it eagerly, and one of the mastiffs buried his teeth in a haunch until Farlen shouted him off. No part of this animal has been butchered, Theon realized. The wolves ate, but not the men. Even if Osha did not want to risk a fire, she ought to have cut them a few steaks. It made no sense to leave so much good meat to rot. "Farlen, are you certain we're on the right trail?" he demanded. "Could your dogs be chasing the wrong wolves?"

"My bitch knows the smell of Summer and Shaggy well enough."

"I hope so. For your sake."

Less than an hour later, the trail led down a slope toward a muddy brook swollen by the recent rains. It was there the dogs lost the scent. Farlen and Wex waded across with the hounds and came back shaking their heads while the animals ranged up and down the far bank, sniffing. "They went in here, m'lord, but I can't see where they come out," the kennelmaster said.

Theon dismounted and knelt beside the stream. He dipped a hand in it. The water was cold. "They won't have stayed long in this," he said. "Take half the dogs downstream, I'll go up—" Wex clapped his hands together loudly.

"What is it?" Theon said.

The mute boy pointed.

The ground near the water was sodden and muddy. The tracks the wolves had left were plain enough. "Pawprints, yes. So?"

Wex drove his heel into the mud, and pivoted his foot this way and that. It left a deep gouge.

Joseh understood. "A man the size of Hodor ought to have left a deep print in this mud," he said. "More so with the weight of a boy on his back. Yet the only boot prints here are our own. See for yourself."

Appalled, Theon saw it was true. The wolves had gone into the turgid brown water alone. "Osha must have turned aside back of us. Before the elk, most likely. She sent the wolves on by themselves, hoping we'd chase after them." He rounded on his huntsmen. "If you two have played me false—"

"There's been only the one trail, my lord, I swear it," said Gariss defensively. "And the direwolves would never have parted from them boys. Not for long."

That's so, Theon thought. Summer and Shaggydog might have gone off to hunt, but soon or late they would return to Bran and Rickon. "Gariss, Murch, take four dogs and double back, find where we lost them. Aggar, you watch them, I'll have no trickery. Farlen and I will follow the direwolves. Give a blast on the horn when you pick up the trail. Two blasts if you catch sight of the beasts themselves. Once we find where they went, they'll lead us back to their masters."

He took Wex, the Frey boy, and Gynir Rednose to search upstream. He and Wex rode on one side of the brook, Rednose and Walder Frey on the other, each with a pair of hounds. The wolves might have come out on either bank. Theon kept an eye out for tracks, spoor, broken branches, any hint as to where the direwolves might have left the water. He spied the prints of deer, elk, and badger easily enough. Wex surprised a vixen drinking at the stream, and Walder flushed three rabbits from the underbrush and managed to put an arrow in one. They saw the claw marks where a bear had shredded the bark of a tall birch. But of the direwolves there was no sign.

A little farther, Theon told himself. Past that oak, over that rise, past the next bend of the stream, we'll find something there. He pressed on long after he knew he should turn back, a growing sense of anxiety gnawing at his belly. It was midday when he wrenched Smiler's head round in disgust and gave up.

Somehow Osha and the wretched boys were eluding him. It should not have been possible, not on foot, burdened with a cripple and a young child. Every passing hour increased the likelihood that they would make good their escape. If they reach a village... The people of the north would never deny Ned Stark's sons, Robb's brothers. They'd have mounts to speed them on their way, food. Men would fight for the honor of protecting them. The whole bloody north would rally around them.

The wolves went downstream, that's all. He clung to that thought. That red bitch will sniff where they came out of the water and we'll be after them again.

But when they joined up with Farlen's party, one look at the kennelmaster's face smashed all of Theon's hopes to shards. "The only thing those dogs are fit for is a bear baiting," he said angrily. "Would that I had a bear."

"The dogs are not at fault." Farlen knelt between a mastiff and his precious red bitch, a hand on each. "Running water don't hold no scents, m'lord."

"The wolves had to come out of the stream somewhere."

"No doubt they did. Upstream or down. We keep on, we'll find the place, but which way?"

"I never knew a wolf to run up a streambed for miles," said Reek. "A man might. If he knew he was being hunted, he might. But a wolf?"

Yet Theon wondered. These beasts were not as other wolves. I should have skinned the cursed things.

It was the same tale all over again when they rejoined Gariss, Murch, and Aggar. The huntsmen had retraced their steps halfway to Winterfell without finding any sign of where the Starks might have parted company with the direwolves. Farlen's hounds seemed as frustrated as their masters, sniffing forlornly at trees and rocks and snapping irritably at each other.

Theon dared not admit defeat. "We'll return to the brook. Search again. This time we'll go as far as we must."

"We won't find them," the Frey boy said suddenly. "Not so long as the frog eaters are with them. Mudmen are sneaks, they won't fight like decent folks, they skulk and use poison arrows, You never see them, but they see you. Those who go into the bogs after them get lost and never come out. Their houses move, even the castles like Greywater Watch." He glanced nervously at

greenery that encircled them on all sides. “They might be out there right now, listening to everything we say.”

Farlen laughed to show what he thought of that notion. “My dogs would smell anything in them bushes. Be all over them before you could break wind, boy.”

“Frogeaters don’t smell like men,” Frey insisted. “They have a boggy stink, like frogs and trees and scummy water. Moss grows under their arms in place of hair, and they can live with nothing to eat but mud and breathe swamp water.”

Theon was about to tell him what he ought to do with his wet nurse’s fable when Maester Luwin spoke up. “The histories say the crannogmen grew close to the children of the forest in the days when the greenseers tried to bring the hammer of the waters down upon the Neck. It may be that they have secret knowledge.”

Suddenly the wood seemed a deal darker than it had a moment before, as if a cloud had passed before the sun. It was one thing to have some fool boy spouting folly, but maesters were supposed to be wise. “The only children that concern me are Bran and Rickon,” Theon said. “Back to the stream. Now.”

For a moment he did not think they were going to obey, but in the end old habit asserted itself. They followed sullenly, but they followed. The Frey boy was as jumpy as those rabbits he’d flushed earlier. Theon put men on either bank and followed the current. They rode for miles, going slow and careful, dismounting to lead the horses over treacherous ground, letting the good-for-bear-bait hounds sniff at every bush. Where a fallen tree dammed the flow, the hunters were forced to loop around a deep green pool, but if the direwolves had done the same they’d left neither print nor spoor. The beasts had taken to swimming, it seemed. When I catch them, they’ll have all the swimming they can stomach. I’ll give them both to the Drowned God.

When the woods began to darken, Theon Greyjoy knew he was beaten. Either the crannogmen did know the magic of the children of the forest, or else Osha had deceived them with some wildling trick. He made them press on through the dusk, but when the last light faded Joseth finally worked up the courage to say, “This is fruitless, my lord. We will lame a horse, break a leg.”

“Joseth has the right of it,” said Maester Luwin. “Groping through the woods by torchlight will avail us nothing.”

Theon could taste bile at the back of his throat, and his stomach was a nest of snakes twining and snapping at each other. If he crept back to Winterfell empty-handed, he might as well dress in motley henceforth and wear a pointed hat; the whole north would know him for a fool. And when my father hears, and Asha...

“M’lord prince.” Reek urged his horse near. “Might be them Starks never came this way. If I was them, I would have gone north and east, maybe. To the Umbers. Good Stark men, they are. But their lands are a long way. The boys will shelter someplace nearer. Might be I know where.”

Theon looked at him suspiciously. “Tell me.”

“You know that old mill, sitting lonely on the Acorn Water? We stopped there when I was being dragged to Winterfell a captive. The miller’s wife sold us hay for our horses while that old knight clucked over her brats. Might be the Starks are hiding there.”

Theon knew the mill. He had even tumbled the miller’s wife a time or two. There was nothing special about it, or her. “Why there? There are a dozen villages and holdfasts just as close.”

Amusement shone in those pale eyes. “Why? Now that’s past knowing. But they’re there, I have a feeling.”

He was growing sick of the man’s sly answers. His lips look like two worms fucking. “What are you saying? If you’ve kept some knowledge from me-”

“M’Iord prince?” Reek dismounted, and beckoned Theon to do the same. When they were both afoot, he pulled open the cloth sack he’d fetched from Winterfell. “Have a look here.”

It was growing hard to see. Theon thrust his hand into the sack impatiently, groping amongst soft fur and rough scratchy wool. A sharp point pricked his skin, and his fingers closed around something cold and hard. He drew out a wolf’s-head brooch, silver and jet. Understanding came suddenly. His hand closed into a fist. “Gelmarr,” he said, wondering whom he could trust. None of them. “Aggar. Rednose. With us. The rest of you may return to Winterfell with the hounds. I’ll have no further need of them. I know where Bran and Rickon are hiding now.”

“Prince Theon,” Maester Luwin entreated, “you will remember your promise? Mercy, you said.”

“Mercy was for this morning,” said Theon. It is better to be feared than laughed at. “Before they made me angry.”

JON

They could see the fire in the night, glimmering against the side of the mountain like a fallen star. It burned redder than the other stars, and did not twinkle, though sometimes it flared up bright and sometimes dwindled down to no more than a distant spark, dull and faint.

Half a mile ahead and two thousand feet up, Jon judged, and perfectly placed to see anything moving in the pass below

“Watchers in the Skirling Pass,” wondered the oldest among them. In the spring of his youth, he had been squire to a king, so the black brothers still called him Squire Dalbridge. “What is it Mance Rayder fears, I wonder?”

“If he knew they’d lit a fire, he’d flay the poor bastards,” said Ebben, a squat bald man muscled like a bag of rocks.

“Fire is life up here,” said Qhorin Halfhand, “but it can be death as well.” By his command, they’d risked no open flames since entering the mountains. They ate cold salt beef, hard bread, and harder cheese, and slept clothed and huddled beneath a pile of cloaks and furs, grateful for each other’s warmth. It made Jon remember cold nights long ago at Winterfell, when he’d shared a bed with his brothers. These men were brothers too, though the bed they shared was stone and earth.

“They’ll have a horn,” said Stonesnake.

The Halfhand said, “A horn they must not blow.”

“That’s a long cruel climb by night,” Ebben said as he eyed the distant spark through a cleft in the rocks that sheltered them. The sky was cloudless, the jagged mountains rising black on black until the very top, where their cold crowns of snow and ice shone palely in the moonlight.

“And a longer fall,” said Qhorin Halfhand. “Two men, I think. There are like to be two up there, sharing the watch.”

“Me.” The ranger they called Stonesnake had already shown that he was the best climber among them. It would have to be him.

“And me,” said Jon Snow.

Qhorin Halfhand looked at him. Jon could hear the wind keening as it shivered through the high pass above them. One of the garrons whickered and pawed at the thin stony soil of the hollow where they had taken shelter. “The wolf will remain with us,” Qhorin said. “White fur is seen too easily by moonlight.” He turned to Stonesnake. “When it’s done, throw down a burning brand. We’ll come when we see it fall.”

“No better time to start than now,” said Stonesnake.

They each took a long coil of rope. Stonesnake carried a bag of iron spikes as well, and a small hammer with its head wrapped in thick felt. Their garrons they left behind, along with their helmets, mail, and Ghost. Jon knelt and let the direwolf nuzzle him before they set off. “Stay,” he commanded. “I’ll be back for you.”

Stonesnake took the lead. He was a short wiry man, near fifty and grey of beard but stronger than he seemed, and he had the best night eyes of anyone Jon had ever known. He needed them

tonight. By day the mountains were blue-grey, brushed with frost, but once the sun vanished behind the jagged peaks they turned black. Now the rising moon had lined them in white and silver.

The black brothers moved through black shadows amidst black rocks, working their way up a steep, twisting trail as their breath frosted in the black air. Jon felt almost naked without his mail, but he did not miss its weight. This was hard going, and slow. To hurry here was to risk a broken ankle or worse. Stonesnake seemed to know where to put his feet as if by instinct, but Jon needed to be more careful on the broken, uneven ground.

The Skirling Pass was really a series of passes, a long twisting course that went up around a succession of icy wind-carved peaks and down through hidden valleys that seldom saw the sun. Apart from his companions, Jon had glimpsed no living man since they'd left the wood behind and begun to make their way upward. The Frostfangs were as cruel as any place the gods had made, and as inimical to men. The wind cut like a knife up here, and shrilled in the night like a mother mourning her slain children. What few trees they saw were stunted, grotesque things growing sideways out of cracks and fissures. Tumbled shelves of rock often overhung the trail, fringed with hanging icicles that looked like long white teeth from a distance.

Yet even so, Jon Snow was not sorry he had come. There were wonders here as well. He had seen sunlight flashing on icy thin waterfalls as they plunged over the lips of sheer stone cliffs, and a mountain meadow full of autumn wildflowers, blue coldsnaps and bright scarlet frostfires and stands of piper's grass in russet and gold. He had peered down ravines so deep and black they seemed certain to end in some hell, and he had ridden his garron over a wind-eaten bridge of natural stone with nothing but sky to either side. Eagles nested in the heights and came down to hunt the valleys, circling effortlessly on great blue-grey wings that seemed almost part of the sky. Once he had watched a shadowcat stalk a ram, flowing down the mountainside like liquid smoke until it was ready to pounce.

Now it is our turn to pounce. He wished he could move as sure and silent as that shadowcat, and kill as quickly. Longclaw was sheathed across his back, but he might not have room to use it. He carried dirk and dagger for closer work. They will have weapons as well, and I am not armored. He wondered who would prove the shadowcat by night's end, and who the ram.

For a long way they stayed to the trail, following its twists and turns as it snaked along the side of the mountain, upward, ever upward. Sometimes the mountain folded back on itself and they lost sight of the fire, but soon or late it would always reappear. The path Stonesnake chose would never have served for the horses. In places Jon had to put his back to the cold stone and shuffle along sideways like a crab, inch by inch. Even where the track widened it was treacherous; there were cracks big enough to swallow a man's leg, rubble to stumble over, hollow places where the water pooled by day and froze hard by night. One step and then another, Jon told himself. One step and then another, and I will not fall.

He had not shaved since leaving the Fist of the First Men, and the hair on his lip was soon stiff with frost. Two hours into the climb, the wind kicked up so fiercely that it was all he could do to

hunch down and cling to the rock, praying he would not be blown off the mountain. One step and then another, he resumed when the gale subsided. One step and then another, and I will not fall.

Soon they were high enough so that looking down was best not considered. There was nothing below but yawning blackness, nothing above but moon and stars. “The mountain is your mother,” Stonesnake had told him during an easier climb a few days past. “Cling to her, press your face up against her teats, and she won’t drop you.” Jon had made a joke of it, saying how he’d always wondered who his mother was, but never thought to find her in the Frostfangs. It did not seem nearly so amusing now. One step and then another, he thought, clinging tight.

The narrow track ended abruptly where a massive shoulder of black granite thrust out from the side of the mountain. After the bright moonlight, its shadow was so black that it felt like stepping into a cave. “Straight up here,” the ranger said in a quiet voice. “We want to get above them.” He peeled off his gloves, tucked them through his belt, tied one end of his rope around his waist, the other end around Jon. “Follow me when the rope grows taut.” The ranger did not wait for an answer but started at once, moving upward with fingers and feet, faster than Jon would have believed. The long rope unwound slowly. Jon watched him closely, making note of how he went, and where he found each handhold, and when the last loop of hemp uncoiled, he took off his own gloves and followed, much more slowly.

Stonesnake had passed the rope around the smooth spike of rock he was waiting on, but as soon as Jon reached him he shook it loose and was off again. This time there was no convenient cleft when he reached the end of their tether, so he took out his felt-headed hammer and drove a spike deep into a crack in the stone with a series of gentle taps. Soft as the sounds were, they echoed off the stone so loudly that Jon winced with every blow, certain that the wildlings must hear them too. When the spike was secure, Stonesnake secured the rope to it, and Jon started after him. Suck on the mountain’s teat, he reminded himself. Don’t look down. Keep your weight above your feet. Don’t look down. Look at the rock in front of you. There’s a good handhold, yes. Don’t look down. I can catch a breath on that ledge there, all I need to do is reach it. Never look down.

Once his foot slipped as he put his weight on it and his heart stopped in his chest, but the gods were good and he did not fall. He could feel the cold seeping off the rock into his fingers, but he dared not don his gloves; gloves would slip, no matter how tight they seemed, cloth and fur moving between skin and stone, and up here that could kill him. His burned hand was stiffening up on him, and soon it began to ache. Then he ripped open his thumbnail somehow, and after that he left smears of blood wherever he put his hand. He hoped he still had all his fingers by the end of the climb.

Up they went, and up, and up, black shadows creeping across the moonlit wall of rock. Anyone down on the floor of the pass could have seen them easily, but the mountain hid them from the view of the wildlings by their fire. They were close now, though. Jon could sense it. Even so, he did not think of the foes who were waiting for him, all unknowing, but of his brother at Winterfell. Bran used to love to climb. I wish I had a tenth part of his courage.

The wall was broken two-thirds of the way up by a crooked fissure of icy stone. Stonesnake reached down a hand to help him up. He had donned his gloves again, so Jon did the same. The ranger moved his head to the left, and the two of them crawled along the shelf three hundred yards or more, until they could see the dull orange glow beyond the lip of the cliff.

The wildlings had built their watchfire in a shallow depression above the narrowest part of the pass, with a sheer drop below and rock behind to shelter them from the worst of the wind. That same windbreak allowed the black brothers to crawl within a few feet of them, creeping along on their bellies until they were looking down on the men they must kill.

One was asleep, curled up tight and buried beneath a great mound of skins. Jon could see nothing of him but his hair, bright red in the firelight. The second sat close to the flames, feeding them twigs and branches and complaining of the wind in a querulous tone. The third watched the pass, though there was little to see, only a vast bowl of darkness ringed by the snowy shoulders of the mountains. It was the watcher who wore the horn.

Three. For a moment Jon was uncertain. There was only supposed to be two. One was asleep, though. And whether there was two or three or twenty, he still must do what he had come to do. Stonesnake touched his arm, pointed at the wildling with the horn. Jon nodded toward the one by the fire. It felt queer, picking a man to kill. Half the days of his life had been spent with sword and shield, training for this moment. Did Robb feel this way before his first battle? he wondered, but there was no time to ponder the question. Stonesnake moved as fast as his namesake, leaping down on the wildlings in a rain of pebbles. Jon slid Longclaw from its sheath and followed.

It all seemed to happen in a heartbeat. Afterward Jon could admire the courage of the wildling who reached first for his horn instead of his blade. He got it to his lips, but before he could sound it Stonesnake knocked the horn aside with a swipe of his shortsword. Jon's man leapt to his feet, thrusting at his face with a burning brand. He could feel the heat of the flames as he flinched back. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the sleeper stirring, and knew he must finish his man quick. When the brand swung again, he bulled into it, swinging the bastard sword with both hands. The Valyrian steel sheared through leather, fur, wool, and flesh, but when the wildling fell he twisted, ripping the sword from Jon's grasp. On the ground the sleeper sat up beneath his furs. Jon slid his dirk free, grabbing the man by the hair and jamming the point of the knife up under his chin as he reached for his-no, her-

His hand froze. "A girl."

"A watcher," said Stonesnake. "A wildling. Finish her."

Jon could see fear and fire in her eyes. Blood ran down her white throat from where the point of his dirk had pricked her. One thrust and it's done, he told himself. He was so close he could smell onion on her breath. She is no older than I am. Something about her made him think of Arya, though they looked nothing at all alike. "Will you yield?" he asked, giving the dirk a half turn. And if she doesn't?

"I yield." Her words steamed in the cold air.

"You're our captive, then." He pulled the dirk away from the soft skin of her throat.

"Qhorin said nothing of taking captives," said Stonesnake.

“He never said not to.” Jon let go his grip on the girl’s hair, and she scuttled backward, away from them.

“She’s a spearwife.” Stonesnake gestured at the long-hafted axe that lay beside her sleeping furs. “She was reaching for that when you grabbed her. Give her half a chance and she’ll bury it between your eyes.”

“I won’t give her half a chance.” Jon kicked the axe well out of the girl’s reach. “Do you have a name?”

“Ygritte.” Her hand rubbed at her throat and came away bloody. She stared at the wetness.

Sheathing his dirk, he wrenched Longclaw free from the body of the man he’d killed. “You are my captive, Ygritte.”

“I gave you my name.”

“I’m Jon Snow.”

She flinched. “An evil name.”

“A bastard name,” he said. “My father was Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell.”

The girl watched him warily, but Stonesnake gave a mordant chuckle. “It’s the captive supposed to tell things, remember?” The ranger thrust a long branch into the fire. “Not that she will. I’ve known wildlings to bite off their own tongues before they’d answer a question.” When the end of the branch was blazing merrily, he took two steps and flung it out over the pass. It fell through the night spinning until it was lost to sight.

“You ought to burn them you killed,” said Ygritte.

“Need a bigger fire for that, and big fires burn bright.” Stonesnake turned, his eyes scanning the black distance for any spark of light. “Are there more wildlings close by, is that it?”

“Burn them,” the girl repeated stubbornly, “or it might be you’ll need them swords again.”

Jon remembered dead Othor and his cold black hands. “Maybe we should do as she says.”

“There are other ways.” Stonesnake knelt beside the man he’d slain, stripped him of cloak and boots and belt and vest, then hoisted the body over one thin shoulder and carried it to the edge. He grunted as he tossed it over. A moment later they heard a wet, heavy smack well below them. By then the ranger had the second body down to the skin and was dragging it by the arms. Jon took the feet and together they flung the dead man out in the blackness of the night.

Ygritte watched and said nothing. She was older than he’d thought at first, Jon realized; maybe as old as twenty, but short for her age, bandylegged, with a round face, small hands, and a pug nose. Her shaggy mop of red hair stuck out in all directions. She looked plump as she crouched there, but most of that was layers of fur and wool and leather. Underneath all that she could be as skinny as Arya.

“Were you sent to watch for us?” Jon asked her.

“You, and others.”

Stonesnake warmed his hands over the fire. “What waits beyond the pass?”

“The free folk.”

“How many?”

“Hundreds and thousands. More than you ever saw, crow.” She smiled. Her teeth were crooked, but very white.

She doesn't know how many. “Why come here?”

Ygritte fell silent.

“What's in the Frostfangs that your king could want? You can't stay here, there's no food.”

She turned her face away from him.

“Do you mean to march on the Wall? When?”

She stared at the flames as if she could not hear him.

“Do you know anything of my uncle, Benjen Stark?”

Ygritte ignored him. Stonesnake laughed. “if she spits out her tongue, don't say I didn't warn you.”

A low rumbling growl echoed off the rock. Shadowcat, Jon knew at once. As he rose he heard another, closer at hand. He pulled his sword and turned, listening.

“They won't trouble us,” Ygritte said. “It's the dead they've come for. Cats can smell blood six miles off. They'll stay near the bodies till they've eaten every last stringy shred o' meat, and cracked the bones for the marrow.”

Jon could hear the sounds of their feeding echoing off the rocks. It gave him an uneasy feeling. The warmth of the fire made him realize how bone-tired he was, but he dared not sleep. He had taken a captive, and it was on him to guard her. “Were they your kin?” he asked her quietly.

“The two we killed?”

“No more than you are.”

“Me?” He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You said you were the Bastard o' Winterfell.”

“I am.”

“Who was your mother?”

“Some woman. Most of them are.” Someone had said that to him once. He did not remember who.

She smiled again, a flash of white teeth. “And she never sung you the song o' the winter rose?”

“I never knew my mother. Or any such song.”

“Bael the Bard made it,” said Ygritte. “He was King-beyond-the--Wall a long time back. All the free folk know his songs, but might be you don't sing them in the south.”

“Winterfell's not in the south,” Jon objected.

“Yes it is. Everything below the Wall's south to us.”

He had never thought of it that way. “I suppose it's all in where you're standing.”

“Aye,” Ygritte agreed. “It always is.”

“Tell me,” Jon urged her. it would be hours before Qhorin came up, and a story would help keep him awake. “I want to hear this tale of yours.”

“Might be you won't like it much.”

“I'll hear it all the same.”

“Brave black crow,” she mocked. “Well, long before he was king over the free folk, Bael was a great raider.”

Stonesnake gave a snort. “A murderer, robber, and raper, is what you mean.”

“That’s all in where you’re standing too,” Ygritte said. “The Stark in Winterfell wanted Bael’s head, but never could take him, and the taste o’ failure galled him. One day in his bitterness he called Bael a craven who preyed only on the weak. When word o’ that got back, Bael vowed to teach the lord a lesson. So he scaled the Wall, skipped down the kingsroad, and walked into Winterfell one winter’s night with harp in hand, naming himself Sygerrick of Skagos. Sygerrick means ‘deceiver’ in the Old Tongue, that the First Men spoke, and the giants still speak.

“North or south, singers always find a ready welcome, so Bael ate at Lord Stark’s own table, and played for the lord in his high seat until half the night was gone. The old songs he played, and new ones he’d made himself, and he played and sang so well that when he was done, the lord offered to let him name his own reward. ‘All I ask is a flower’ Bael answered, ‘the fairest flower that blooms in the gardens o’ Winterfell.’

“Now as it happened the winter roses had only then come into bloom, and no flower is so rare nor precious. So the Stark sent to his glass gardens and commanded that the most beautiful o’ the winter roses be plucked for the singer’s payment. And so it was done. But when morning come, the singer had vanished... and so had Lord Brandon’s maiden daughter. Her bed they found empty, but for the pale blue rose that Bael had left on the pillow where her head had lain.”

Jon had never heard this tale before. “Which Brandon was this supposed to be? Brandon the Builder lived in the Age of Heroes, thousands of years before Bael. There was Brandon the Burner and his father Brandon the Shipwright, but-”

“This was Brandon the Daughterless,” Ygritte said sharply. “Would you hear the tale, or no?”

He scowled. “Go on.”

“Lord Brandon had no other children. At his behest, the black crows flew forth from their castles in the hundreds, but nowhere could they find any sign o’ Bael or this maid. For most a year they searched, till the lord lost heart and took to his bed, and it seemed as though the line o’ Starks was at its end. But one night as he lay waiting to die, Lord Brandon heard a child’s cry. He followed the sound and found his daughter back in her bedchamber, asleep with a babe at her breast.”

“Bael had brought her back?”

“No. They had been in Winterfell all the time, hiding with the dead beneath the castle. The maid loved Bael so dearly she bore him a son, the song says... though if truth be told, all the maids love Bael in them songs he wrote. Be that as it may, what’s certain is that Bael left the child in payment for the rose he’d plucked unasked, and that the boy grew to be the next Lord Stark. So there it is-you have Bael’s blood in you, same as me.”

“It never happened,” Jon said.

She shrugged. “Might be it did, might be it didn’t. It is a good song, though. My mother used to sing it to me. She was a woman too, Jon Snow. Like yours.” She rubbed her throat where his dirk had cut her. “The song ends when they find the babe, but there is a darker end to the story. Thirty

years later, when Bael was King-beyond-the-Wall and led the free folk south, it was young Lord Stark who met him at the Frozen Ford... and killed him, for Bael would not harm his own son when they met sword to sword.”

“So the son slew the father instead,” said Jon.

“Aye,” she said, “but the gods hate kinslayers, even when they kill unknowing. When Lord Stark returned from the battle and his mother saw Bael’s head upon his spear, she threw herself from a tower in her grief. Her son did not long outlive her. One o’ his lords peeled the skin off him and wore him for a cloak.”

“Your Bael was a liar,” he told her, certain now.

“No,” Ygritte said, “but a bard’s truth is different than yours or mine. Anyway, you asked for the story, so I told it.” She turned away from him, closed her eyes, and seemed to sleep.

Dawn and Qhorin Halfhand arrived together. The black stones had turned to grey and the eastern sky had gone indigo when Stonesnake spied the rangers below, wending their way upward. Jon woke his captive and held her by the arm as they descended to meet them. Thankfully, there was another way off the mountain to the north and west, along paths much gentler than the one that had brought them up here. They were waiting in a narrow defile when their brothers appeared, leading their garrons. Ghost raced ahead at first scent of them. Jon squatted to let the direwolf close his jaws around his wrist, tugging his hand back and forth. It was a game they played. But when he glanced up, he saw Ygritte watching with eyes as wide and white as hen’s eggs.

Qhorin Halfhand made no comment when he saw the prisoner. “There were three,” Stonesnake told him. No more than that.

“We passed two,” Ebben said, “or what the cats had left of them.” He eyed the girl sourly, suspicion plain on his face.

“She yielded,” Jon felt compelled to say.

Qhorin’s face was impassive. “Do you know who I am?”

“Qhorin Halfhand.” The girl looked half a child beside him, but she faced him boldly.

“Tell me true. If I fell into the hands of your people and yielded myself, what would it win me?”

“A slower death than elsewhere.”

The big ranger looked to Jon. “We have no food to feed her, nor can we spare a man to watch her.”

“The way before us is perilous enough, lad,” said Squire Dalbridge. “One shout when we need silence, and every man of us is doomed.”

Ebben drew his dagger. “A steel kiss will keep her quiet.”

Jon’s throat was raw. He looked at them all helplessly. “She yielded herself to me.”

“Then you must do what needs be done,” Qhorin Halfhand said. “You are the blood of Winterfell and a man of the Night’s Watch.” He looked at the others. “Come, brothers. Leave him to it. It will go easier for him if we do not watch.” And he led them up the steep twisting trail

toward the pale pink glow of the sun where it broke through a mountain cleft, and before very long only Jon and Ghost remained with the wildling girl.

He thought Ygritte might try to run, but she only stood there, waiting, looking at him. “You never killed a woman before, did you?” When he shook his head, she said, “We die the same as men. But you don’t need to do it. Mance would take you, I know he would. There’s secret ways. Them crows would never catch us.”

“I’m as much a crow as they are,” Jon said.

She nodded, resigned. “Will you burn me, after?”

“I can’t. The smoke might be seen.”

“That’s so.” She shrugged. “Well, there’s worse places to end up than the belly of a shadowcat.”

He pulled Longclaw over a shoulder. “Aren’t you afraid?”

“Last night I was,” she admitted. “But now the sun’s up.” She pushed her hair aside to bare her neck, and knelt before him. “Strike hard and true, crow, or I’ll come back and haunt you.”

Longclaw was not so long or heavy a sword as his father’s Ice, but it was Valyrian steel all the same. He touched the edge of the blade to mark where the blow must fall, and Ygritte shivered. “That’s cold,” she said. “Go on, be quick about it.”

He raised Longclaw over his head, both hands tight around the grip. One cut, with all my weight behind it. He could give her a quick clean death, at least. He was his father’s son. Wasn’t he? Wasn’t he?

“Do it,” she urged him after a moment. “Bastard. Do it. I can’t stay brave forever.” When the blow did not fall she turned her head to look at him.

Jon lowered his sword. “Go,” he muttered.

Ygritte stared.

“Now,” he said, “before my wits return. Go.”

She went.

SANSA

The southern sky was black with smoke. It rose swirling off a hundred distant fires, its sooty fingers smudging out the stars. Across the Blackwater Rush, a line of flame burned nightly from horizon to horizon, while on this side the Imp had fired the whole riverfront: docks and warehouses, homes and brothels, everything outside the city walls.

Even in the Red Keep, the air tasted of ashes. When Sansa found Ser Dontos in the quiet of the godswood, he asked if she'd been crying. "It's only from the smoke," she lied. "It looks as though half the kingswood is burning."

"Lord Stannis wants to smoke out the Imp's savages." Dontos swayed as he spoke, one hand on the trunk of a chestnut tree. A wine stain discolored the red-and-yellow motley of his tunic. "They kill his scouts and raid his baggage train. And the wildlings have been lighting fires too. The Imp told the queen that Stannis had better train his horses to eat ash, since he would find no blade of grass. I heard him say so. I hear all sorts of things as a fool that I never heard when I was a knight. They talk as though I am not there, and--he leaned close, breathing his winey breath right in her face--the Spider pays in gold for any little trifle. I think Moon Boy has been his for years."

He is drunk again. My poor Florian he names himself, and so he is. But he is all I have. "Is it true Lord Stannis burned the godswood at Storm's End?"

Dontos nodded. "He made a great pyre of the trees as an offering to his new god. The red priestess made him do it. They say she rules him now, body and soul. He's vowed to burn the Great Sept of Baelor too, if he takes the city."

"Let him." When Sansa had first beheld the Great Sept with its marble walls and seven crystal towers, she'd thought it was the most beautiful building in the world, but that had been before Joffrey beheaded her father on its steps. "I want it burned."

"Hush, child, the gods will hear you."

"Why should they? They never hear my prayers."

"Yes they do. They sent me to you, didn't they?"

Sansa picked at the bark of a tree. She felt light-headed, almost feverish. "They sent you, but what good have you done? You promised you would take me home, but I'm still here."

Dontos patted her arm. "I've spoken to a certain man I know, a good friend to me... and you, my lady. He will hire a swift ship to take us to safety, when the time is right."

"The time is right now," Sansa insisted, "before the fighting starts. They've forgotten about me. I know we could slip away if we tried."

"Child, child." Dontos shook his head. "Out of the castle, yes, we could do that, but the city gates are more heavily guarded than ever, and the Imp has even closed off the river."

It was true. The Blackwater Rush was as empty as Sansa had ever seen it. All the ferries had been withdrawn to the north bank, and the trading galleys had fled or been seized by the Imp to be made over for battle. The only ships to be seen were the king's war galleys. They rowed

endlessly up and down, staying to the deep water in the middle of the river and exchanging flights of arrows with Stannis's archers on the south shore.

Lord Stannis himself was still on the march, but his vanguard had appeared two nights ago during the black of the moon. King's Landing had woken to the sight of their tents and banners. They were five thousand, Sansa had heard, near as many as all the gold cloaks in the city. They flew the red or green apples of House Fossoway, the turtle of Estermont, and the fox-and-flowers of Florent, and their commander was Ser Guyard Morrigen, a famous southron knight who men now called Guyard the Green. His standard showed a crow in flight, its black wings spread wide against a storm-green sky. But it was the pale yellow banners that worried the city. Long ragged tails streamed behind them like flickering flames, and in place of a lord's sigil they bore the device of a god: the burning heart of the Lord of Light.

"When Stannis comes, he'll have ten times as many men as Joffrey does, everyone says so."

Dontos squeezed her shoulder. "The size of his host does not matter, sweetling, so long as they are on the wrong side of the river. Stannis cannot cross without ships."

"He has ships. More than Joffrey."

"It's a long sail from Storm's End, the fleet will need to come up Massey's Hook and through the Gullet and across Blackwater Bay. Perhaps the good gods will send a storm to sweep them from the seas." Dontos gave a hopeful smile. "It is not easy for you, I know. You must be patient, child. When my friend returns to the city, we shall have our ship. Have faith in your Florian, and try not to be afraid."

Sansa dug her nails into her hand. She could feel the fear in her tummy, twisting and pinching, worse every day. Nightmares of the day Princess Myrcella had sailed still troubled her sleep; dark suffocating dreams that woke her in the black of night, struggling for breath. She could hear the people screaming at her, screaming without words, like animals. They had hemmed her in and thrown filth at her and tried to pull her off her horse, and would have done worse if the Hound had not cut his way to her side. They had torn the High Septon to pieces and smashed in Ser Aron's head with a rock. Try not to be afraid! he said.

The whole city was afraid. Sansa could see it from the castle walls. The smallfolk were hiding themselves behind closed shutters and barred doors as if that would keep them safe. The last time King's Landing had fallen, the Lannisters looted and raped as they pleased and put hundreds to the sword, even though the city had opened its gates. This time the Imp meant to fight, and a city that fought could expect no mercy at all.

Dontos was prattling on. "If I were still a knight, I should have to put on armor and man the walls with the rest. I ought to kiss King Joffrey's feet and thank him sweetly."

"If you thanked him for making you a fool, he'd make you a knight again," Sansa said sharply.

Dontos chuckled. "My Jonquil's a clever girl, isn't she?"

"Joffrey and his mother say I'm stupid."

"Let them. You're safer that way, sweetling. Queen Cersei and the Imp and Lord Varys and their like, they all watch each other keen as hawks, and pay this one and that one to spy out what the others are doing, but no one ever troubles themselves about Lady Tanda's daughter, do

they?" Dontos covered his mouth to stifle a burp. "Gods preserve you, my little Jonquil." He was growing weepy. The wine did that to him. "Give your Florian a little kiss now. A kiss for luck." He swayed toward her.

Sansa dodged the wet groping lips, kissed him lightly on an unshaven cheek, and bid him good night. It took all her strength not to weep. She had been weeping too much of late. It was unseemly, she knew, but she could not seem to help herself; the tears would come, sometimes over a trifle, and nothing she did could hold them back.

The drawbridge to Maegor's Holdfast was unguarded. The imp had moved most of the gold cloaks to the city walls, and the white knights of the Kingsguard had duties more important than dogging her heels. Sansa could go where she would so long as she did not try to leave the castle, but there was nowhere she wanted to go.

She crossed over the dry moat with its cruel iron spikes and made her way up the narrow turnpike stair, but when she reached the door of her bedchamber she could not bear to enter. The very walls of the room made her feel trapped; even with the window opened wide it felt as though there were no air to breathe.

Turning back to the stair, Sansa climbed. The smoke blotted out the stars and the thin crescent of moon, so the roof was dark and thick with shadows. Yet from here she could see everything: the Red Keep's tall towers and great cornerforts, the maze of city streets beyond, to south and west the river running black, the bay to the east, the columns of smoke and cinders, and fires, fires everywhere. Soldiers crawled over the city walls like ants with torches, and crowded the hoardings that had sprouted from the ramparts. Down by the Mud Gate, outlined against the drifting smoke, she could make out the vague shape of the three huge catapults, the biggest anyone had ever seen, overtopping the walls by a good twenty feet. Yet none of it made her feel less fearful. A stab went through her, so sharp that Sansa sobbed and clutched at her belly. She might have fallen, but a shadow moved suddenly, and strong fingers grabbed her arm and steadied her.

She grabbed a merlon for support, her fingers scrabbling at the rough stone. "Let go of me," she cried. "Let go."

"The little bird thinks she has wings, does she? Or do you mean to end up crippled like that brother of yours?"

Sansa twisted in his grasp. "I wasn't going to fall. It was only... you startled me, that's all."

"You mean I scared you. And still do."

She took a deep breath to calm herself. "I thought I was alone, I She glanced away.

"The little bird still can't bear to look at me, can she?" The Hound released her. "You were glad enough to see my face when the mob had you, though. Remember?"

Sansa remembered all too well. She remembered the way they had howled, the feel of the blood running down her cheek from where the stone had struck her, and the garlic stink on the breath of the man who had tried to pull her from her horse. She could still feel the cruel pinch of fingers on her wrist as she lost her balance and began to fall.

She'd thought she was going to die then, but the fingers had twitched, all five at once, and the man had shrieked loud as a horse. When his hand fell away, another hand, stronger, shoved her back into her saddle. The man with the garlicky breath was on the ground, blood pumping out the stump of his arm, but there were others all around, some with clubs in hand. The Hound leapt at them, his sword a blur of steel that trailed a red mist as it swung. When they broke and ran before him he had laughed, his terrible burned face for a moment transformed.

She made herself look at that face now, really look. It was only courteous, and a lady must never forget her courtesies. The scars are not the worst part, nor even the way his mouth twitches. It's his eyes. She had never seen eyes so full of anger. "I... I should have come to you after," she said haltingly. "To thank you, for... for saving me... you were so brave."

"Brave?" His laugh was half a snarl. "A dog doesn't need courage to chase off rats. They had me thirty to one, and not a man of them dared face me."

She hated the way he talked, always so harsh and angry. "Does it give you joy to scare people?"

"No, it gives me joy to kill people." His mouth twitched. "Wrinkle up your face all you like, but spare me this false piety. You were a high lord's get. Don't tell me Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell never killed a man."

"That was his duty. He never liked it."

"Is that what he told you?" Clegane laughed again. "Your father lied. Killing is the sweetest thing there is." He drew his longsword. "Here's your truth. Your precious father found that out on Baelor's steps. Lord of Winterfell, Hand of the King, Warden of the North, the mighty Eddard Stark, of a line eight thousand years old... but Ilyn Payne's blade went through his neck all the same, didn't it? Do you remember the dance he did when his head came off his shoulders?"

Sansa hugged herself, suddenly cold. "Why are you always so hateful? I was thanking you..."

"Just as if I was one of those true knights you love so well, yes. What do you think a knight is for, girl? You think it's all taking favors from ladies and looking fine in gold plate? Knights are for killing." He laid the edge of his longsword against her neck, just under her ear. Sansa could feel the sharpness of the steel. "I killed my first man at twelve. I've lost count of how many I've killed since then. High lords with old names, fat rich men dressed in velvet, knights puffed up like bladders with their honors, yes, and women and children too-they're all meat, and I'm the butcher. Let them have their lands and their gods and their gold. Let them have their sers."

Sandor Clegane spat at her feet to show what he thought of that. "So long as I have this," he said, lifting the sword from her throat, "there's no man on earth I need fear."

Except your brother, Sansa thought, but she had better sense than to say it aloud. He is a dog, just as he says. A half-wild, mean-tempered dog that bites any hand that tries to pet him, and yet will savage any man who tries to hurt his masters. "Not even the men across the river?"

Clegane's eyes turned toward the distant fires. "All this burning." He sheathed his sword. "Only cowards fight with fire."

"Lord Stannis is no coward.-

"He's not the man his brother was either. Robert never let a little thing like a river stop him."

"What will you do when he crosses?"

“Fight. Kill. Die, maybe.”

“Aren’t you afraid? The gods might send you down to some terrible hell for all the evil you’ve done.”

“What evil?” He laughed. “What gods?”

“The gods who made us all.”

“All?” he mocked. “Tell me, little bird, what kind of god makes a monster like the Imp, or a halfwit like Lady Tanda’s daughter? If there are gods, they made sheep so wolves could eat mutton, and they made the weak for the strong to play with.”

“True knights protect the weak.”

He snorted. “There are no true knights, no more than there are gods. If you can’t protect yourself, die and get out of the way of those who can. Sharp steel and strong arms rule this world, don’t ever believe any different.”

Sansa backed away from him. “You’re awful.”

“I’m honest. It’s the world that’s awful. Now fly away, little bird, I’m sick of you peeping at me.”

Wordless, she fled. She was afraid of Sandor Clegane... and yet, some part of her wished that Ser Dontos had a little of the Hound’s ferocity. There are gods, she told herself, and there are true knights too. All the stories can’t be lies.

That night Sansa dreamed of the riot again. The mob surged around her, shrieking, a maddened beast with a thousand faces. Everywhere she turned she saw faces twisted into monstrous inhuman masks. She wept and told them she had never done them hurt, yet they dragged her from her horse all the same. “No,” she cried, “no, please, don’t, don’t,” but no one paid her any heed. She shouted for Ser Dontos, for her brothers, for her dead father and her dead wolf, for gallant Ser Loras who had given her a red rose once, but none of them came. She called for the heroes from the songs, for Florian and Ser Ryam Redwyne and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, but no one heard. Women swarmed over her like weasels, pinching her legs and kicking her in the belly, and someone hit her in the face and she felt her teeth shatter. Then she saw the bright glimmer of steel. The knife plunged into her belly and tore and tore and tore, until there was nothing left of her down there but shiny wet ribbons.

When she woke, the pale light of morning was slanting through her window, yet she felt as sick and achy as if she had not slept at all. There was something sticky on her thighs. When she threw back the blanket and saw the blood, all she could think was that her dream had somehow come true. She remembered the knives inside her, twisting and ripping. She squirmed away in horror, kicking at the sheets and falling to the floor, breathing raggedly, naked, bloodied, and afraid.

But as she crouched there, on her hands and knees, understanding came. “No, please,” Sansa whimpered, “please, no.” She didn’t want this happening to her, not now, not here, not now, not now, not now, not now.

Madness took hold of her. Pulling herself up by the bedpost, she went to the basin and washed between her legs, scrubbing away all the stickiness. By the time she was done, the water was pink with blood. When her maidservants saw it they would know. Then she remembered the

bedclothes. She rushed back to the bed and stared in horror at the dark red stain and the tale it told. All she could think was that she had to get rid of it, or else they'd see. She couldn't let them see, or they'd marry her to Joffrey and make her lay with him.

Snatching up her knife, Sansa hacked at the sheet, cutting out the stain. If they ask me about the hole, what will I say? Tears ran down her face. She pulled the torn sheet from the bed, and the stained blanket as well. I'll have to burn them. She balled up the evidence, stuffed it in the fireplace, drenched it in oil from her bedside lamp, and lit it afire. Then she realized that the blood had soaked through the sheet into the featherbed, so she bundled that up as well, but it was big and cumbersome, hard to move. Sansa could get only half of it into the fire. She was on her knees, struggling to shove the mattress into the flames as thick grey smoke eddied around her and filled the room, when the door burst open and she heard her maid gasp.

In the end it took three of them to pull her away. And it was all for nothing. The bedclothes were burnt, but by the time they carried her off her thighs were bloody again. It was as if her own body had betrayed her to Joffrey, unfurling a banner of Lannister crimson for all the world to see.

When the fire was out, they carried off the singed featherbed, fanned away the worst of the smoke, and brought up a tub. Women came and went, muttering and looking at her strangely. They filled the tub with scalding hot water, bathed her and washed her hair and gave her a cloth to wear between her legs. By then Sansa was calm again, and ashamed for her folly. The smoke had ruined most of her clothing. One of the women went away and came back with a green wool shift that was almost her size. "It's not as pretty as your own things, but it will serve," she announced when she'd pulled it down over Sansa's head. "Your shoes weren't burned, so at least you won't need to go barefoot to the queen."

Cersei Lannister was breaking her fast when Sansa was ushered into her solar. "You may sit," the queen said graciously. "Are you hungry?" She gestured at the table. There was porridge, honey, milk, boiled eggs, and crisp fried fish.

The sight of the food made Sansa feel ill. Her tummy was tied in a knot. "No, thank you, Your Grace."

"I don't blame you. Between Tyrion and Lord Stannis, everything I eat tastes of ash. And now you're setting fires as well. What did you hope to accomplish?"

Sansa lowered her head. "The blood frightened me."

"The blood is the seal of your womanhood. Lady Catelyn might have prepared you. You've had your first flowering, no more."

Sansa had never felt less flowery. "My lady mother told me, but I... I thought it would be different."

"Different how?"

"I don't know. Less... less messy, and more magical."

Queen Cersei laughed. "Wait until you birth a child, Sansa. A woman's life is nine parts mess to one part magic, you'll learn that soon enough... and the parts that look like magic often turn

out to be messiest of all.” She took a sip of milk. “So now you are a woman. Do you have the least idea of what that means?”

“It means that I am now fit to be wedded and bedded,” said Sansa, “and to bear children for the king.”

The queen gave a wry smile. “A prospect that no longer entices you as it once did, I can see. I will not fault you for that. Joffrey has always been difficult. Even his birth... I labored a day and a half to bring him forth. You cannot imagine the pain, Sansa. I screamed so loudly that I fancied Robert might hear me in the kingswood.”

“His Grace was not with you?”

“Robert? Robert was hunting. That was his custom. Whenever my time was near, my royal husband would flee to the trees with his huntsmen and hounds. When he returned he would present me with some pelts or a stag’s head, and I would present him with a baby.

“Not that I wanted him to stay, mind you. I had Grand Maester Pycelle and an army of midwives, and I had my brother. When they told Jaime he was not allowed in the birthing room, he smiled and asked which of them proposed to keep him out.

“Joffrey will show you no such devotion, I fear. You could thank your sister for that, if she weren’t dead. He’s never been able to forget that day on the Trident when you saw her shame him, so he shames you in turn. You’re stronger than you seem, though- I expect you’ll survive a bit of humiliation. I did. You may never love the king, but you’ll love his children.”

“I love His Grace with all my heart,” Sansa said.

The queen sighed. “You had best learn some new lies, and quickly. Lord Stannis will not like that one, I promise you.”

“The new High Septon said that the gods will never permit Lord Stannis to win, since Joffrey is the rightful king.”

A half smile flickered across the queen’s face. “Robert’s trueborn son and heir. Though Joff would cry whenever Robert picked him up. His Grace did not like that. His bastards had always gurgled at him happily, and sucked his finger when he put it in their little baseborn mouths. Robert wanted smiles and cheers, always, so he went where he found them, to his friends and his whores. Robert wanted to be loved. My brother Tyrion has the same disease. Do you want to be loved, Sansa?”

“Everyone wants to be loved.”

“I see flowering hasn’t made you any brighter,” said Cersei. “Sansa, permit me to share a bit of womanly wisdom with you on this very special day. Love is poison. A sweet poison, yes, but it will kill you all the same.”

JON

It was dark in the Skirling Pass. The great stone flanks of the mountains hid the sun for most of the day, so they rode in shadow, the breath of man and horse steaming in the cold air. Icy fingers of water trickled down from the snowpack above into small frozen pools that cracked and broke beneath the hooves of their garrons. Sometimes they would see a few weeds struggling from some crack in the rock or a splotch of pale lichen, but there was no grass, and they were above the trees now.

The track was as steep as it was narrow, wending its way ever upward. Where the pass was so constricted that rangers had to go single file, Squire Dalbridge would take the lead, scanning the heights as he went, his longbow ever close to hand. It was said he had the keenest eyes in the Night's Watch.

Ghost padded restlessly by Jon's side. From time to time he would stop and turn, his ears pricked, as if he heard something behind them. Jon did not think the shadowcats would attack living men, not unless they were starving, but he loosened Longclaw in its scabbard even so.

A wind-carved arch of grey stone marked the highest point of the pass. Here the way broadened as it began its long descent toward the valley of the Milkwater. Qhorin decreed that they would rest here until the shadows began to grow again. "Shadows are friends to men in black," he said.

Jon saw the sense of that. It would be pleasant to ride in the light for a time, to let the bright mountain sun soak through their cloaks and chase the chill from their bones, but they dared not. Where there were three watchers there might be others, waiting to sound the alarm.

Stonesnake curled up under his ragged fur cloak and was asleep almost at once. Jon shared his salt beef with Ghost while Ebben and Squire Dalbridge fed the horses. Qhorin Halfhand sat with his back to a rock, honing the edge of his longsword with long slow strokes. Jon watched the ranger for a few moments, then summoned his courage and went to him. "My lord," he said, "you never asked me how it went. With the girl."

"I am no lord, Jon Snow." Qhorin slid the stone smoothly along the steel with his two-fingered hand.

"She told me Mance would take me, if I ran with her."

"She told you true."

"She even claimed we were kin. She told me a story..."

"...of Bael the Bard and the rose of Winterfell. So Stonesnake told me. It happens I know the song. Mance would sing it of old, when he came back from a ranging. He had a passion for wildling music. Aye, and for their women as well."

"You knew him?"

"We all knew him." His voice was sad.

They were friends as well as brothers, Jon realized, and now they are sworn foes. "Why did he desert?"

"For a wench, some say. For a crown, others would have it." Qhorin tested the edge of his sword with the ball of his thumb. "He liked women, Mance did, and he was not a man whose

knees bent easily, that's true. But it was more than that. He loved the wild better than the Wall. It was in his blood. He was wildling born, taken as a child when some raiders were put to the sword. When he left the Shadow Tower he was only going home again."

"Was he a good ranger?"

"He was the best of us," said the Halfhand, "and the worst as well. Only fools like Thoren Smallwood despise the wildlings. They are as brave as we are, Jon. As strong, as quick, as clever. But they have no discipline. They name themselves the free folk, and each one thinks himself as good as a king and wiser than a maester. Mance was the same. He never learned how to obey."

"No more than me," said Jon quietly.

Qhorin's shrewd grey eyes seemed to see right through him. "So you let her go?" He did not sound the least surprised.

"You know?"

"Now. Tell me why you spared her."

It was hard to put into words. "My father never used a headsman. He said he owed it to men he killed to look into their eyes and hear their last words. And when I looked into Ygritte's eyes, I..." Jon stared down at his hands helplessly. "I know she was an enemy, but there was no evil in her."

"No more than in the other two."

"It was their lives or ours Jon said. "If they had seen us, if they had sounded that horn..."

"The wildlings would hunt us down and slay us, true enough."

"Stonesnake has the horn now, though, and we took Ygritte's knife and axe. She's behind us, afoot, unarmed..."

"And not like to be a threat," Qhorin agreed. "If I had needed her dead, I would have left her with Ebben, or done the thing myself."

"Then why did you command it of me?"

"I did not command it. I told you to do what needed to be done, and left you to decide what that would be." Qhorin stood and slid his longsword back into its scabbard. "When I want a mountain scaled, I call on Stonesnake. Should I need to put an arrow through the eye of some foe across a windy battlefield, I summon Squire Dalbridge. Ebben can make any man give up his secrets. To lead men you must know them, Jon Snow. I know more of you now than I did this morning."

"And if I had slain her?" asked Jon.

"She would be dead, and I would know you better than I had before. But enough talk. You ought to be sleeping. We have leagues to go, and dangers to face. You will need your strength."

Jon did not think sleep would come easily, but he knew the Halfhand was right. He found a place out of the wind, beneath an overhang of rock, and took off his cloak to use it for a blanket. "Ghost," he called. "Here. To me." He always slept better with the great white wolf beside him; there was comfort in the smell of him, and welcome warmth in that shaggy pale fur. This time, though, Ghost did no more than look at him. Then he turned away and padded around the garrons, and quick as that he was gone. He wants to hunt, Jon thought. Perhaps there were goats

in these mountains. The shadowcats must live on something. “Just don’t try and bring down a ‘cat,” he muttered. Even for a direwolf, that would be dangerous. He tugged his cloak over him and stretched out beneath the rock.

When he closed his eyes, he dreamed of direwolves.

There were five of them when there should have been six, and they were scattered, each apart from the others. He felt a deep ache of emptiness, a sense of incompleteness. The forest was vast and cold, and they were so small, so lost. His brothers were out there somewhere, and his sister, but he had lost their scent. He sat on his haunches and lifted his head to the darkening sky, and his cry echoed through the forest, a long lonely mournful sound. As it died away, he pricked up his ears, listening for an answer, but the only sound was the sigh of blowing snow.

Jon?

The call came from behind him, softer than a whisper, but strong too. Can a shout be silent? He turned his head, searching for his brother, for a glimpse of a lean grey shape moving beneath the trees, but there was nothing, only...

A weirwood.

It seemed to sprout from solid rock, its pale roots twisting up from a myriad of fissures and hairline cracks. The tree was slender compared to other weirwoods he had seen, no more than a sapling, yet it was growing as he watched, its limbs thickening as they reached for the sky. Wary, he circled the smooth white trunk until he came to the face. Red eyes looked at him. Fierce eyes they were, yet glad to see him. The weirwood had his brother’s face. Had his brother always had three eyes?

Not always, came the silent shout. Not before the crow.

He sniffed at the bark, smelled wolf and tree and boy, but behind that there were other scents, the rich brown smell of warm earth and the hard grey smell of stone and something else, something terrible. Death, he knew. He was smelling death. He cringed back, his hair bristling, and bared his fangs.

Don’t be afraid, I like it in the dark. No one can see you, but you can see them. But first you have to open your eyes. See? Like this. And the tree reached down and touched him.

And suddenly he was back in the mountains, his paws sunk deep in a drift of snow as he stood upon the edge of a great precipice. Before him the Skirling Pass opened up into airy emptiness, and a long vee-shaped valley lay spread beneath him like a quilt, awash in all the colors of an autumn afternoon.

A vast blue-white wall plugged one end of the vale, squeezing between the mountains as if it had shouldered them aside, and for a moment he thought he had dreamed himself back to Castle Black. Then he realized he was looking at a river of ice several thousand feet high. Under that glittering cold cliff was a great lake, its deep cobalt waters reflecting the snowcapped peaks that ringed it. There were men down in the valley, he saw now; many men, thousands, a huge host. Some were tearing great holes in the half-frozen ground, while others trained for war. He watched as a swarming mass of riders charged a shield wall, astride horses no larger than ants.

The sound of their mock battle was a rustling of steel leaves, drifting faintly on the wind. Their encampment had no plan to it; he saw no ditches, no sharpened stakes, no neat rows of horse lines. Everywhere crude earthen shelters and hide tents sprouted haphazardly, like a pox on the face of the earth. He spied untidy mounds of hay, smelled goats and sheep, horses and pigs, dogs in great profusion. Tendrils of dark smoke rose from a thousand cookfires.

This is no army, no more than it is a town. This is a whole people come together.

Across the long lake, one of the mounds moved. He watched it more closely and saw that it was not dirt at all, but alive, a shaggy lumbering beast with a snake for a nose and tusks larger than those of the greatest boar that had ever lived. And the thing riding it was huge as well, and his shape was wrong, too thick in the leg and hips to be a man.

Then a sudden gust of cold made his fur stand up, and the air thrilled to the sound of wings. As he lifted his eyes to the ice-white mountain heights above, a shadow plummeted out of the sky. A shrill scream split the air. He glimpsed blue-grey pinions spread wide, shutting out the sun...

"Ghost!" Jon shouted, sitting up. He could still feel the talons, the pain. "Ghost, to me!"

Ebben appeared, grabbed him, shook him. "Quiet! You mean to bring the wildlings down on us? What's wrong with you, boy?"

"A dream," said Jon feebly. "I was Ghost, I was on the edge of the mountain looking down on a frozen river, and something attacked me. A bird... an eagle, I think..."

Squire Dalbridge smiled. "It's always pretty women in my dreams. Would that I dreamed more often."

Qhorin came up beside him. "A frozen river, you say?"

"The Milkwater flows from a great lake at the foot of a glacier," Stonesnake put in.

"There was a tree with my brother's face. The wildlings... there were thousands, more than I ever knew existed. And giants riding mammoths." From the way the light had shifted, Jon judged that he had been asleep for four or five hours. His head ached, and the back of his neck where the talons had burned through him. But that was in the dream.

"Tell me all that you remember, from first to last," said Qhorin Halfhand.

Jon was confused. "It was only a dream."

"A wolf dream," the Halfhand said. "Craster told the Lord Commander that the wildlings were gathering at the source of the Milkwater. That may be why you dreamed it. Or it may be that you saw what waits for us, a few hours farther on. Tell me."

It made him feel half a fool to talk of such things to Qhorin and the other rangers, but he did as he was commanded. None of the black brothers laughed at him, however. By the time he was done, even Squire Dalbridge was no longer smiling.

"Skinchanger?" said Ebben grimly, looking at the Halfhand. Does he mean the eagle~ Jon wondered. Or me? Skinchangers and wargs belonged in Old Nan's stories, not in the world he had lived in all his life. Yet here, in this strange bleak wilderness of rock and ice, it was not hard to believe.

"The cold winds are rising. Mormont feared as much. Benjen Stark felt it as well. Dead men walk and the trees have eyes again. Why should we balk at wargs and giants?"

“Does this mean my dreams are true as well?” asked Squire Dalbridge. “Lord Snow can keep his mammoths, I want my women.”

“Man and boy I’ve served the Watch, and ranged as far as any,” said Ebben. “I’ve seen the bones of giants, and heard many a queer tale, but no more. I want to see them with my own eyes.”

“Be careful they don’t see you, Ebben,” Stonesnake said.

Ghost did not reappear as they set out again. The shadows covered the floor of the pass by then, and the sun was sinking fast toward the jagged twin peaks of the huge mountain the rangers named Forktop. If the dream was true... Even the thought scared him. Could the eagle have hurt Ghost, or knocked him off the precipice? And what about the weirwood with his brother’s face, that smelled of death and darkness?

The last ray of sun vanished behind the peaks of Forktop. Twilight filled the Skirling Pass. It seemed to grow colder almost at once. They were no longer climbing. In fact, the ground had begun to descend, though as yet not sharply. It was littered with cracks and broken boulders and tumbled heaps of rock. It will be dark soon, and still no sight of Ghost. It was tearing Jon apart, yet he dare not shout for the direwolf as he would have liked. Other things might be listening as well.

“Qhorin,” Squire Dalbridge called softly. “There. Look.”

The eagle was perched on a spine of rock far above them, outlined against the darkening sky. We’ve seen other eagles, Jon thought. That need not be the one I dreamed of.

Even so, Ebben would have loosed a shaft at it, but the squire stopped him. “The bird’s well out of bowshot.”

“I don’t like it watching us.”

The squire shrugged. “Nor me, but you won’t stop it. Only waste a good arrow.”

Qhorin sat in his saddle, studying the eagle for a long time. “We press on,” he finally said. The rangers resumed their descent.

Ghost, Jon wanted to shout, where are you?

He was about to follow Qhorin and the others when he glimpsed a flash of white between two boulders. A patch of old snow, he thought, until he saw it stir. He was off his horse at once. As he went to his knees,

Ghost lifted his head. His neck glistened wetly, but he made no sound when Jon peeled off a glove and touched him. The talons had torn a bloody path through fur and flesh, but the bird had not been able to snap his neck.

Qhorin Halfhand was standing over him. “How bad?”

As if in answer, Ghost struggled to his feet.

“The wolf is strong,” the ranger said. “Ebben, water. Stonesnake, your skin of wine. Hold him still, Jon.”

Together they washed the caked blood from the direwolf’s fur. Ghost struggled and bared his teeth when Qhorin poured the wine into the ragged red gashes the eagle had left him, but Jon wrapped his arms around him and murmured soothing words, and soon enough the wolf quieted.

By the time they'd ripped a strip from Jon's cloak to wrap the wounds, full dark had settled. Only a dusting of stars set the black of sky apart from the black of stone. "Do we press on?" Stonesnake wanted to know.

Qhorin went to his garron. "Back, not on."

"Back?" Jon was taken by surprise.

"Eagles have sharper eyes than men. We are seen. So now we run." The Halfhand wound a long black scarf around his face and swung up into the saddle.

The other rangers exchanged a look, but no man thought to argue. One by one they mounted and turned their mounts toward home. "Ghost, come," he called, and the direwolf followed, a pale shadow moving through the night.

All night they rode, feeling their way up the twisting pass and through the stretches of broken ground. The wind grew stronger. Sometimes it was so dark that they dismounted and went ahead on foot, each man leading his garron. Once Ebben suggested that some torches might serve them well, but Qhorin said, "No fire," and that was the end of that. They reached the stone bridge at the summit and began to descend again. Off in the darkness a shadowcat screamed in fury, its voice bouncing off the rocks so it seemed as though a dozen other 'cats were giving answer. Once Jon thought he saw a pair of glowing eyes on a ledge overhead, as big as harvest moons.

In the black hour before dawn, they stopped to let the horses drink and fed them each a handful of oats and a twist or two of hay. "We are not far from the place the wildlings died," said Qhorin. "From there, one man could hold a hundred. The right man." He looked at Squire Dalbridge.

The squire bowed his head. "Leave me as many arrows as you can spare, brothers." He stroked his longbow. "And see my garron has an apple when you're home. He's earned it, poor beastie." He's staying to die, Jon realized.

Qhorin clasped the squire's forearm with a gloved hand. "If the eagle flies down for a look at you..."

"...he'll sprout some new feathers."

The last Jon saw of Squire Dalbridge was his back as he clambered up the narrow path to the heights.

When dawn broke, Jon looked up into a cloudless sky and saw a speck moving through the blue. Ebben saw it too, and cursed, but Qhorin told him to be quiet. "Listen."

Jon held his breath, and heard it. Far away and behind them, the call of a hunting horn echoed against the mountains.

"And now they come," said Qhorin.

TYRION

Pod dressed him for his ordeal in a plush velvet tunic of Lannister crimson and brought him his chain of office. Tyrion left it on the bedside table. His sister disliked being reminded that he was the King's Hand, and he did not wish to inflame the relations between them any further.

Varys caught up with him as he was crossing the yard. "My lord," he said, a little out of breath. "You had best read this at once." He held out a parchment in a soft white hand. "A report from the north."

"Good news or bad?" Tyrion asked.

"That is not for me to judge."

Tyrion unrolled the parchment. He had to squint to read the words in the torchlit yard. "Gods be good," he said softly. "Both of them?"

"I fear so, my lord. It is so sad. So grievous sad. And them so young and innocent."

Tyrion remembered how the wolves had howled when the Stark boy had fallen. Are they howling now, I wonder? "Have you told anyone else?" he asked.

"Not as yet, though of course I must."

He rolled up the letter. "I'll tell my sister." He wanted to see how she took the news. He wanted that very much.

The queen looked especially lovely that night. She wore a low-cut gown of deep green velvet that brought out the color of her eyes. Her golden hair tumbled across her bare shoulders, and around her waist was a woven belt studded with emeralds. Tyrion waited until he had been seated and served a cup of wine before thrusting the letter at her. He said not a word. Cersei blinked at him innocently and took the parchment from his hand.

"I trust you're pleased," he said as she read. "You wanted the Stark boy dead, I believe."

Cersei made a sour face. "It was Jaime who threw him from that window, not me. For love, he said, as if that would please me. It was a stupid thing to do, and dangerous besides, but when did our sweet brother ever stop to think?"

"The boy saw you," Tyrion pointed out.

"He was a child. I could have frightened him into silence." She looked at the letter thoughtfully. "Why must I suffer accusations every time some Stark stubs his toe? This was Greyjoy's work, I had nothing to do with it."

"Let us hope Lady Catelyn believes that."

Her eyes widened. "She wouldn't-"

"-kill Jaime? Why not? What would you do if Joffrey and Tommen were murdered?"

"I still hold Sansa!" the queen declared.

"We still hold Sansa," he corrected her, "and we had best take good care of her. Now where is this supper you've promised me, sweet sister?"

Cersei set a tasty table, that could not be denied. They started with a creamy chestnut soup, crusty hot bread, and greens dressed with apples and pine nuts. Then came lamprey pie, honeyed

ham, buttered carrots, white beans and bacon, and roast swan stuffed with mushrooms and oysters. Tyrion was exceedingly courteous; he offered his sister the choice portions of every dish, and made certain she ate only what she did. Not that he truly thought she'd poison him, but it never hurt to be careful.

The news about the Starks had soured her, he could see. "We've had no word from Bitterbridge?" she asked anxiously as she speared a bit of apple on the point of her dagger and ate it with small, delicate bites.

"None."

"I've never trusted Littlefinger. For enough coin, he'd go over to Stannis in a heartbeat."

"Stannis Baratheon is too bloody righteous to buy men. Nor would he make a comfortable lord for the likes of Petyr. This war has made for some queer bedfellows, I agree, but those two? No."

As he carved some slices off the ham, she said, "We have Lady Tanda to thank for the pig."

"A token of her love?"

"A bribe. She begs leave to return to her castle. Your leave as well as mine. I suspect she fears you'll arrest her on the road, as you did Lord Gyles."

"Does she plan to make off with the heir to the throne?" Tyrion served his sister a cut of ham and took one for himself. "I'd sooner she remain. If she wants to feel safe, tell her to bring down her garrison from Stokeworth. As many men as she has."

"If we need men so badly, why did you send away your savages?" A certain testiness crept into Cersei's voice.

"It was the best use I could have made of them," he told her truthfully. "They're fierce warriors, but not soldiers. In formal battle, discipline is more important than courage. They've already done us more good in the kingswood than they would ever have done us on the city walls."

As the swan was being served, the queen questioned him about the conspiracy of the Antler Men. She seemed more annoyed than afraid. "Why are we plagued with so many treasons? What injury has House Lannister ever done these wretches?"

"None," said Tyrion, "but they think to be on the winning side... which makes them fools as well as traitors."

"Are you certain you've found them all?"

"Varys says so." The swan was too rich for his taste.

A line appeared on Cersei's pale white brow, between those lovely eyes. "You put too much trust in that eunuch."

"He serves me well."

"Or so he'd have you believe. You think you're the only one he whispers secrets to? He gives each of us just enough to convince us that we'd be helpless without him. He played the same game with me, when I first wed Robert. For years, I was convinced I had no truer friend at court, but now..." She studied his face for a moment. "He says you mean to take the Hound from Joffrey."

Damn Varys. "I need Clegane for more important duties."

"Nothing is more important than the life of the king."

“The life of the king is not at risk. Joff will have brave Ser Osmund guarding him, and Meryn Trant as well.” They’re good for nothing better. “I need Balon Swann and the Hound to lead sorties, to make certain Stannis gets no toehold on our side of the Blackwater.”

“Jaime would lead the sorties himself.”

“From Riverrun? That’s quite a sortie.”

“Joff’s only a boy.”

“A boy who wants to be part of this battle, and for once he’s showing some sense. I don’t intend to put him in the thick of the fighting, but he needs to be seen. Men fight more fiercely for a king who shares their peril than one who hides behind his mother’s skirts.”

“He’s thirteen, Tyrion.”

“Remember Jaime at thirteen? If you want the boy to be his father’s son, let him play the part. Joff wears the finest armor gold can buy, and he’ll have a dozen gold cloaks around him at all times. If the city looks to be in the least danger of falling, I’ll have him escorted back to the Red Keep at once.”

He had thought that might reassure her, but he saw no sign of pleasure in those green eyes.

“Will the city fall?”

“No.” But if it does, pray that we can hold the Red Keep long enough for our lord father to march to our relief.

“You’ve lied to me before, Tyrion.”

“Always with good reason, sweet sister. I want amity between us as much as you do. I’ve decided to release Lord Gyles.” He had kept Gyles safe for just this gesture. “You can have Ser Boros Blount back as well.”

The queen’s mouth tightened. “Ser Boros can rot at Rosby,” she said, “but Tommen-”

“-stays where he is. He’s safer under Lord Jacelyn’s protection than he would ever have been with Lord Gyles.”

Serving men cleared away the swan, hardly touched. Cersei beckoned for the sweet. “I hope you like blackberry tarts.”

“I love all sorts of tarts.”

“Oh, I’ve known that a long while. Do you know why Varys is so dangerous?”

“Are we playing at riddles now? No.”

“He doesn’t have a cock.”

“Neither do you.” And don’t you just hate that, Cersei?

“Perhaps I’m dangerous too. You, on the other hand, are as big a fool as every other man. That worm between your legs does half your thinking.”

Tyrion licked the crumbs off his fingers. He did not like his sister’s smile. “Yes, and just now my worm is thinking that perhaps it is time I took my leave.”

“Are you unwell, brother?” She leaned forward, giving him a good look at the top of her breasts. “Suddenly you appear somewhat flustered.”

“Flustered?” Tyrion glanced at the door. He thought he’d heard something outside. He was beginning to regret coming here alone. “You’ve never shown much interest in my cock before.”

“It’s not your cock that interests me, so much as what you stick it in. I don’t depend on the eunuch for everything, as you do. I have my own ways of finding out things... especially things that people don’t want me to know.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Only this- I have your little whore.”

Tyrion reached for his wine cup, buying a moment to gather his thoughts. “I thought men were more to your taste.”

“You’re such a droll little fellow. Tell me, have you married this one yet?” When he gave her no answer she laughed and said, “Father will be ever so relieved.”

His belly felt as if it were full of eels. How had she found Shae? Had Varys betrayed him? Or had all his precautions been undone by his impatience the night he rode directly to the manse?

“Why should you care who I choose to warm my bed?”

“A Lannister always pays his debts,” she said. “You’ve been scheming against me since the day you came to King’s Landing. You sold Myrcella, stole Tommen, and now you plot to have Joff killed. You want him dead so you can rule through Tommen.”

Well, I can’t say the notion isn’t tempting. “This is madness, Cersei. Stannis will be here in days. You need me.”

“For what? Your great prowess in battle?”

“Bronn’s sellswords will never fight without me,” he lied.

“Oh, I think they will. It’s your gold they love, not your impish wit. Have no fear, though, they won’t be without you. I won’t say I haven’t thought of slitting your throat from time to time, but Jaime would never forgive me if I did.”

“And the whore?” He would not call her by name. If I can convince her Shae means nothing to me, perhaps...

“She’ll be treated gently enough, so long as no harm comes to my sons. If Joff should be killed, however, or if Tommen should fall into the hands of our enemies, your little cunt will die more painfully than you can possibly imagine.”

She truly believes I mean to kill my own nephew “The boys are safe,” he promised her wearily. “Gods be good, Cersei, they’re my own blood! What sort of man do you take me for?”

“A small and twisted one.”

Tyrion stared at the dregs on the bottom of his wine cup. What would Jaime do in my place? Kill the bitch, most likely, and worry about the consequences afterward. But Tyrion did not have a golden sword, nor the skill to wield one. He loved his brother’s reckless wrath, but it was their lord father he must try and emulate. Stone, I must be stone, I must be Casterly Rock, hard and unmovable. If I fail this test, I had as lief seek out the nearest grotesquerie. “For all I know, you’ve killed her already,” he said.

“Would you like to see her? I thought you might.” Cersei crossed the room and threw open the heavy oaken door. “Bring in my brother’s whore.”

Ser Osmund’s brothers Osney and Osfryd were peas from the same pod, tall men with hooked noses, dark hair, and cruel smiles. She hung between them, eyes wide and white in her dark face.

Blood trickled from her broken lip, and he could see bruises through her torn clothing. Her hands were bound with rope, and they'd gagged her so she could not speak.

"You said she wouldn't be hurt."

"She fought." Unlike his brothers, Osney Kettleblack was cleanshaven, so the scratches showed plainly on his bare cheeks. "Got claws like a shadowcat, this one."

"Bruises heal," said Cersei in a bored tone. "The whore will live. So long as Joff does."

Tyrion wanted to laugh at her. It would have been so sweet, so very very sweet, but it would have given the game away. You've lost, Cersei, and the Kettleblacks are even bigger fools than Bronn claimed. All he needed to do was say the words.

Instead he looked at the girl's face and said, "You swear you'll release her after the battle?"

"If you release Tommen, yes."

He pushed himself to his feet. "Keep her then, but keep her safe. If these animals think they can use her... well, sweet sister, let me point out that a scale tips two ways." His tone was calm, flat, uncaring; he'd reached for his father's voice, and found it. "Whatever happens to her happens to Tommen as well, and that includes the beatings and rapes." If she thinks me such a monster, I'll play the part for her.

Cersei had not expected that. "You would not dare."

Tyrion made himself smile, slow and cold. Green and black, his eyes laughed at her. "Dare? I'll do it myself."

His sister's hand flashed at his face, but he caught her wrist and bent it back until she cried out. Osfryd moved to her rescue. "One more step and I'll break her arm," the dwarf warned him. The man stopped. "You remember when I said you'd never hit me again, Cersei?" He shoved her to the floor and turned back to the Kettleblacks. "Untie her and remove that gag."

The rope had been so tight as to cut off the blood to her hands. She cried out in pain as the circulation returned. Tyrion massaged her fingers gently until feeling returned. "Sweetling," he said, "you must be brave. I am sorry they hurt you."

"I know you'll free me, my lord."

"I will," he promised, and Alayaya bent over and kissed him on the brow. Her broken lips left a smear of blood on his forehead. A bloody kiss is more than I deserve, Tyrion thought. She would never have been hurt but for me.

Her blood still marked him as he looked down at the queen. "I have never liked you, Cersei, but you were my own sister, so I never did you harm. You've ended that. I will hurt you for this. I don't know how yet, but give me time. A day will come when you think yourself safe and happy, and suddenly your joy will turn to ashes in your mouth, and you'll know the debt is paid."

In war, his father had told him once, the battle is over in the instant one army breaks and flees. No matter that they're as numerous as they were a moment before, still armed and armored; once they had run before you they would not turn to fight again. So it was with Cersei. "Get out!" was all the answer she could summon. "Get out of my sight!"

Tyrion bowed. "Good night, then. And pleasant dreams."

He made his way back to the Tower of the Hand with a thousand armored feet marching through his skull. I ought to have seen this coming the first time I slipped through the back of Chataya's wardrobe. Perhaps he had not wanted to see. His legs were aching badly by the time he had made the climb. He sent Pod for a flagon of wine and pushed his way into his bedchamber.

Shae sat cross-legged in the canopied bed, nude but for the heavy golden chain that looped across the swell of her breasts: a chain of linked golden hands, each clasping the next.

Tyrion had not expected her. "What are you doing here?"

Laughing, she stroked the chain. "I wanted some hands on my titties... but these little gold ones are cold."

For a moment he did know what to say. How could he tell her that another woman had taken the beating meant for her, and might well die in her place should some mischance of battle fell Joffrey? He wiped Alayaya's blood from his brow with the heel of his hand. "The Lady Lollys—"

"She's asleep. Sleep's all she ever wants to do, the great cow. She sleeps and she eats. Sometimes she falls asleep while she's eating. The food falls under the blankets and she rolls in it, and I have to clean her." She made a disgusted face. "All they did was fuck her."

"Her mother says she's sick."

"She has a baby in her belly, that's all."

Tyrion gazed around the room. Everything seemed much as he left it. "How did you enter? Show me the hidden door."

She gave a shrug. "Lord Varys made me wear a hood. I couldn't see, except... there was one place, I got a peep at the floor out the bottom of the hood. It was all tiles, you know, the kind that make a picture?"

"A mosaic?"

Shae nodded. "They were colored red and black. I think the picture was a dragon. Otherwise, everything was dark. We went down a ladder and walked a long ways, until I was all twisted around. Once we stopped so he could unlock an iron gate. I brushed against it when we went through. The dragon was past the gate. Then we went up another ladder, with a tunnel at the top. I had to stoop, and I think Lord Varys was crawling."

Tyrion made a round of the bedchamber. One of the sconces looked loose. He stood on his toes and tried to turn it. It revolved slowly, scraping against the stone wall. When it was upside down, the stub of the candle fell out. The rushes scattered across the cold stone floor did not show any particular disturbance. "Doesn't m'lord want to bed me?" asked Shae.

"In a moment." Tyrion threw open his wardrobe, shoved the clothing aside, and pushed against the rear panel. What worked for a warehouse might work for a castle as well... but no, the wood was solid, unyielding. A stone beside the window seat drew his eye, but all his tugging and prodding went for naught. He returned to the bed frustrated and annoyed.

Shae undid his laces and threw her arms around his neck. "Your shoulders feel as hard as rocks," she murmured. "Hurry, I want to feel you inside me." Yet as her legs locked around his

waist, his manhood left him. When she felt him go soft, Shae slid down under the sheets and took him in her mouth, but even that could not rouse him.

After a few moments he stopped her. “What’s wrong?” she asked. All the sweet innocence of the world was written there in the lines of her young face.

Innocence? Fool, she’s a whore, Cersei was right, you think with your cock, fool, fool.

“Just go to sleep, sweetling,” he urged, stroking her hair. Yet long after Shae had taken his advice, Tyrion himself still lay awake, his fingers cupped over one small breast as he listened to her breathing.

CATELYN

The Great Hall of Riverrun was a lonely place for two to sit to supper. Deep shadows draped the walls. One of the torches had guttered out, leaving only three. Catelyn sat staring into her wine goblet. The vintage tasted thin and sour on her tongue. Brienne was across from her. Between them, her father's high seat was as empty as the rest of the hall. Even the servants were gone. She had given them leave to join the celebration.

The walls of the keep were thick, yet even so, they could hear the muffled sounds of revelry from the yard outside. Ser Desmond had brought twenty casks up from the cellars, and the smallfolk were celebrating Edmure's imminent return and Robb's conquest of the Crag by hoisting horns of nut-brown ale.

I cannot blame them, Catelyn thought. They do not know And if they did, why should they care? They never knew my sons. Never watched Bran climb with their hearts in their throats, pride and terror so mingled they seemed as one, never heard him laugh, never smiled to see Rickon trying so fiercely to be like his older brothers. She stared at the supper set before her: trout wrapped in bacon, salad of turnip greens and red fennel and sweetgrass, pease and onions and hot bread. Brienne was eating methodically, as if supper were another chore to be accomplished. I am become a sour woman, Catelyn thought. I take no joy in mead nor meat, and song and laughter have become suspicious strangers to me. I am a creature of grief and dust and bitter longings. There is an empty place within me where my heart was once.

The sound of the other woman's eating had become intolerable to her. "Brienne, I am no fit company. Go join the revels, if you would. Drink a horn of ale and dance to Rymund's harping."

"I am not made for revels, my lady." Her big hands tore apart a heel of black bread. Brienne stared at the chunks as if she had forgotten what they were. "If you command it, I..."

Catelyn could sense her discomfort. "I only thought you might enjoy happier company than mine."

"I'm well content." The girl used the bread to sop up some of the bacon grease the trout had been fried in.

"There was another bird this morning." Catelyn did not know why she said it. "The maester woke me at once. That was dutiful, but not kind. Not kind at all." She had not meant to tell Brienne. No one knew but her and Maester Vyman, and she had meant to keep it that way until... until...

Until what? Foolish woman, will holding it secret in your heart make it any less true? If you never tell, never speak of it, will it become only a dream, less than a dream, a nightmare half-remembered? Oh, if only the gods would be so good.

"Is it news of King's Landing?" asked Brienne.

"Would that it was. The bird came from Castle Cerwyn, from Ser Rodrik, my castellan." Dark wings, dark words. "He has gathered what power he could and is marching on Winterfell, to take the castle back." How unimportant all that sounded now. "But he said... he wrote... he told me, he..."

“My lady, what is it? Is it some news of your sons?”

Such a simple question that was; would that the answer could be as simple. When Catelyn tried to speak, the words caught in her throat. “I have no sons but Robb.” She managed those terrible words without a sob, and for that much she was glad.

Brienne looked at her with horror. “My lady?”

“Bran and Rickon tried to escape, but were taken at a mill on the Acorn Water. Theon Greyjoy has mounted their heads on the walls of Winterfell. Theon Greyjoy, who ate at my table since he was a boy of ten.” I have said it, gods forgive me. I have said it and made it true.

Brienne’s face was a watery blur. She reached across the table, but her fingers stopped short of Catelyn’s, as if the touch might be unwelcome. “I... there are no words, my lady. My good lady. Your sons, they... they’re with the gods now.”

“Are they?” Catelyn said sharply. “What god would let this happen? Rickon was only a baby. How could he deserve such a death? And Bran... when I left the north, he had not opened his eyes since his fall. I had to go before he woke. Now I can never return to him, or hear him laugh again.” She showed Brienne her palms, her fingers. “These scars... they sent a man to cut Bran’s throat as he lay sleeping. He would have died then, and me with him, but Bran’s wolf tore out the man’s throat.” That gave her a moment’s pause. “I suppose Theon killed the wolves too. He must have, otherwise... I was certain the boys would be safe so long as the direwolves were with them. Like Robb with his Grey Wind. But my daughters have no wolves now.”

The abrupt shift of topic left Brienne bewildered. “Your daughters...”

“Sansa was a lady at three, always so courteous and eager to please. She loved nothing so well as tales of knightly valor. Men would say she had my look, but she will grow into a woman far more beautiful than I ever was, you can see that. I often sent away her maid so I could brush her hair myself. She had auburn hair, lighter than mine, and so thick and soft... the red in it would catch the light of the torches and shine like copper.

“And Arya, well... Ned’s visitors would oft mistake her for a stableboy if they rode into the yard unannounced. Arya was a trial, it must be said. Half a boy and half a wolf pup. Forbid her anything and it became her heart’s desire. She had Ned’s long face, and brown hair that always looked as though a bird had been nesting in it. I despaired of ever making a lady of her. She collected scabs as other girls collect dolls, and would say anything that came into her head. I think she must be dead too.” When she said that, it felt as though a giant hand were squeezing her chest. “I want them all dead, Brienne. Theon Greyjoy first, then Jaime Lannister and Cersei and the Imp, every one, every one. But my girls... my girls will...”

“The queen... she has a little girl of her own,” Brienne said awkwardly. “And sons too, of an age with yours. When she hears, perhaps she... she may take pity, and...”

“Send my daughters back unharmed?” Catelyn smiled sadly. “There is a sweet innocence about you, child. I could wish... but no. Robb will avenge his brothers. Ice can kill as dead as fire. Ice was Ned’s greatsword. Valyrian steel, marked with the ripples of a thousand foldings, so sharp I feared to touch it. Robb’s blade is dull as a cudgel compared to Ice. It will not be easy for him to get Theon’s head off, I fear. The Starks do not use headsman. Ned always said that the man who

passes the sentence should swing the blade, though he never took any joy in the duty. But I would, oh, yes.” She stared at her scarred hands, opened and closed them, then slowly raised her eyes. “I’ve sent him wine.”

“Wine?” Brienne was lost. “Robb? Or... Theon Greyjoy?”

“The Kingslayer.” The ploy had served her well with Cleos Frey. I hope you’re thirsty, Jaime. I hope your throat is dry and tight. “I would like you to come with me.”

“I am yours to command, my lady.”

“Good.” Catelyn rose abruptly. “Stay, finish your meal in peace. I will send for you later. At midnight.”

“So late, my lady?”

“The dungeons are windowless. One hour is much like another down there, and for me, all hours are midnight.” Her footsteps rang hollowly when Catelyn left the hall. As she climbed to Lord Hoster’s solar, she could hear them outside, shouting, “Tully!” and “A cup! A cup to the brave young lord!” My father is not dead, she wanted to shout down at them. My sons are dead, but my father lives, damn you all, and he is your lord still.

Lord Hoster was deep in sleep. “He had a cup of dreamwine not so long ago, my lady,” Maester Vyman said. “For the pain. He will not know you are here.”

“It makes no matter,” Catelyn said. He is more dead than alive, yet more alive than my poor sweet sons.

“My lady, is there aught I might do for you? A sleeping draught, perhaps?”

“Thank you, Maester, but no. I will not sleep away my grief. Bran and Rickon deserve better from me. Go and join the celebration, I will sit with my father for a time.”

“As you will, my lady.” Vyman bowed and left her.

Lord Hoster lay on his back, mouth open, his breath a faint whistling sigh. One hand hung over the edge of the mattress, a pale frail fleshless thing, but warm when she touched it. She slid her fingers through his and closed them. No matter how tightly I hold him, I cannot keep him here, she thought sadly. Let him go. Yet her fingers would not seem to unbend.

“I have no one to talk with, Father,” she told him. “I pray, but the gods do not answer.” Lightly she kissed his hand. The skin was warm, blue veins branching like rivers beneath his pale translucent skin. Outside the greater rivers flowed, the Red Fork and the Tumblestone, and they would flow forever, but not so the rivers in her father’s hand. Too soon that current would grow still. “Last night I dreamed of that time Lysa and I got lost while riding back from Seagard. Do you remember? That strange fog came up and we fell behind the rest of the party. Everything was grey, and I could not see a foot past the nose of my horse. We lost the road. The branches of the trees were like long skinny arms reaching out to grab us as we passed. Lysa started to cry, and when I shouted the fog seemed to swallow the sound. But Petyr knew where we were, and he rode back and found us...”

“But there’s no one to find me now, is there? This time I have to find our own way, and it is hard, so hard.

“I keep remembering the Stark words. Winter has come, Father. For me. For me. Robb must fight the Greyjoys now as well as the Lannisters, and for what? For a gold hat and an iron chair? Surely the land has bled enough. I want my girls back, I want Robb to lay down his sword and pick some homely daughter of Walder Frey to make him happy and give him sons. I want Bran and Rickon back, I want...” Catelyn hung her head. “I want,” she said once more, and then her words were gone.

After a time the candle guttered and went out. Moonlight slanted between the slats of the shutters, laying pale silvery bars across her father’s face. She could hear the soft whisper of his labored breathing, the endless rush of waters, the faint chords of some love song drifting up from the yard, so sad and sweet. “I loved a maid as red as autumn,” Rymund sang, “with sunset in her hair.”

Catelyn never noticed when the singing ended. Hours had passed, yet it seemed only a heartbeat before Brienne was at the door. “MY lady,” she announced softly. “Midnight has come.”

Midnight has come, Father, she thought, and I must do my duty. She let go of his hand.

The gaoler was a furtive little man with broken veins in his nose. They found him bent over a tankard of ale and the remains of a pigeon pie, more than a little drunk. He squinted at them suspiciously. “Begging your forgiveness, m’lady, but Lord Edmure says no one is to see the Kingslayer without a writing from him, with his seal upon it.”

“Lord Edmure? Has my father died, and no one told me?”

The gaoler licked his lips. “No, m’lady, not as I knows.”

“You will open the cell, or you will come with me to Lord Hoster’s solar and tell him why you saw fit to defy me.”

His eyes fell. “As m’lady says.” The keys were chained to the studded leather belt that girdled his waist. He muttered under his breath as he sorted through them, until he found the one that fit the door to the Kingslayer’s cell.

“Go back to your ale and leave us,” she commanded. An oil lamp hung from a hook on the low ceiling. Catelyn took it down and turned up the flame. “Brienne, see that I am not disturbed.”

Nodding, Brienne took up a position just outside the cell, her hand resting on the pommel of her sword. “My lady will call if she has need of me.”

Catelyn shouldered aside the heavy wood-and-iron door and stepped into foul darkness. This was the bowels of Riverrun, and smelled the part. Old straw crackled underfoot. The walls were discolored with patches of nitre. Through the stone, she could hear the faint rush of the Tumblestone. The lamplight revealed a pail overflowing with feces in one corner and a huddled shape in another. The flagon of wine stood beside the door, untouched. So much for that ploy. I ought to be thankful that the gaoler did not drink it himself, I suppose.

Jaime raised his hands to cover his face, the chains around his wrists clanking. “Lady Stark,” he said, in a voice hoarse with disuse. “I fear I am in no condition to receive you.”

“Look at me, ser.”

“The light hurts my eyes. A moment, if you would.” Jaime Lannister had been allowed no razor since the night he was taken in the Whispering Wood, and a shaggy beard covered his face, once

so like the queen's. Glinting gold in the lamplight, the whiskers made him look like some great yellow beast, magnificent even in chains. His unwashed hair fell to his shoulders in ropes and tangles, the clothes were rotting on his body, his face was pale and wasted... and even so, the power and the beauty of the man were still apparent.

"I see you had no taste for the wine I sent you."

"Such sudden generosity seemed somewhat suspect."

"I can have your head off anytime I want. Why would I need to poison you?"

"Death by poison can seem natural. Harder to claim that my head simply fell off." He squinted up from the floor, his cat-green eyes slowly becoming accustomed to the light. "I'd invite you to sit, but your brother has neglected to provide me a chair."

"I can stand well enough."

"Can you? You look terrible, I must say. Though perhaps it's just the light in here." He was fettered at wrist and ankle, each cuff chained to the others, so he could neither stand nor lie comfortably. The ankle chains were bolted to the wall. "Are my bracelets heavy enough for you, or did you come to add a few more? I'll rattle them prettily if you like."

"You brought this on yourself," she reminded him. "We granted you the comfort of a tower cell befitting your birth and station. You repaid us by trying to escape."

"A cell is a cell. Some under Casterly Rock make this one seem a sunlit garden. One day perhaps I'll show them to you."

If he is cowed, he hides it well, Catelyn thought. "A man chained hand and foot should keep a more courteous tongue in his mouth, ser. I did not come here to be threatened."

"No? Then surely it was to have your pleasure of me? It's said that widows grow weary of their empty beds. We of the Kingsguard vow never to wed, but I suppose I could still service you if that's what you need. Pour us some of that wine and slip out of that gown and we'll see if I'm up to it."

Catelyn stared down at him in revulsion. Was there ever a man as beautiful or as vile as this one? "If you said that in my son's hearing, he would kill you for it."

"Only so long as I was wearing these." Jaime Lannister rattled his chains at her. "We both know the boy is afraid to face me in single combat."

"My son may be young, but if you take him for a fool, you are sadly mistaken... and it seems to me that you were not so quick to make challenges when you had an army at your back."

"Did the old Kings of Winter hide behind their mothers' skirts as well?"

"I grow weary of this, ser. There are things I must know."

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"To save your life."

"You think I fear death?" That seemed to amuse him.

"You should. Your crimes will have earned you a place of torment in the deepest of the seven hells, if the gods are just."

“What gods are those, Lady Catelyn? The trees your husband prayed to? How well did they serve him when my sister took his head off?” Jaime gave a chuckle. “If there are gods, why is the world so full of pain and injustice?”

“Because of men like you.”

“There are no men like me. There’s only me.”

There is nothing here but arrogance and pride, and the empty courage of a madman. I am wasting my breath with this one. If there was ever a spark of honor in him, it is long dead. “If you will not speak with me, so be it. Drink the wine or piss in it, ser, it makes no matter to me.” Her hand was at the door pull when he said, “Lady Stark.” She turned, waited. “Things go to rust in this damp,” Jaime went on. “Even a man’s courtesies. Stay, and you shall have your answers... for a price.”

He has no shame. “Captives do not set prices.”

“Oh, you’ll find mine modest enough. Your turnkey tells me nothing but vile lies, and he cannot even keep them straight. one day he says Cersei has been flayed, and the next it’s my father. Answer my questions and I’ll answer yours.”

“Truthfully?”

“Oh, it’s truth you want? Be careful, my lady. Tyrion says that people often claim to hunger for truth, but seldom like the taste when it’s served up.”

“I am strong enough to hear anything you care to say.”

“As you will, then. But first, if you’d be so kind... the wine. My throat is raw.”

Catelyn hung the lamp from the door and moved the cup and flagon closer. Jaime slobbered the wine around his mouth before he swallowed. “Sour and vile,” he said, “but it will do.” He put his back to the wall, drew his knees up to his chest, and stared at her. “Your first question, Lady Catelyn?”

Not knowing how long this game might continue, Catelyn wasted no time. “Are you Joffrey’s father?”

“You would never ask unless you knew the answer.”

“I want it from your own lips.”

He shrugged. “Joffrey is mine. As are the rest of Cersei’s brood, I suppose.”

“You admit to being your sister’s lover?”

“I’ve always loved my sister, and you owe me two answers. Do all my kin still live?”

“Ser Stafford Lannister was slain at Oxcross, I am told.”

Jaime was unmoved. “Uncle Dolt, my sister called him. it’s Cersei and Tyrion who concern me. As well as my lord father.”

“They live, all three.” But not long, if the gods are good.

Jaime drank some more wine. “Ask your next.”

Catelyn wondered if he would dare answer her next question with anything but a lie. “How did my son Bran come to fall?”

“I flung him from a window.”

The easy way he said it took her voice away for an instant. If I had a knife, I would kill him now, she thought, until she remembered the girls. Her throat constricted as she said, "You were a knight, sworn to defend the weak and innocent."

"He was weak enough, but perhaps not so innocent. He was spying on us.

"Bran would not spy."

"Then blame those precious gods of yours, who brought the boy to our window and gave him a glimpse of something he was never meant to see."

"Blame the gods?" she said, incredulous. "Yours was the hand that threw him. You meant for him to die."

His chains chinked softly. "I seldom fling children from towers to improve their health. Yes, I meant for him to die."

"And when he did not, you knew your danger was worse than ever, so you gave your catspaw a bag of silver to make certain Bran would never wake."

"Did I now?" Jaime lifted his cup and took a long swallow. "I won't deny we talked of it, but you were with the boy day and night, your maester and Lord Eddard attended him frequently, and there were guards, even those damned direwolves... it would have required cutting my way through half of Winterfell. And why bother, when the boy seemed like to die of his own accord?"

"If you lie to me, this session is at an end." Catelyn held out her hands, to show him her fingers and palms. "The man who came to slit Bran's throat gave me these scars. You swear you had no part in sending him?"

"On my honor as a Lannister."

"Your honor as a Lannister is worth less than this." She kicked over the waste pail. Foul-smelling brown ooze crept across the floor of the cell, soaking into the straw.

Jaime Lannister backed away from the spill as far as his chains would allow. "I may indeed have shit for honor, I won't deny it, but I have never yet hired anyone to do my killing. Believe what you will, Lady Stark, but if I had wanted your Bran dead I would have slain him myself."

Gods be merciful, he's telling the truth. "If you did not send the killer, your sister did."

"If so, I'd know. Cersei keeps no secrets from me."

"Then it was the Imp."

"Tyrion is as innocent as your Bran. He wasn't climbing around outside of anyone's window, spying."

"Then why did the assassin have his dagger?"

"What dagger was this?"

"It was so long," she said, holding her hands apart, "plain, but finely made, with a blade of Valyrian steel and a dragonbone hilt. Your brother won it from Lord Baelish at the tourney on Prince Joffrey's name day."

Lannister poured, drank, poured, and stared into his wine cup. "This wine seems to be improving as I drink it. Imagine that. I seem to remember that dagger, now that you describe it. Won it, you say? How?"

“Wagering on you when you tilted against the Knight of Flowers.” Yet when she heard her own words Catelyn knew she had gotten it wrong. “No... was it the other way?”

“Tyrion always backed me in the lists,” Jaime said, “but that day Ser Loras unhorsed me. A mischance, I took the boy too lightly, but no matter. Whatever my brother wagered, he lost... but that dagger did change hands, I recall it now. Robert showed it to me that night at the feast. His Grace loved to salt my wounds, especially when drunk. And when was he not drunk?”

Tyrion Lannister had said much the same thing as they rode through the Mountains of the Moon, Catelyn remembered. She had refused to believe him. Petyr had sworn otherwise, Petyr who had been almost a brother, Petyr who loved her so much he fought a duel for her hand... and yet if Jaime and Tyrion told the same tale, what did that mean? The brothers had not seen each other since departing Winterfell more than a year ago. “Are you trying to deceive me?” Somewhere there was a trap here.

“I’ve admitted to shoving your precious urchin out a window, what would it gain me to lie about this knife?” He tossed down another cup of wine. “Believe what you will, I’m past caring what people say of me. And it’s my turn. Have Robert’s brothers taken the field?”

“They have.”

“Now there’s a niggardly response. Give me more than that, or your next answer will be as poor.”

“Stannis marches against King’s Landing,” she said grudgingly. “Renly is dead, murdered at Bitterbridge by his brother, through some black art I do not understand.”

“A pity,” Jaime said. “I rather liked Renly, though Stannis is quite another tale. What side have the Tyrells taken?”

“Renly, at first. Now, I could not say.”

“Your boy must be feeling lonely.”

“Robb was sixteen a few days past... a man grown, and a king. He’s won every battle he’s fought. The last word we had from him, he had taken the Crag from the Westerlings.”

“He hasn’t faced my father yet, has he?”

“When he does, he’ll defeat him. As he did you.”

“He took me unawares. A craven’s trick.”

“You dare talk of tricks? Your brother Tyrion sent us cutthroats in envoy’s garb, under a peace banner.”

“If it were one of your sons in this cell, wouldn’t his brothers do as much for him?”

My son has no brothers, she thought, but she would not share her pain with a creature such as this.

Jaime drank some more wine. “What’s a brother’s life when honor is at stake, eh?” Another sip. “Tyrion is clever enough to realize that your son will never consent to ransom me.”

Catelyn could not deny it. “Robb’s bannermen would sooner see you dead. Rickard Karstark in particular. You slew two of his sons in the Whispering Wood.”

“The two with the white sunburst, were they?” Jaime gave a shrug. “If truth be told, it was your son that I was trying to slay. The others got in my way. I killed them in fair fight, in the heat of battle. Any other knight would have done the same.”

“How can you still count yourself a knight, when you have forsaken every vow you ever swore?”

Jaime reached for the flagon to refill his cup. “So many vows... they make you swear and swear. Defend the king. Obey the king. Keep his secrets. Do his bidding. Your life for his. But obey your father. Love your sister. Protect the innocent. Defend the weak. Respect the gods. Obey the laws. It’s too much. No matter what you do, you’re forsaking one vow or the other.” He took a healthy swallow of wine and closed his eyes for an instant, leaning his head back against the patch of nitre on the wall. “I was the youngest man ever to wear the white cloak.”

“And the youngest to betray all it stood for, Kingslayer.”

“Kingslayer,” he pronounced carefully. “And such a king he was!” He lifted his cup. “To Aerys Targaryen, the Second of His Name, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. And to the sword that opened his throat. A golden sword, don’t you know. Until his blood ran red down the blade. Those are the Lannister colors, red and gold.”

As he laughed, she realized the wine had done its work; Jaime had drained most of the flagon, and he was drunk. “Only a man like you would be proud of such an act.”

“I told you, there are no men like me. Answer me this, Lady Stark did your Ned ever tell you the manner of his father’s death? Or his brother’s?”

“They strangled Brandon while his father watched, and then killed Lord Rickard as well.” An ugly tale, and sixteen years old. Why was he asking about it now?

“Killed, yes, but how?”

“The cord or the axe, I suppose.”

Jaime took a swallow, wiped his mouth. “No doubt Ned wished to spare you. His sweet young bride, if not quite a maiden. Well, you wanted truth. Ask me. We made a bargain, I can deny you nothing. Ask.”

“Dead is dead.” I do not want to know this.

“Brandon was different from his brother, wasn’t he? He had blood in his veins instead of cold water. More like me.”

“Brandon was nothing like you.”

“If you say so. You and he were to wed.”

“He was on his way to Riverrun when...” Strange, how telling it still made her throat grow tight, after all these years. “...when he heard about Lyanna, and went to King’s Landing instead. It was a rash thing to do.” She remembered how her own father had raged when the news had been brought to Riverrun. The gallant fool, was what he called Brandon.

Jaime poured the last half cup of wine. “He rode into the Red Keep with a few companions, shouting for Prince Rhaegar to come out and die. But Rhaegar wasn’t there. Aerys sent his guards to arrest them all for plotting his son’s murder. The others were lords’ sons too, it seems to me.”

“Ethan Glover was Brandon’s squire,” Catelyn said. “He was the only one to survive. The others were Jeffory Mallister, Kyle Royce, and Elbert Arryn, Jon Arryn’s nephew and heir.” It was queer how she still remembered the names, after so many years. “Aerys accused them of treason and summoned their fathers to court to answer the charge, with the sons as hostages. When they came, he had them murdered without trial. Fathers and sons both.”

“There were trials. Of a sort. Lord Rickard demanded trial by combat, and the king granted the request. Stark armored himself as for battle, thinking to duel one of the Kingsguard. Me, perhaps. Instead they took him to the throne room and suspended him from the rafters while two of Aerys’s pyromancers kindled a blaze beneath him. The king told him that fire was the champion of House Targaryen. So all Lord Rickard needed to do to prove himself innocent of treason was... well, not burn.

“When the fire was blazing, Brandon was brought in. His hands were chained behind his back, and around his neck was a wet leathern cord attached to a device the king had brought from Tyrosh. His legs were left free, though, and his longsword was set down just beyond his reach.

“The pyromancers roasted Lord Rickard slowly, banking and fanning that fire carefully to get a nice even heat. His cloak caught first, and then his surcoat, and soon he wore nothing but metal and ashes. Next he would start to cook, Aerys promised... unless his son could free him. Brandon tried, but the more he struggled, the tighter the cord constricted around his throat. In the end he strangled himself.

“As for Lord Rickard, the steel of his breastplate turned cherry-red before the end, and his gold melted off his spurs and dripped down into the fire. I stood at the foot of the Iron Throne in my white armor and white cloak, filling my head with thoughts of Cersei. After, Gerold Hightower himself took me aside and said to me, ‘You swore a vow to guard the king, not to judge him.’ That was the White Bull, loyal to the end and a better man than me, all agree.”

“Aerys...” Catelyn could taste bile at the back of her throat. The story was so hideous she suspected it had to be true. “Aerys was mad, the whole realm knew it, but if you would have me believe you slew him to avenge Brandon Stark...”

“I made no such claim. The Starks were nothing to me. I will say, I think it passing odd that I am loved by one for a kindness I never did, and reviled by so many for my finest act. At Robert’s coronation, I was made to kneel at the royal feet beside Grand Maester Pycelle and Varys the eunuch, so that he might forgive us our crimes before he took us into his service. As for your Ned, he should have kissed the hand that slew Aerys, but he preferred to scorn the arse he found sitting on Robert’s throne. I think Ned Stark loved Robert better than he ever loved his brother or his father... or even you, my lady. He was never unfaithful to Robert, was he?” Jaime gave a drunken laugh. “Come, Lady Stark, don’t you find this all terribly amusing?”

“I find nothing about you amusing, Kingslayer.”

“That name again. I don’t think I’ll fuck you after all, Littlefinger had you first, didn’t he? I never eat off another man’s trencher. Besides, you’re not half so lovely as my sister.” His smile cut. “I’ve never lain with any woman but Cersei. In my own way, I have been truer than your

Ned ever was. Poor old dead Ned. So who has shit for honor now, I ask you? What was the name of that bastard he fathered?"

Catelyn took a step backward. "Brienne. -

"No, that wasn't it." Jaime Lannister upended the flagon. A trickle ran down onto his face, bright as blood. "Snow, that was the one. Such a white name... like the pretty cloaks they give us in the Kingsguard when we swear our pretty oaths."

Brienne pushed open the door and stepped inside the cell. "You called, my lady?"

"Give me your sword." Catelyn held out her hand.

THEON

The sky was a gloom of cloud, the woods dead and frozen. Roots grabbed at Theon's feet as he ran, and bare branches lashed his face, leaving thin stripes of blood across his cheeks. He crashed through heedless, breathless, icicles flying to pieces before him. Mercy, he sobbed. From behind came a shuddering howl that curdled his blood. Mercy, mercy. When he glanced back over his shoulder he saw them coming, great wolves the size of horses with the heads of small children. Oh, mercy, mercy. Blood dripped from their mouths black as pitch, burning holes in the snow where it fell. Every stride brought them closer. Theon tried to run faster, but his legs would not obey. The trees all had faces, and they were laughing at him, laughing, and the howl came again. He could smell the hot breath of the beasts behind him, a stink of brimstone and corruption. They're dead, dead, I saw them killed, he tried to shout, I saw their heads dipped in tar, but when he opened his mouth only a moan emerged, and then something touched him and he whirled, shouting...

...flailing for the dagger he kept by his bedside and managing only to knock it to the floor. Wex danced away from him. Reek stood behind the mute, his face lit from below by the candle he carried. "What?" Theon cried. Mercy. "What do you want? Why are you in my bedchamber? Why?"

"My lord prince," said Reek, "your sister has come to Winterfell. You asked to be informed at once if she arrived."

"Past time," Theon muttered, pushing his fingers through his hair. He had begun to fear that Asha meant to leave him to his fate. Mercy. He glanced outside the window, where the first vague light of dawn was just brushing the towers of Winterfell. "Where is she?"

"Lorren took her and her men to the Great Hall to break their fast. Will you see her now?"

"Yes." Theon pushed off the blankets. The fire had burned down to embers. "Wex, hot water." He could not let Asha see him disheveled and soaked with sweat. Wolves with children's faces... He shivered. "Close the shutters." The bedchamber felt as cold as the dream forest had been.

All his dreams had been cold of late, and each more hideous than the one before. Last night he had dreamed himself back in the mill again, on his knees dressing the dead. Their limbs were already stiffening, so they seemed to resist sullenly as he fumbled at them with half-frozen fingers, tugging up breeches and knotting laces, yanking fur-trimmed boots over hard unbending feet, buckling a studded leather belt around a waist no bigger than the span of his hands. "This was never what I wanted," he told them as he worked. "They gave me no choice." The corpses made no answer, but only grew colder and heavier.

The night before, it had been the miller's wife. Theon had forgotten her name, but he remembered her body, soft pillowy breasts and stretch marks on her belly, the way she clawed his back when he fucked her. Last night in his dream he had been in bed with her once again, but this time she had teeth above and below, and she tore out his throat even as she was gnawing off his manhood. It was madness. He'd seen her die too. Gelmarr had cut her down with one blow of

his axe as she cried to Theon for mercy. Leave me, woman. It was him who killed you, not me. And he's dead as well. At least Gelmarr did not haunt Theon's sleep.

The dream had receded by the time Wex returned with the water. Theon washed the sweat and sleep from his body and took his own good time dressing. Asha had let him wait long enough; now it was her turn. He chose a satin tunic striped black and gold and a fine leather jerkin with silver studs... and only then remembered that his wretched sister put more stock in blades than beauty. Cursing, he tore off the clothes and dressed again, in felted black wool and ringmail. Around his waist he buckled sword and dagger, remembering the night she had humiliated him at his own father's table. Her sweet suckling babe, yes. Well, I have a knife too, and know how to use it.

Last of all, he donned his crown, a band of cold iron slim as a finger, set with heavy chunks of black diamond and nuggets of gold. It was misshapen and ugly, but there was no help for that. Mikken lay buried in the lichyard, and the new smith was capable of little more than nails and horseshoes. Theon consoled himself with the reminder that it was only a prince's crown. He would have something much finer when he was crowned king.

Outside his door, Reek waited with Urzen and Kromm. Theon fell in with them. These days, he took guards with him everywhere he went, even to the privy. Winterfell wanted him dead. The very night they had returned from Acorn Water, Gelmarr the Grim had tumbled down some steps and broken his back. The next day, Aggar turned up with his throat slit ear to ear. Gynir Rednose became so wary that he shunned wine, took to sleeping in byrnie, coif, and helm, and adopted the noisiest dog in the kennels to give him warning should anyone try to steal up on his sleeping place. All the same, one morning the castle woke to the sound of the little dog barking wildly. They found the pup racing around the well, and Rednose floating in it, drowned.

He could not let the killings go unpunished. Farlen was as likely a suspect as any, so Theon sat in judgment, called him guilty, and condemned him to death. Even that went sour. As he knelt to the block, the kennelmaster said, "M'lord Eddard always did his own killings." Theon had to take the axe himself or look a weakling. His hands were sweating, so the shaft twisted in his grip as he swung and the first blow landed between Farlen's shoulders. It took three more cuts to hack through all that bone and muscle and sever the head from the body, and afterward he was sick, remembering all the times they'd sat over a cup of mead talking of hounds and hunting. I had no choice, he wanted to scream at the corpse. The ironborn can't keep secrets, they had to die, and someone had to take the blame for it. He only wished he had killed him cleaner. Ned Stark had never needed more than a single blow to take a man's head.

The killings stopped after Farlen's death, but even so his men continued sullen and anxious. "They fear no foe in open battle," Black Lorren told him, "but it is another thing to dwell among enemies, never knowing if the washerwoman means to kiss you or kill you, or whether the serving boy is filling your cup with ale or bale. We would do well to leave this place."

"I am the Prince of Winterfell!" Theon had shouted. "This is my seat, no man will drive me from it. No, nor woman either!"

Asha. It was her doing. My own sweet sister, may the Others bugger her with a sword. She wanted him dead, so she could steal his place as their father's heir. That was why she had let him languish here, ignoring the urgent commands he had sent her.

He found her in the high seat of the Starks, ripping a capon apart with her fingers. The hall rang with the voices of her men, sharing stories with Theon's own as they drank together. They were so loud that his entrance went all but unnoticed. "Where are the rest?" he demanded of Reek. There were no more than fifty men at the trestle tables, most of them his. Winterfell's Great Hall could have seated ten times the number.

"This is the whole o' the company, m'lord prince."

"The whole-how many men did she bring?"

"Twenty, by my count."

Theon Greyjoy strode to where his sister was sprawled. Asha was laughing at something one of her men had said, but broke off at his approach. "Why, 'tis the Prince of Winterfell." She tossed a bone to one of the dogs sniffing about the hall. Under that hawk's beak of a nose, her wide mouth twisted in a mocking grin. "Or is it Prince of Fools?"

"Envy ill becomes a maid."

Asha sucked grease from her fingers. A lock of black hair fell across her eyes. Her men were shouting for bread and bacon. They made a deal of noise, as few as they were. "Envy, Theon?"

"What else would you call it? With thirty men, I captured Winterfell in a night. You needed a thousand and a moon's turn to take Deepwood Motte."

"Well, I'm no great warrior like you, brother," She quaffed half a horn of ale and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I saw the heads above your gates. Tell me true, which one gave you the fiercest fight, the cripple or the babe?"

Theon could feel the blood rushing to his face. He took no joy from those heads, no more than he had in displaying the headless bodies of the children before the castle. Old Nan stood with her soft toothless mouth opening and closing soundlessly, and Farlen threw himself at Theon, snarling like one of his hounds. Urzen and Cadwyl had to beat him senseless with the butts of their spears. How did I come to this~ he remembered thinking as he stood over the fly-speckled bodies.

Only Maester Luwin had the stomach to come near. Stone-faced, the small grey man had begged leave to sew the boys' heads back onto their shoulders, so they might be laid in the crypts below with the other Stark dead.

"No," Theon had told him. "Not the crypts."

"But why, my lord? Surely they cannot harm you now. It is where they belong. All the bones of the Starks-"

"I said no." He needed the heads for the wall, but he had burned the headless bodies that very day, in all their finery. Afterward he had knelt amongst the bones and ashes to retrieve a slag of melted silver and cracked jet, all that remained of the wolf's-head brooch that had once been Bran's. He had it still.

“I treated Bran and Rickon generously,” he told his sister. “They brought their fate on themselves.”

“As do we all, little brother.”

His patience was at an end. “How do you expect me to hold Winterfell if you bring me only twenty men?”

“Ten,” Asha corrected. “The others return with me. You wouldn’t want your own sweet sister to brave the dangers of the wood without an escort, would you? There are direwolves prowling the dark.” She uncoiled from the great stone seat and rose to her feet. “Come, let us go somewhere we can speak more privily.”

She was right, he knew, though it galled him that she would make that decision. I should never have come to the hall, he realized belatedly. I should have summoned her to me.

It was too late for that now, however. Theon had no choice but to lead Asha to Ned Stark’s solar. There, before the ashes of a dead fire, he blurted, “Dagmer’s lost the fight at Torrhen’s Square-”

“The old castellan broke his shield wall, yes,” Asha said calmly. “What did you expect? This Ser Rodrik knows the land intimately, as the Cleftjaw does not, and many of the northmen were mounted. The ironborn lack the discipline to stand a charge of armored horse. Dagmer lives, be grateful for that much. He’s leading the survivors back toward the Stony Shore.”

She knows more than I do, Theon realized. That only made him angrier. “The victory has given Leobald Tallhart the courage to come out from behind his walls and join Ser Rodrik. And I’ve had reports that Lord Manderly has sent a dozen barges upriver packed with knights, warhorses, and siege engines. The Umbers are gathering beyond the Last River as well. I’ll have an army at my gates before the moon turns, and you bring me only ten men?”

“I need not have brought you any.”

“I commanded you-”

“Father commanded me to take Deepwood Motte,” she snapped. “He said nothing of me having to rescue my little brother.”

“Bugger Deepwood,” he said. “It’s a wooden pisspot on a hill. Winterfell is the heart of the land, but how am I to hold it without a garrison?”

“You might have thought of that before you took it. Oh, it was cleverly done, I’ll grant you. If only you’d had the good sense to raze the castle and carry the two little princelings back to Pyke as hostages, you might have won the war in a stroke.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? To see my prize reduced to ruins and ashes.”

“Your prize will be the doom of you. Krakens rise from the sea, Theon, or did you forget that during your years among the wolves? Our strength is in our longships. My wooden pisspot sits close enough to the sea for supplies and fresh men to reach me whenever they are needful. But Winterfell is hundreds of leagues inland, ringed by woods, hills, and hostile holdfasts and castles. And every man in a thousand leagues is your enemy now, make no mistake. You made certain of that when you mounted those heads on your gatehouse.” Asha shook her head. “How could you be such a bloody fool? Children...”

“They defied me!” he shouted in her face. “And it was blood for blood besides, two sons of Eddard Stark to pay for Rodrik and Maron.” The words tumbled out heedlessly, but Theon knew at once that his father would approve. “I’ve laid my brothers’ ghosts to rest.”

“Our brothers,” Asha reminded him, with a half smile that suggested she took his talk of vengeance well salted. “Did you bring their ghosts from Pyke, brother? And here I thought they haunted only Father.”

“When has a maid ever understood a man’s need for revenge?” Even if his father did not appreciate the gift of Winterfell, he must approve of Theon avenging his brothers!

Asha snorted back a laugh. “This Ser Rodrik may well feel the same manly need, did you think of that? You are blood of my blood, Theon, whatever else you may be. For the sake of the mother who bore us both, return to Deepwood Motte with me. Put Winterfell to the torch and fall back while you still can.”

“No.” Theon adjusted his crown. “I took this castle and I mean to hold it.”

His sister looked at him a long time. “Then hold it you shall,” she said, “for the rest of your life.” She sighed. “I say it tastes like folly, but what would a shy maid know of such things?” At the door she gave him one last mocking smile. “You ought to know, that’s the ugliest crown I’ve ever laid eyes on. Did you make it yourself?”

She left him fuming, and lingered no longer than was needful to feed and water her horses. Half the men she’d brought returned with her as threatened, riding out the same Hunter’s Gate that Bran and Rickon had used for their escape.

Theon watched them go from atop the wall. As his sister vanished into the mists of the wolfwood he found himself wondering why he had not listened and gone with her.

“Gone, has she?” Reek was at his elbow.

Theon had not heard him approach, nor smelled him either. He could not think of anyone he wanted to see less. It made him uneasy to see the man walking around breathing, with what he knew. I should have had him killed after he did the others, he reflected, but the notion made him nervous. Unlikely as it seemed, Reek could read and write, and he was possessed of enough base cunning to have hidden an account of what they’d done.

“M’lord prince, if you’ll pardon me saying, it’s not right for her to abandon you. And ten men, that won’t be near enough.”

“I am well aware of that,” Theon said. So was Asha.

“Well, might be I could help you,” said Reek. “Give me a horse and bag o’ coin, and I could find you some good fellows.”

Theon narrowed his eyes. “How many?”

“A hundred, might be. Two hundred. Maybe more.” He smiled, his pale eyes glinting. “I was born up north here. I know many a man, and many a man knows Reek.”

Two hundred men were not an army, but you didn’t need thousands to hold a castle as strong as Winterfell. So long as they could learn which end of a spear did the killing, they might make all the difference. “Do as you say and you’ll not find me ungrateful. You can name your own reward.”

“Well, m’lord, I haven’t had no woman since I was with Lord Ramsay,” Reek said. “I’ve had my eye on that Palla, and I hear she’s already been had, so...”

He had gone too far with Reek to turn back now. “Two hundred men and she’s yours. But a man less and you can go back to fucking pigs.”

Reek was gone before the sun went down, carrying a bag of Stark silver and the last of Theon’s hopes. Like as not, I’ll never see the wretch again, he thought bitterly, but even so the chance had to be taken.

That night he dreamed of the feast Ned Stark had thrown when King Robert came to Winterfell. The hall rang with music and laughter, though the cold winds were rising outside. At first it was all wine and roast meat, and Theon was making japes and eyeing the serving girls and having himself a fine time... until he noticed that the room was growing darker. The music did not seem so jolly then; he heard discords and strange silences, and notes that hung in the air bleeding. Suddenly the wine turned bitter in his mouth, and when he looked up from his cup he saw that he was dining with the dead.

King Robert sat with his guts spilling out on the table from the great gash in his belly, and Lord Eddard was headless beside him. Corpses lined the benches below, grey-brown flesh sloughing off their bones as they raised their cups to toast, worms crawling in and out of the holes that were their eyes. He knew them, every one; Jory Cassel and Fat Tom, Porthor and Cayn and Hullen the master of horse, and all the others who had ridden south to King’s Landing never to return. Mikken and Chayle sat together, one dripping blood and the other water. Benfred Tallhart and his Wild Hares filled most of a table. The miller’s wife was there as well, and Farlen, even the wildling Theon had killed in the wolfwood the day he had saved Bran’s life.

But there were others with faces he had never known in life, faces he had seen only in stone. The slim, sad girl who wore a crown of pale blue roses and a white gown spattered with gore could only be Lyanna. Her brother Brandon stood beside her, and their father Lord Rickard just behind. Along the walls figures halfseen moved through the shadows, pale shades with long grim faces. The sight of them sent fear shivering through Theon sharp as a knife. And then the tall doors opened with a crash, and a freezing gale blew down the hall, and Robb came walking out of the night. Grey Wind stalked beside, eyes burning, and man and wolf alike bled from half a hundred savage wounds.

Theon woke with a scream, startling Wex so badly that the boy ran naked from the room. When his guards burst in with drawn swords, he ordered them to bring him the maester. By the time Luwin arrived ruffled and sleepy, a cup of wine had steadied Theon’s hands, and he was feeling ashamed of his panic. “A dream,” he muttered, “that was all it was. It meant nothing.”

“Nothing,” Luwin agreed solemnly. He left a sleeping draught, but Theon poured it down the privy shaft the moment he was gone. Luwin was a man as well as a maester, and the man had no love for him. He wants me to sleep, yes... to sleep and never wake. He’d like that as much as Asha would.

He sent for Kyra, kicked shut the door, climbed on top of her, and fucked the wench with a fury he’d never known was in him, By the time he finished, she was sobbing, her neck and breasts

covered with bruises and bite marks. Theon shoved her from the bed and threw her a blanket. "Get out."

Yet even then, he could not sleep.

Come dawn, he dressed and went outside, to walk along the outer walls. A brisk autumn wind was swirling through the battlements. It reddened his cheeks and stung his eyes. He watched the forest go from grey to green below him as light filtered through the silent trees. On his left he could see tower tops above the inner wall, their roofs gilded by the rising sun. The red leaves of the weirwood were a blaze of flame among the green. Ned Stark's tree, he thought, and Stark's wood, Stark's castle, Stark's sword, Stark's gods. This is their place, not mine. I am a Greyjoy of Pyke, born to paint a kraken on my shield and sail the great salt sea. I should have gone with Asha.

On their iron spikes atop the gatehouse, the heads waited.

Theon gazed at them silently while the wind tugged on his cloak with small ghostly hands. The miller's boys had been of an age with Bran and Rickon, alike in size and coloring, and once Reek had flayed the skin from their faces and dipped their heads in tar, it was easy to see familiar features in those misshapen lumps of rotting flesh. People were such fools. If we'd said they were rams' heads, they would have seen horns.

SANSA

They had been singing in the sept all morning, since the first report of enemy sails had reached the castle. The sound of their voices mingled with the whicker of horses, the clank of steel, and the groaning hinges of the great bronze gates to make a strange and fearful music. In the sept they sing for the Mother's mercy but on the walls it's the Warrior they pray to, and all in silence. She remembered how Septa Mordane used to tell them that the Warrior and the Mother were only two faces of the same great god. But if there is only one, whose prayers will be heard?

Ser Meryn Trant held the blood bay for Joffrey to mount. Boy and horse alike wore gilded mail and enameled crimson plate, with matching golden lions on their heads. The pale sunlight flashed off the golds and reds every time Joff moved. Bright, shining, and empty, Sansa thought.

The imp was mounted on a red stallion, armored more plainly than the king in battle gear that made him look like a little boy dressed up in his father's clothes. But there was nothing childish about the battle-axe slung below his shield. Ser Mandon Moore rode at his side, white steel icy bright. When Tyrion saw her he turned his horse her way. "Lady Sansa," he called from the saddle, "surely my sister has asked you to join the other highborn ladies in Maegor's?"

"She has, my lord, but King Joffrey sent for me to see him off. I mean to visit the sept as well, to pray."

"I won't ask for whom." His mouth twisted oddly; if that was a smile, off with shouts and cheers. When the last was gone, a sudden stillness settled over the yard, like the hush before a storm.

Through the quiet, the singing pulled at her. Sansa turned toward the sept. Two stableboys followed, and one of the guards whose watch was ended. Others fell in behind them.

Sansa had never seen the sept so crowded, nor so brightly lit; great shafts of rainbow-colored sunlight slanted down through the crystals in the high windows, and candles burned on every side, their little flames twinkling like stars. The Mother's altar and the Warrior's swam in light, but Smith and Crone and Maid and Father had their worshipers as well, and there were even a few flames dancing below the Stranger's halfhuman face... for what was Stannis Baratheon, if not the Stranger come to judge them? Sansa visited each of the Seven in turn, lighting a candle at each altar, and then found herself a place on the benches between a wizened old washer woman and a boy no older than Rickon, dressed in the fine linen tunic of a knight's son. The old woman's hand was bony and hard with callus, the boy's small and soft, but it was good to have someone to hold on to. The air was hot and heavy, smelling of incense and sweat, crystal-kissed and candle-bright; it made her dizzy to breathe it.

She knew the hymn; her mother had taught it to her once, a long time ago in Winterfell. She joined her voice to theirs.

Gentle Mother, font of mercy, save our sons from war, we pray, stay the swords and stay the arrows, let them know a better day. Gentle Mother, strength of women, help our daughters through this fray, soothe the wrath and tame the fury, teach us all a kinder way.

Across the city, thousands had jammed into the Great Sept of Baelor on Visenya's Hill, and they would be singing too, their voices swelling out over the city, across the river, and up into the sky. Surely the gods must hear us, she thought.

Sansa knew most of the hymns, and followed along on those she did not know as best she could. She sang along with grizzled old serving men and anxious young wives, with serving girls and soldiers, cooks and falconers, knights and knaves, squires and spit boys and nursing mothers. She sang with those inside the castle walls and those without, sang with all the city. She sang for mercy, for the living and the dead alike, for Bran and Rickon and Robb, for her sister Arya and her bastard brother Jon Snow, away off on the Wall. She sang for her mother and her father, for her grandfather Lord Hoster and her uncle Edmure Tully, for her friend Jeyne Poole, for old drunken King Robert, for Septa Mordane and Ser Dontos and Jory Cassel and Maester Luwin, for all the brave knights and soldiers who would die today, and for the children and the wives who would mourn them, and finally, toward the end, she even sang for Tyrion the Imp and for the Hound. He is no true knight but he saved me all the same, she told the Mother. Save him if you can, and gentle the rage inside him.

But when the septon climbed on high and called upon the gods to protect and defend their true and noble king, Sansa got to her feet. The aisles were jammed with people. She had to shoulder through while the septon called upon the Smith to lend strength to Joffrey's sword and shield, the Warrior to give him courage, the Father to defend him in his need. Let his sword break and his shield shatter, Sansa thought coldly as she shoved out through the doors, let his courage fail him and every man desert him.

A few guards paced along on the gatehouse battlements, but otherwise the castle seemed empty. Sansa stopped and listened. Away off, she could hear the sounds of battle. The singing almost drowned them out, but the sounds were there if you had the ears to hear: the deep moan of warhorns, the creak and thud of catapults flinging stones, the splashes and splinterings, the crackle of burning pitch and thrum of scorpions loosing their yard-long iron-headed shafts... and beneath it all, the cries of dying men.

It was another sort of song, a terrible song. Sansa pulled the hood of her cloak up over her ears, and hurried toward Maegor's Holdfast, the castle-within-a-castle where the queen had promised they would all be safe. At the foot of the drawbridge, she came upon Lady Tanda and her two daughters. Falyse had arrived yesterday from Castle Stokeworth with a small troop of soldiers. She was trying to coax her sister onto the bridge, but Lollys clung to her maid, sobbing, "I don't want to, I don't want to, I don't want to."

"The battle is begun," Lady Tanda said in a brittle voice.

"I don't want to, I don't want to."

There was no way Sansa could avoid them. She greeted them courteously. "May I be of help?" Lady Tanda flushed with shame. "No, my lady, but we thank you kindly. You must forgive my daughter, she has not been well."

“I don’t want to.” Lollys clutched at her maid, a slender, pretty girl with short dark hair who looked as though she wanted nothing so much as to shove her mistress into the dry moat, onto those iron spikes. “Please, please, I don’t want to.”

Sansa spoke to her gently. “We’ll all be thrice protected inside, and there’s to be food and drink and song as well.”

Lollys gaped at her, mouth open. She had dull brown eyes that always seemed to be wet with tears. “I don’t want to.”

“You have to,” her sister Falyse said sharply, “and that is the end of it. Shae, help me.” They each took an elbow, and together half dragged and half carried Lollys across the bridge. Sansa followed with their mother. “She’s been sick,” Lady Tanda said. If a babe can be termed a sickness, Sansa thought. It was common gossip that Lollys was with child.

The two guards at the door wore the lion-crested helms and crimson cloaks of House Lannister, but Sansa knew they were only dressed-up sellswords. Another sat at the foot of the stair—a real guard would have been standing, not sitting on a step with his halberd across his knees—but he rose when he saw them and opened the door to usher them inside.

The Queen’s Ballroom was not a tenth the size of the castle’s Great Hall, only half as big as the Small Hall in the Tower of the Hand, but it could still seat a hundred, and it made up in grace what it lacked in space. Beaten silver mirrors backed every wall sconce, so the torches burned twice as bright; the walls were paneled in richly carved wood, and sweet-smelling rushes covered the floors. From the gallery above drifted down the merry strains of pipes and fiddle. A line of arched windows ran along the south wall, but they had been closed off with heavy draperies. Thick velvet hangings admitted no thread of light, and would muffle the sound of prayer and war alike. It makes no matter, Sansa thought. The war is with us.

Almost every highborn woman in the city sat at the long trestle tables, along with a handful of old men and young boys. The women were wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters. Their men had gone out to fight Lord Stannis. Many would not return. The air was heavy with the knowledge. As Joffrey’s betrothed, Sansa had the seat of honor on the queen’s right hand. She was climbing the dais when she saw the man standing in the shadows by the back wall. He wore a long hauberk of oiled black mail, and held his sword before him: her father’s greatsword, Ice, near as tall as he was. Its point rested on the floor, and his hard bony fingers curled around the crossguard on either side of the grip. Sansa’s breath caught in her throat. Ser Ilyn Payne seemed to sense her stare. He turned his gaunt, pox-ravaged face toward her.

“What is he doing here?” she asked Osfryd Kettleblack. He captained the queen’s new red cloak guard.

Osfryd grinned. “Her Grace expects she’ll have need of him before the night’s done. “

Ser Ilyn was the King’s justice. There was only one service he might be needed for. Whose head does she want?

“All rise for Her Grace, Cersei of House Lannister, Queen Regent and Protector of the Realm,” the royal steward cried.

Cersei's gown was snowy linen, white as the cloaks of the Kingsguard. Her long dagged sleeves showed a lining of gold satin. Masses of bright yellow hair tumbled to her bare shoulders in thick curls. Around her slender neck hung a rope of diamonds and emeralds. The white made her look strangely innocent, almost maidenly, but there were points of color on her cheeks.

"Be seated," the queen said when she had taken her place on the dais, "and be welcome." Osfryd Kettleblack held her chair; a page performed the same service for Sansa. "You look pale, Sansa," Cersei observed. "Is your red flower still blooming?"

"I? Yes."

"How apt. The men will bleed out there, and you in here." The queen signaled for the first course to be served.

"Why is Ser Ilyn here?" Sansa blurted out.

The queen glanced at the mute headsman. "To deal with treason, and to defend us if need be. He was a knight before he was a headsman." She pointed her spoon toward the end of the hall, where the tall wooden doors had been closed and barred. "When the axes smash down those doors, you may be glad of him."

I would be gladder if it were the Hound, Sansa thought. Harsh as he was, she did not believe Sandor Clegane would let any harm come to her. "Won't your guards protect us?"

"And who will protect us from my guards?" The queen gave Osfryd a sideways look. "Loyal sellswords are rare as virgin whores. If the battle is lost my guards will trip on those crimson cloaks in their haste to rip them off. They'll steal what they can and flee, along with the serving men, washer women, and stableboys, all out to save their own worthless hides. Do you have any notion what happens when a city is sacked, Sansa? No, you wouldn't, would you? All you know of life you learned from singers, and there's such a dearth of good sacking songs."

"True knights would never harm women and children." The words rang hollow in her ears even as she said them.

"True knights." The queen seemed to find that wonderfully amusing. "No doubt you're right. So why don't you just eat your broth like a good girl and wait for Symeon Star-Eyes and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight to come rescue you, sweetling. I'm sure it won't be very long now."

DAVOS

Blackwater Bay was rough and choppy, whitecaps everywhere. Black Betha rode the flood tide, her sail cracking and snapping at each shift of wind. Wraith and Lady Marya sailed beside her, no more than twenty yards between their hulls. His sons could keep a line. Davos took pride in that.

Across the sea warhorns boomed, deep throaty moans like the calls of monstrous serpents, repeated ship to ship. “Bring down the sail,” Davos commanded. “Lower mast. Oarsmen to your oars.” His son Matthos relayed the commands. The deck of Black Betha churned as crewmen ran to their tasks, pushing through the soldiers who always seemed to be in the way no matter where they stood. Ser Imry had decreed that they would enter the river on oars alone, so as not to expose their sails to the scorpions and spitfires on the walls of King’s Landing.

Davos could make out Fury well to the southeast, her sails shimmering golden as they came down, the crowned stag of Baratheon blazoned on the canvas. From her decks Stannis Baratheon had commanded the assault on Dragonstone sixteen years before, but this time he had chosen to ride with his army, trusting Fury and the command of his fleet to his wife’s brother Ser Imry, who’d come over to his cause at Storm’s End with Lord Alester and all the other Florents.

Davos knew Fury as well as he knew his own ships. Above her three hundred oars was a deck given over wholly to scorpions, and topside she mounted catapults fore and aft, large enough to fling barrels of burning pitch. A most formidable ship, and very swift as well, although Ser Imry had packed her bow to stern with armored knights and men-at-arms, at some cost to her speed.

The warhorns sounded again, commands drifting back from the Fury. Davos felt a tingle in his missing fingertips. “Out oars,” he shouted. “Form line.” A hundred blades dipped down into the water as the oarman’s drum began to boom. The sound was like the beating of a great slow heart, and the oars moved at every stroke, a hundred men pulling as one.

Wooden wings had sprouted from the Wraith and Lady Marya as well. The three galleys kept pace, their blades churning the water. “Slow cruise,” Davos called. Lord Velaryon’s silver-hulled Pride of Driftmark had moved into her position to port of Wraith, and Bold Laughter was coming up fast, but Harridan was only now getting her oars into the water and Seahorse was still struggling to bring down her mast. Davos looked astern. Yes, there, far to the south, that could only be Swordfish, lagging as ever. She dipped two hundred oars and mounted the largest ram in the fleet, though Davos had grave doubts about her captain.

He could hear soldiers shouting encouragement to each other across the water. They’d been little more than ballast since Storm’s End, and were eager to get at the foe, confident of victory. In that, they were of one mind with their admiral, Lord High Captain Ser Imry Florent.

Three days past, he had summoned all his captains to a war council aboard the Fury while the fleet lay anchored at the mouth of the Wendwater, in order to acquaint them with his dispositions. Davos and his sons had been assigned a place in the second line of battle, well out on the dangerous starboard wing. “A place of honor,” Allard had declared, well satisfied with the chance to prove his valor. “A place of peril,” his father had pointed out. His sons had given him

pitying looks, even young Maric. The Onion Knight has become an old woman, he could hear them thinking, still a smuggler at heart.

Well, the last was true enough, he would make no apologies for it. Seaworth had a lordly ring to it, but down deep he was still Davos of Flea Bottom, coming home to his city on its three high hills. He knew as much of ships and sails and shores as any man in the Seven Kingdoms, and had fought his share of desperate fights sword to sword on a wet deck. But to this sort of battle he came a maiden, nervous and afraid. Smugglers do not sound warhorns and raise banners. When they smell danger, they raise sail and run before the wind.

Had he been admiral, he might have done it all differently. For a start, he would have sent a few of his swiftest ships to probe upriver and see what awaited them, instead of smashing in headlong. When he had suggested as much to Ser Imry, the Lord High Captain had thanked him courteously, but his eyes were not as polite. Who is this lowborn craven? those eyes asked. Is he the one who bought his knighthood with an onion?

With four times as many ships as the boy king, Ser Imry saw no need for caution or deceptive tactics. He had organized the fleet into ten lines of battle, each of twenty ships. The first two lines would sweep up the river to engage and destroy Joffrey's little fleet, or "the boy's toys" as Ser Imry dubbed them, to the mirth of his lordly captains. Those that followed would land companies of archers and spearmen beneath the city walls, and only then join the fight on the river. The smaller, slower ships to the rear would ferry over the main part of Stannis's host from the south bank, protected by Salladhor Saan and his Lyseni, who would stand out in the bay in case the Lannisters had other ships hidden up along the coast, poised to sweep down on their rear.

To be fair, there was reason for Ser Imry's haste. The winds had not used them kindly on the voyage up from Storm's End. They had lost two cogs to the rocks of Shipbreaker Bay on the very day they set sail, a poor way to begin. One of the Myrish galleys had foundered in the Straits of Tarth, and a storm had overtaken them as they were entering the Gullet, scattering the fleet across half the narrow sea. All but twelve ships had finally regrouped behind the sheltering spine of Massey's Hook, in the calmer waters of Blackwater Bay, but not before they had lost considerable time.

Stannis would have reached the Rush days ago. The kingsroad ran from Storm's End straight to King's Landing, a much shorter route than by sea, and his host was largely mounted; near twenty thousand knights, light horse, and freeriders, Renly's unwilling legacy to his brother. They would have made good time, but armored destriers and twelve-foot lances would avail them little against the deep waters of the Blackwater Rush and the high stone walls of the city. Stannis would be camped with his lords on the south bank of the river, doubtless seething with impatience and wondering what Ser Imry had done with his fleet.

Off Merling Rock two days before, they had sighted a half-dozen fishing skiffs. The fisherfolk had fled before them, but one by one they had been overtaken and boarded. "A small spoon of victory is just the thing to settle the stomach before battle," Ser Imry had declared happily. "It makes the men hungry for a larger helping." But Davos had been more interested in what the

captives had to say about the defenses at King's Landing. The dwarf had been busy building some sort of boom to close off the mouth of the river, though the fishermen differed as to whether the work had been completed or not. He found himself wishing it had. If the river was closed to them, Ser Imry would have no choice but to pause and take stock.

The sea was full of sound: shouts and calls, warhorns and drums and the trill of pipes, the slap of wood on water as thousands of oars rose and fell. "Keep line," Davos shouted. A gust of wind tugged at his old green cloak. A jerkin of boiled leather and a pothelm at his feet were his only armor. At sea, heavy steel was as like to cost a man his life as to save it, he believed. Ser Imry and the other highborn captains did not share his view; they glittered as they paced their decks.

Harridan and Seahorse had slipped into their places now, and Lord Celtigar's Red Claw beyond them. To starboard of Allard's Lady Marya were the three galleys that Stannis had seized from the unfortunate Lord Sunglass, Piety, Prayer, and Devotion, their decks crawling with archers. Even Swordfish was closing, lumbering and rolling through a thickening sea under both oars and sail. A ship of that many oars ought to be much faster, Davos reflected with disapproval. It's that ram she carries, it's too big, she has no balance.

The wind was gusting from the south, but under oars it made no matter. They would be sweeping in on the flood tide, but the Lannisters would have the river current to their favor, and the Blackwater Rush flowed strong and swift where it met the sea. The first shock would inevitably favor the foe. We are fools to meet them on the Blackwater, Davos thought. In any encounter on the open sea, their battle lines would envelop the enemy fleet on both flanks, driving them inward to destruction. On the river, though, the numbers and weight of Ser Imry's ships would count for less. They could not dress more than twenty ships abreast, lest they risk tangling their oars and colliding with each other.

Beyond the line of warships, Davos could see the Red Keep up on Aegon's High Hill, dark against a lemon sky, with the mouth of the Rush opening out below. Across the river the south shore was black with men and horses, stirring like angry ants as they caught sight of the approaching ships. Stannis would have kept them busy building rafts and fletching arrows, yet even so the waiting would have been a hard thing to bear. Trumpets sounded from among them, tiny and brazen, soon swallowed by the roar of a thousand shouts. Davos closed his stubby hand around the pouch that held his fingerbones, and mouthed a silent prayer for luck.

Fury herself would center the first line of battle, flanked by the Lord Steffon and the Stag of the Sea, each of two hundred oars. On the port and starboard wings were the hundreds: Lady Harra, Brightfish, Laughing Lord, Sea Demon, Horned Honor, Ragged Jenna, Trident Three, Swift Sword, Princess Rhaenys, Dog's Nose, Sceptre, Faithful, Red Raven, Queen Alysanne, Cat, Courageous, and Dragonsbane. From every stern streamed the fiery heart of the Lord of Light, red and yellow and orange. Behind Davos and his sons came another line of hundreds commanded by knights and lordly captains, and then the smaller, slower Myrish contingent, none dipping more than eighty oars. Farther back would come the sailed ships, carracks and lumbering great cogs, and last of all Salladhor Saan in his proud Valyrian, a towering three-hundred, paced by the rest of his galleys with their distinctive striped hulls. The flamboyant Lyseni princeling

had not been pleased to be assigned the rear guard, but it was clear that Ser Imry trusted him no more than Stannis did. Too many complaints, and too much talk of the gold he was owed. Davos was sorry nonetheless. Salladhor Saan was a resourceful old pirate, and his crews were born seamen, fearless in a fight. They were wasted in the rear.

Ahoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo. The call rolled across whitecaps and churning oars from the forecastle of the Fury: Ser Imry was sounding the attack. Ahoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo, aoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.

Swordfish had joined the line at last, though she still had her sail raised. “Fast cruise,” Davos barked. The drum began to beat more quickly, and the stroke picked up, the blades of the oars cutting water, splash-swoosh, splash-swoosh, splash-swoosh. On deck, soldiers banged sword against shield, while archers quietly strung their bows and pulled the first arrow from the quivers at their belts. The galleys of the first line of battle obscured his vision, so Davos paced the deck searching for a better view. He saw no sign of any boom; the mouth of the river was open, as if to swallow them all. Except...

In his smuggling days, Davos had often jested that he knew the waterfront at King’s Landing a deal better than the back of his hand, since he had not spent a good part of his life sneaking in and out of the back of his hand. The squat towers of raw new stone that stood opposite one another at the mouth of the Blackwater might mean nothing to Ser Imry Florent, but to him it was as if two extra fingers had sprouted from his knuckles.

Shading his eyes against the westering sun, he peered at those towers more closely. They were too small to hold much of a garrison. The one on the north bank was built against the bluff with the Red Keep frowning above; its counterpart on the south shore had its footing in the water. They dug a cut through the bank, he knew at once. That would make the tower very difficult to assault; attackers would need to wade through the water or bridge the little channel. Stannis had posted bowmen below, to fire up at the defenders whenever one was rash enough to lift his head above the ramparts, but otherwise had not troubled.

Something flashed down low where the dark water swirled around the base of the tower. It was sunlight on steel, and it told Davos Seaworth all he needed to know. A chain boom... and yet they have not closed the river against us. Why?

He could make a guess at that as well, but there was no time to consider the question. A shout went up from the ships ahead, and the warhorns blew again: the enemy was before them.

Between the flashing oars of Sceptre and Faithful, Davos saw a thin line of galleys drawn across the river, the sun glinting off the gold paint that marked their hulls. He knew those ships as well as he knew his own. When he had been a smuggler, he’d always felt safer knowing whether the sail on the horizon marked a fast ship or a slow one, and whether her captain was a young man hungry for glory or an old one serving out his days.

Ahoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo, the warhorns called. “Battle speed,” Davos shouted. On port and starboard he heard Dale and Allard giving the same command. Drums began to beat furiously, oars rose and fell, and Black Betha surged forward. When he glanced toward Wraith,

Dale gave him a salute. Swordfish was lagging once more, wallowing in the wake of the smaller ships to either side; otherwise the line was straight as a shield wall.

The river that had seemed so narrow from a distance now stretched wide as a sea, but the city had grown gigantic as well. Glowering down from Aegon's High Hill, the Red Keep commanded the approaches. Its iron-crowned battlements, massive towers, and thick red walls gave it the aspect of a ferocious beast hunched above river and streets. The bluffs on which it crouched were steep and rocky, spotted with lichen and gnarled thorny trees. The fleet would have to pass below the castle to reach the harbor and city beyond.

The first line was in the river now, but the enemy galleys were backing water. They mean to draw us in. They want us jammed close, constricted, no way to sweep around their flanks... and with that boom behind us. He paced his deck, craning his neck for a better look at Joffrey's fleet. The boy's toys included the ponderous Godsgrace, he saw, the old slow Prince Aemon, the Lady of Silk and her sister Lady's Shame, Wildwind, Kingslander, White Hart, Lance, Seaflower. But where was the Lionstar? Where was the beautiful Lady Lyanna that King Robert had named in honor of the maid he'd loved and lost? And where was King Robert's Hammer? She was the largest war galley in the royal fleet, four hundred oars, the only warship the boy king owned capable of overmatching Fury. By rights she should have formed the heart of any defense.

Davos tasted a trap, yet he saw no sign of any foes sweeping in behind them, only the great fleet of Stannis Baratheon in their ordered ranks, stretching back to the watery horizon. Will they raise the chain and cut us in two? He could not see what good that would serve. The ships left out in the bay could still land men north of the city; a slower crossing, but safer.

A flight of flickering orange birds took wing from the castle, twenty or thirty of them; pots of burning pitch, arcing out over the river trailing threads of flame. The waters ate most, but a few found the decks of galleys in the first line of battle, spreading flame when they shattered. Men-at-arms were scrambling on Queen Alysanne's deck, and he could see smoke rising from three different spots on Dragonsbane, nearest the bank. By then a second flight was on its way, and arrows were falling as well, hissing down from the archers' nests that studded the towers above. A soldier tumbled over Cat's gunwale, crashed off the oars, and sank. The first man to die today, Davos thought, but he will not be the last.

Atop the Red Keep's battlements streamed the boy king's banners: the crowned stag of Baratheon on its gold field, the lion of Lannister on crimson. More pots of pitch came flying. Davos heard men shriek as fire spread across Courageous. Her oarsmen were safe below, protected from missiles by the half deck that sheltered them, but the men-at-arms crowded topside were not so fortunate. The starboard wing was taking all the damage, as he had feared. It will be our turn soon, he reminded himself, uneasy. Black Betha was well in range of the firepots, being the sixth ship out from the north bank. To starboard, she had only Allard's Lady Marya, the ungainly Swordfish-so far behind now that she was nearer the third line than the second-and Piety, Prayer, and Devotion, who would need all the godly intervention they could get, placed as vulnerably as they were.

As the second line swept past the twin towers, Davos took a closer look. He could see three links of a huge chain snaking out from a hole no bigger than a man's head and disappearing under the water. The towers had a single door, set a good twenty feet off the ground. Bowmen on the roof of the northern tower were firing down at Prayer and Devotion. The archers on Devotion fired back, and Davos heard a man scream as the arrows found him.

"Captain ser." His son Matthos was at his elbow. "Your helm." Davos took it with both hands and slid it over his head. The pothelm was visorless; he hated having his vision impeded.

By then the pitch pots were raining down around them. He saw one shatter on the deck of Lady Marya, but Allard's crew quickly beat it out. To port, warhorns sounded from the Pride of Driftmark. The oars flung up sprays of water with every stroke. The yard-long shaft of a scorpion came down not two feet from Matthos and sank into the wood of the deck, thrumming. Ahead, the first line was within bowshot of the enemy; flights of arrows flew between the ships, hissing like striking snakes.

South of the Blackwater, Davos saw men dragging crude rafts toward the water while ranks and columns formed up beneath a thousand streaming banners. The fiery heart was everywhere, though the tiny black stag imprisoned in the flames was too small to make out. We should be flying the crowned stag, he thought. The stag was King Robert's sigil, the city would rejoice to see it. This stranger's standard serves only to set men against us.

He could not behold the fiery heart without thinking of the shadow Melisandre had birthed in the gloom beneath Storm's End. At least we fight this battle in the light, with the weapons of honest men, he told himself. The red woman and her dark children would have no part of it. Stannis had shipped her back to Dragonstone with his bastard nephew Edric Storm. His captains and bannermen had insisted that a battlefield was no place for a woman. Only the queen's men had dissented, and then not loudly. All the same, the king had been on the point of refusing them until Lord Bryce Caron said, "Your Grace, if the sorceress is with us, afterward men will say it was her victory, not yours. They will say you owe your crown to her spells." That had turned the tide. Davos himself had held his tongue during the arguments, but if truth be told, he had not been sad to see the back of her. He wanted no part of Melisandre or her god.

To starboard, Devotion drove toward shore, sliding out a plank. Archers scrambled into the shallows, holding their bows high over their heads to keep the strings dry. They splashed ashore on the narrow strand beneath the bluffs. Rocks came bouncing down from the castle to crash among them, and arrows and spears as well, but the angle was steep and the missiles seemed to do little damage.

Prayer landed two dozen yards upstream and Piety was slanting toward the bank when the defenders came pounding down the riverside, the hooves of their warhorses sending up gouts of water from the shallows. The knights fell among the archers like wolves among chickens, driving them back toward the ships and into the river before most could notch an arrow. Men-at-arms rushed to defend them with spear and axe, and in three heartbeats the scene had turned to blood-soaked chaos. Davos recognized the dog's-head helm of the Hound. A white cloak streamed

from his shoulders as he rode his horse up the plank onto the deck of Prayer, hacking down anyone who blundered within reach.

Beyond the castle, King's Landing rose on its hills behind the encircling walls. The riverfront was a blackened desolation; the Lannisters had burned everything and pulled back within the Mud Gate. The charred spars of sunken hulks sat in the shallows, forbidding access to the long stone quays. We shall have no landing there. He could see the tops of three huge trebuchets behind the Mud Gate. High on Visenya's Hill, sunlight blazed off the seven crystal towers of the Great Sept of Baelor.

Davos never saw the battle joined, but he heard it; a great rending crash as two galleys came together. He could not say which two. Another impact echoed over the water an instant later, and then a third. Beneath the screech of splintering wood, he heard the deep thrum-thump of the Fury's fore catapult. Stag of the Sea split one of Joffrey's galleys clean in two, but Dog's Nose was afire and Queen Alysanne was locked between Lady of Silk and Lady's Shame, her crew fighting the boarders rail-to-rail.

Directly ahead, Davos saw the enemy's Kingslander drive between Faithful and Sceptre. The former slid her starboard oars out of the way before impact, but Sceptre's portside oars snapped like so much kindling as Kingslander raked along her side. "Loose," Davos commanded, and his bowmen sent a withering rain of shafts across the water. He saw Kingslander's captain fall, and tried to recall the man's name.

Ashore, the arms of the great trebuchets rose one, two, three, and a hundred stones climbed high into the yellow sky. Each one was as large as a man's head; when they fell they sent up great gouts of water, smashed through oak planking, and turned living men into bone and pulp and gristle. All across the river the first line was engaged. Grappling hooks were flung out, iron rams crashed through wooden hulls, boarders swarmed, flights of arrows whispered through each other in the drifting smoke, and men died... but so far, none of his.

Black Betha swept upriver, the sound of her oarmaster's drum thundering in her captain's head as he looked for a likely victim for her ram. The beleaguered Queen Alysanne was trapped between two Lannister warships, the three made fast by hooks and lines.

"Ramming speed!" Davos shouted.

The drumbeats blurred into a long fevered hammering, and Black Betha flew, the water turning white as milk as it parted for her prow. Allard had seen the same chance; Lady Marya ran beside them. The first line had been transformed into a confusion of separate struggles. The three tangled ships loomed ahead, turning, their decks a red chaos as men hacked at each other with sword and axe. A little more, Davos Seaworth beseeched the Warrior, bring her around a little more, show me her broadside.

The Warrior must have been listening. Black Betha and Lady Marya slammed into the side of Lady's Shame within an instant of each other, ramming her fore and aft with such force that men were thrown off the deck of Lady of Silk three boats away. Davos almost bit his tongue off when his teeth jarred together. He spat out blood. Next time close your mouth, you fool. Forty years at

sea, and yet this was the first time he'd rammed another ship. His archers were loosing arrows at will.

"Back water," he commanded. When Black Betha reversed her oars, the river rushed into the splintered hole she left, and Lady's Shame fell to pieces before his eyes, spilling dozens of men into the river. Some of the living swam; some of the dead floated; the ones in heavy mail and plate sank to the bottom, the quick and the dead alike. The pleas of drowning men echoed in his ears.

A flash of green caught his eye, ahead and off to port, and a nest of writhing emerald serpents rose burning and hissing from the stern of Queen Alysanne. An instant later Davos heard the dread cry of "Wildfire!"

He grimaced. Burning pitch was one thing, wildfire quite another. Evil stuff, and well-nigh unquenchable. Smother it under a cloak and the cloak took fire; slap at a fleck of it with your palm and your hand was aflame. "Piss on wildfire and your cock burns off," old seamen liked to say. Still, Ser Imry had warned them to expect a taste of the alchemists' vile substance. Fortunately, there were few true pyromancers left. They will soon run out, Ser Imry had assured them.

Davos reeled off commands; one bank of oars pushed off while the other backed water, and the galley came about. Lady Marya had won clear too, and a good thing; the fire was spreading over Queen Alysanne and her foes faster than he would have believed possible. Men wreathed in green flame leapt into the water, shrieking like nothing human. On the walls of King's Landing, spitfires were belching death, and the great trebuchets behind the Mud Gate were throwing boulders. One the size of an ox crashed down between Black Betha and Wraith, rocking both ships and soaking every man on deck. Another, not much smaller, found Bold Laughter. The Velaryon galley exploded like a child's toy dropped from a tower, spraying splinters as long as a man's arm.

Through black smoke and swirling green fire, Davos glimpsed a swarm of small boats bearing downriver: a confusion of ferries and wherries, barges, skiffs, rowboats, and hulks that looked too rotten to float. It stank of desperation; such driftwood could not turn the tide of a fight, only get in the way. The lines of battle were hopelessly ensnarled, he saw. Off to port, Lord Steffon, Ragged fenna, and Swift Sword had broken through and were sweeping upriver. The starboard wing was heavily engaged, however, and the center had shattered under the stones of those trebuchets, some captains turning downstream, others veering to port, anything to escape that crushing rain. Fury had swung her aft catapult to fire back at the city, but she lacked the range; the barrels of pitch were shattering under the walls. Sceptre had lost most of her oars, and Faithful had been rammed and was starting to list. He took Black Betha between them, and struck a glancing blow at Queen Cersei's ornate carved-and-gilded pleasure barge, laden with soldiers instead of sweetmeats now. The collision spilled a dozen of them into the river, where Betha's archers picked them off as they tried to stay afloat.

Matthos's shout alerted him to the danger from port; one of the Lannister galleys was coming about to ram. "Hard to starboard," Davos shouted. His men used their oars to push free of the

barge, while others turned the galley so her prow faced the onrushing White Hart. For a moment he feared he'd been too slow, that he was about to be sunk, but the current helped swing Black Betha, and when the impact came it was only a glancing blow, the two hulls scraping against each other, both ships snapping oars. A jagged piece of wood flew past his head, sharp as any spear. Davos flinched. "Board her!" he shouted. Grappling lines were flung. He drew his sword and led them over the rail himself.

The crew of the White Hart met them at the rail, but Black Betha's men-at-arms swept over them in a screaming steel tide. Davos fought through the press, looking for the other captain, but the man was dead before he reached him. As he stood over the body, someone caught him from behind with an axe, but his helm turned the blow, and his skull was left ringing when it might have been split. Dazed, it was all he could do to roll. His attacker charged screaming. Davos grasped his sword in both hands and drove it up point first into the man's belly.

One of his crewmen pulled him back to his feet. "Captain ser, the Hart is ours." It was true, Davos saw. Most of the enemy were dead, dying, or yielded. He took off his helm, wiped blood from his face, and made his way back to his own ship, trodding carefully on boards slimy with men's guts. Matthos lent him a hand to help him back over the rail.

For those few instants, Black Betha and White Hart were the calm eye in the midst of the storm. Queen Alysanne and Lady of Silk, still locked together, were a ranging green inferno, drifting downriver and dragging pieces of Lady's Shame. One of the Myrish galleys had slammed into them and was now afire as well. Cat was taking on men from the fastsinking Courageous. The captain of Dragonsbane had driven her between two quays, ripping out her bottom; her crew poured ashore with the archers and men-at-arms to join the assault on the walls. Red Raven, rammed, was slowly listing. Stag of the Sea was fighting fires and boarders both, but the fiery heart had been raised over Joffrey's Loyal Man. Fury, her proud bow smashed in by a boulder, was engaged with Godsgrace. He saw Lord Velaryon's Pride of Driftmark crash between two Lannister river runners, overturning one and lighting the other up with fire arrows. On the south bank, knights were leading their mounts aboard the cogs, and some of the smaller galleys were already making their way across, laden with men-at-arms. They had to thread cautiously between sinking ships and patches of drifting wildfire. The whole of King Stannis's fleet was in the river now, save for Salladhor Saan's Lyseni. Soon enough they would control the Blackwater. Ser Imry will have his victory, Davos thought, and Stannis will bring his host across, but gods be good, the cost of this...

"Captain ser!" Matthos touched his shoulder.

It was Swordfish, her two banks of oars lifting and falling. She had never brought down her sails, and some burning pitch had caught in her rigging. The flames spread as Davos watched, creeping out over ropes and sails until she trailed a head of yellow flame. Her ungainly iron ram, fashioned after the likeness of the fish from which she took her name, parted the surface of the river before her. Directly ahead, drifting toward her and swinging around to present a tempting plump target, was one of the Lannister hulks, floating low in the water. Slow green blood was leaking out between her boards.

When he saw that, Davos Seaworth's heart stopped beating.

"No," he said. "No, NOOOOOOOO!" Above the roar and crash of battle, no one heard him but Matthos. Certainly the captain of the Swordfish did not, intent as he was on finally spearing something with his ungainly fat sword. The Swordfish went to battle speed. Davos lifted his maimed hand to clutch at the leather pouch that held his fingerbones.

With a grinding, splintering, tearing crash, Swordfish split the rotted hulk asunder. She burst like an overripe fruit, but no fruit had ever screamed that shattering wooden scream. From inside her Davos saw green gushing from a thousand broken jars, poison from the entrails of a dying beast, glistening, shining, spreading across the surface of the river...

"Back water," he roared. "Away. Get us off her, back water, back water!" The grappling lines were cut, and Davos felt the deck move under his feet as Black Betha pushed free of White Hart. Her oars slid down into the water.

Then he heard a short sharp woof, as if someone had blown in his ear. Half a heartbeat later came the roar. The deck vanished beneath him, and black water smashed him across the face, filling his nose and mouth. He was choking, drowning. Unsure which way was up, Davos wrestled the river in blind panic until suddenly he broke the surface. He spat out water, sucked in air, grabbed hold of the nearest chunk of debris, and held on.

Swordfish and the hulk were gone, blackened bodies were floating downstream beside him, and choking men clinging to bits of smoking wood. Fifty feet high, a swirling demon of green flame danced upon the river. It had a dozen hands, in each a whip, and whatever they touched burst into fire. He saw Black Betha burning, and White Hart and Loyal Man to either side. Piety, Cat, Courageous, Sceptre, Red Raven, Harridan, Faithful, Fury, they had all gone up, Kingslander and Godsgrace as well, the demon was eating his own. Lord Velaryon's shining Pride of Driftmark was trying to turn, but the demon ran a lazy green finger across her silvery oars and they flared up like so many tapers. For an instant she seemed to be stroking the river with two banks of long bright torches.

The current had him in its teeth by then, spinning him around and around. He kicked to avoid a floating patch of wildfire. My sons, Davos thought, but there was no way to look for them amidst the roaring chaos. Another hulk heavy with wildfire went up behind him. The Blackwater itself seemed to boil in its bed, and burning spars and burning men and pieces of broken ships filled the air.

I'm being swept out into the bay. It wouldn't be as bad there; he ought to be able to make shore, he was a strong swimmer. Salladhor Saan's galleys would be out in the bay as well, Ser Imry had commanded them to stand off..

And then the current turned him about again, and Davos saw what awaited him downstream. The chain. Gods save us, they've raised the chain.

Where the river broadened out into Blackwater Bay, the boom stretched taut, a bare two or three feet above the water. Already a dozen galleys had crashed into it, and the current was pushing others against them. Almost all were aflame, and the rest soon would be. Davos could make out the striped hulls of Salladhor Saan's ships beyond, but he knew he would never reach

them. A wall of red-hot steel, blazing wood, and swirling green flame stretched before him. The mouth of the Blackwater Rush had turned into the mouth of hell.

TYRION

Motionless as a gargoyle, Tyrion Lannister hunched on one knee atop a merlon. Beyond the Mud Gate and the desolation that had once been the fishmarket and wharves, the river itself seemed to have taken fire. Half of Stannis's fleet was ablaze, along with most of Joffrey's. The kiss of wildfire turned proud ships into funeral pyres and men into living torches. The air was full of smoke and arrows and screams.

Downstream, commoners and highborn captains alike could see the hot green death swirling toward their rafts and carracks and ferries, borne on the current of the Blackwater. The long white oars of the Myrish galleys flashed like the legs of maddened centipedes as they fought to come about, but it was no good. The centipedes had no place to run.

A dozen great fires raged under the city walls, where casks of burning pitch had exploded, but the wildfire reduced them to no more than candles in a burning house, their orange and scarlet pennons fluttering insignificantly against the jade holocaust. The low clouds caught the color of the burning river and roofed the sky in shades of shifting green, eerily beautiful. A terrible beauty. Like dragonfire. Tyrion wondered if Aegon the Conqueror had felt like this as he flew above his Field of Fire.

The furnace wind lifted his crimson cloak and beat at his bare face, yet he could not turn away. He was dimly aware of the gold cloaks cheering from the hoardings. He had no voice to join them. It was a half victory. It will not be enough.

He saw another of the hulks he'd stuffed full of King Aerys's fickle fruits engulfed by the hungry flames. A fountain of burning jade rose from the river the blast so bright he had to shield his eyes. Plumes of fire thirty and forty feet high danced upon the waters, crackling and hissing. For a few moments they washed out the screams. There were hundreds in the water, drowning or burning or doing a little of both.

Do you hear them shrieking, Stannis? Do you see them burning? This is your work as much as mine. Somewhere in that seething mass of men south of the Blackwater, Stannis was watching too, Tyrion knew. He'd never had his brother Robert's thirst for battle. He would command from the rear, from the reserve, much as Lord Tywin Lannister was wont to do. Like as not, he was sitting a warhorse right now, clad in bright armor, his crown upon his head. A crown of red gold, Varys says, its points fashioned in the shapes of flames.

"My ships." Joffrey's voice cracked as he shouted up from the wallwalk, where he huddled with his guards behind the ramparts. The golden circlet of kingship adorned his battle helm. "My Kingslander's burning, Queen Cersei, Loyal Man. Look, that's Seaflower, there." He pointed with his new sword, out to where the green flames were licking at Seaflower's golden hull and creeping up her oars. Her captain had turned her upriver, but not quickly enough to evade the wildfire.

She was doomed, Tyrion knew. There was no other way. If we had not come forth to meet them, Stannis would have sensed the trap. An arrow could be aimed, and a spear, even the stone

from a catapult, but wildfire had a will of its own. Once loosed, it was beyond the control of mere men. "It could not be helped," he told his nephew. "Our fleet was doomed in any case."

Even from atop the merlon he had been too short to see over the ramparts, so he'd had them boost him up—the flames and smoke and chaos of battle made it impossible for Tyrion to see what was happening downriver under the castle, but he had seen it a thousand times in his mind's eye. Bronn would have whipped the oxen into motion the moment Stannis's flagship passed under the Red Keep; the chain was ponderous heavy, and the great winches turned but slowly, creaking and rumbling. The whole of the usurper's fleet would have passed by the time the first glimmer of metal could be seen beneath the water. The links would emerge dripping wet, some glistening with mud, link by link by link, until the whole great chain stretched taut. King Stannis had rowed his fleet up the Blackwater, but he would not row out again.

Even so, some were getting away. A river's current was a tricky thing, and the wildfire was not spreading as evenly as he had hoped. The main channel was all aflame, but a good many of the Myrmen had made for the south bank and looked to escape unscathed, and at least eight ships had landed under the city walls. Landed or wrecked, but it comes to the same thing, they've put men ashore. Worse, a good part of the south wing of the enemy's first two battle lines had been well upstream of the inferno when the hulks went up. Stannis would be left with thirty or forty galleys, at a guess; more than enough to bring his whole host across, once they had regained their courage.

That might take a bit of time; even the bravest would be dismayed after watching a thousand or so of his fellows consumed by wildfire. Hallyne said that sometimes the substance burned so hot that flesh melted like tallow. Yet even so...

Tyrion had no illusions where his own men were concerned. If the battle looks to be going sour they'll break, and they'll break bad, Jacelyn Bywater had warned him, so the only way to win was to make certain the battle stayed sweet, start to finish.

He could see dark shapes moving through the charred ruins of the riverfront wharfs. Time for another sortie, he thought. Men were never so vulnerable as when they first staggered ashore. He must not give the foe time to form up on the north bank.

He scrambled down off the merlon. "Tell Lord Jacelyn we've got enemy on the riverfront," he said to one of the runners Bywater had assigned him. To another he said, "Bring my compliments to Ser Arnel and ask him to swing the Whores thirty degrees west." The angle would allow them to throw farther, if not as far out into the water.

"Mother promised I could have the Whores," Joffrey said. Tyrion was annoyed to see that the king had lifted the visor of his helm again. Doubtless the boy was cooking inside all that heavy steel... but the last thing he needed was some stray arrow punching through his nephew's eye.

He clanged the visor shut. "Keep that closed, Your Grace; your sweet person is precious to us all." And you don't want to spoil that pretty face, either. "The Whores are yours." It was as good a time as any; flinging more firepots down onto burning ships seemed pointless. Joff had the Antler Men trussed up naked in the square below, antlers nailed to their heads. When they'd been brought before the Iron Throne for justice, he had promised to send them to Stannis. A man was

not as heavy as a boulder or a cask of burning pitch, and could be thrown a deal farther. Some of the gold cloaks had been wagering on whether the traitors would fly all the way across the Blackwater. "Be quick about it, Your Grace," he told Joffrey. "We'll want the trebuchets throwing stones again soon enough. Even wildfire does not burn forever."

Joffrey hurried off happy, escorted by Ser Meryn, but Tyrion caught Ser Osmund by the wrist before he could follow. "Whatever happens, keep him safe and keep him there, is that understood?"

"As you command." Ser Osmund smiled amiably.

Tyrion had warned Trant and Kettleblack what would happen to them should any harm come to the king. And Joffrey had a dozen veteran gold cloaks waiting at the foot of the steps. I'm protecting your wretched bastard as well as I can, Cersei, he thought bitterly. See you do the same for Alayaya.

No sooner was Joff off than a runner came panting up the steps. "I my lord, hurry!" He threw himself to one knee. "They've landed men on the tourney grounds, hundreds! They're bringing a ram up to the King's Gate."

Tyrion cursed and made for the steps with a rolling waddle. Podrick Payne waited below with their horses. They galloped off down River Row, Pod and Ser Mandon Moore coming hard behind him. The shuttered houses were steeped in green shadow, but there was no traffic to get in their way; Tyrion had commanded that the street be kept clear, so the defenders could move quickly from one gate to the next. Even so, by the time they reached the King's Gate, he could hear a booming crash of wood on wood that told him the battering ram had been brought into play. The groaning of the great hinges sounded like the moans of a dying giant. The gatchouse square was littered with the wounded, but he saw lines of horses as well, not all of them hurt, and sellswords and gold cloaks enough to form a strong column. "Form up," he shouted as he leapt to the ground. The gate moved under the impact of another blow. "Who commands here? You're going out."

"No." A shadow detached itself from the shadow of the wall, to become a tall man in dark grey armor. Sandor Clegane wrenched off his helm with both hands and let it fall to the ground. The steel was scorched and dented, the left ear of the snarling hound sheared off. A gash above one eye had sent a wash of blood down across the Hound's old burn scars, masking half his face.

"Yes." Tyrion faced him.

Clegane's breath came ragged. "Bugger that. And you."

A sellsword stepped up beside him. "We been out. Three times. Half our men are killed or hurt. Wildfire bursting all around us, horses screaming like men and men like horses--"

"Did you think we hired you to fight in a tourney? Shall I bring you a nice iced milk and a bowl of raspberries? No? Then get on your fucking horse. You too, dog."

The blood on Clegane's face glistened red, but his eyes showed white. He drew his longsword.

He is afraid, Tyrion realized, shocked. The Hound is frightened. He tried to explain their need. "They've taken a ram to the gate, you can hear them, we need to disperse them--"

“Open the gates. When they rush inside, surround them and kill them.” The Hound thrust the point of his longsword into the ground and leaned upon the pommel, swaying. “I’ve lost half my men. Horse as well. I’m not taking more into that fire.”

Ser Mandon Moore moved to Tyrion’s side, immaculate in his enameled white plate. “The King’s Hand commands you.”

“Bugger the King’s Hand.” Where the Hound’s face was not sticky with blood, it was pale as milk. “Someone bring me a drink.” A gold cloak officer handed him a cup. Clegane took a swallow, spit it out, flung the cup away. “Water? Fuck your water. Bring me wine.”

He is dead on his feet. Tyrion could see it now. The wound, the fire... he’s done, I need to find someone else, but who? Ser Mandon? He looked at the men and knew it would not do. Clegane’s fear had shaken them. Without a leader, they would refuse as well, and Ser Mandon... a dangerous man, Jaime said, yes, but not a man other men would follow.

In the distance Tyrion heard another great crash. Above the walls, the darkening sky was awash with sheets of green and orange light. How long could the gate hold?

This is madness, he thought, but sooner madness than defeat. Defeat is death and shame. “Very well, I’ll lead the sortie.”

If he thought that would shame the Hound back to valor, he was wrong. Clegane only laughed. “You?”

Tyrion could see the disbelief on their faces. “Me. Ser Mandon, you’ll bear the king’s banner. Pod, my helm.” The boy ran to obey. The Hound leaned on that notched and blood-streaked sword and looked at him with those wide white eyes. Ser Mandon helped Tyrion mount up again. “Form up!” he shouted.

His big red stallion wore crinet and charnfron. Crimson silk draped his hindquarters, over a coat of mail. The high saddle was gilded. Podrik Payne handed up helm and shield, heavy oak emblazoned with a golden hand on red, surrounded by small golden lions. He walked his horse in a circle, looking at the little force of men. Only a handful had responded to his command, no more than twenty. They sat their horses with eyes as white as the Hound’s. He looked contemptuously at the others, the knights and sellswords who had ridden with Clegane. “They say I’m half a man,” he said. “What does that make the lot of you?”

That shamed them well enough. A knight mounted, helmetless, and rode to join the others. A pair of sellswords followed. Then more. The King’s Gate shuddered again. In a few moments the size of Tyrion’s command had doubled. He had them trapped. If I fight, they must do the same, or they are less than dwarfs.

“You won’t hear me shout out Joffrey’s name,” he told them. “You won’t hear me yell for Casterly Rock either. This is your city Stannis means to sack, and that’s your gate he’s bringing down. So come with me and kill the son of a bitch!” Tyrion unsheathed his axe, wheeled the stallion around, and trotted toward the sally port. He thought they were following, but never dared to look.

SANSA

The torches shimmered brightly against the hammered metal of the wall sconces, filling the Queen's Ballroom with silvery light. Yet there was still darkness in that hall. Sansa could see it in the pale eyes of Ser Ilyn Payne, who stood by the back door still as stone, taking neither food nor wine. She could hear it in Lord Gyles's racking cough, and the whispered voice of Osney Kettleblack when he slipped in to bring Cersei the tidings.

Sansa was finishing her broth when he came the first time, entering through the back. She glimpsed him talking to his brother Osfryd. Then he climbed the dais and knelt beside the high seat, smelling of horse, four long thin scratches on his cheek crusted with scabs, his hair falling down past his collar and into his eyes. For all his whispering, Sansa could not help but hear. "The fleets are locked in battle. Some archers got ashore, but the Hound's cut them to pieces, Y'Grace. Your brother's raising his chain, I heard the signal. Some drunkards down to Flea Bottom are smashing doors and climbing through windows. Lord Bywater's sent the gold cloaks to deal with them. Baelor's Sept is jammed full, everyone praying."

"And my son?"

"The king went to Baelor's to get the High Septon's blessing. Now he's walking the walls with the Hand, telling the men to be brave, lifting their spirits as it were."

Cersei beckoned to her page for another cup of wine, a golden vintage from the Arbor, fruity and rich. The queen was drinking heavily, but the wine only seemed to make her more beautiful; her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes had a bright, feverish heat to them as she looked down over the hall. Eyes of wildfire, Sansa thought.

Musicians played. jugglers juggled. Moon Boy lurched about the hall on stilts making mock of everyone, while Ser Dontos chased serving girls on his broomstick horse. The guests laughed, but it was a joyless laughter, the sort of laughter that can turn into sobbing in half a heartbeat. Their bodies are here, but their thoughts are on the city walls, and their hearts as well.

After the broth came a salad of apples, nuts, and raisins. At any other time, it might have made a tasty dish, but tonight all the food was flavored with fear. Sansa was not the only one in the hall without an appetite. Lord Gyles was coughing more than he was eating, Lollys Stokeworth sat hunched and shivering, and the young bride of one of Ser Lancel's knights began to weep uncontrollably. The queen commanded Maester Frenken to put her to bed with a cup of dreamwine. "Tears," she said scornfully to Sansa as the woman was led from the hall. "The woman's weapon, my lady mother used to call them. The man's weapon is a sword. And that tells us all you need to know, doesn't it?"

"Men must be very brave, though," said Sansa. "To ride out and face swords and axes, everyone trying to kill you..."

"Jaime told me once that he only feels truly alive in battle and in bed." She lifted her cup and took a long swallow. Her salad was untouched. "I would sooner face any number of swords than sit helpless like this, pretending to enjoy the company of this flock of frightened hens."

"You asked them here, Your Grace."

“Certain things are expected of a queen. They will be expected of you should you ever wed Joffrey. Best learn.” The queen studied the wives, daughters, and mothers who filled the benches. “Of themselves the hens are nothing, but their cocks are important for one reason or another, and some may survive this battle. So it behooves me to give their women my protection. If my wretched dwarf of a brother should somehow manage to prevail, they will return to their husbands and fathers full of tales about how brave I was, how my courage inspired them and lifted their spirits, how I never doubted our victory even for a moment.”

“And if the castle should fall?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Cersei did not wait for a denial. “If I’m not betrayed by my own guards, I may be able to hold here for a time. Then I can go to the walls and offer to yield to Lord Stannis in person. That will spare us the worst. But if Maegor’s Holdfast should fall before Stannis can come up, why then, most of my guests are in for a bit of rape, I’d say. And you should never rule out mutilation, torture, and murder at times like these.”

Sansa was horrified. “These are women, unarmed, and gently born.”

“Their birth protects them,” Cersei admitted, “though not as much as you’d think. Each one’s worth a good ransom, but after the madness of battle, soldiers often seem to want flesh more than coin. Even so, a golden shield is better than none. Out in the streets, the women won’t be treated near as tenderly. Nor will our servants. Pretty things like that serving wench of Lady Tanda’s could be in for a lively night, but don’t imagine the old and the infirm and the ugly will be spared. Enough drink will make blind washerwomen and reeking pig girls seem as comely as you, sweetling.

“Me?”

“Try not to sound so like a mouse, Sansa. You’re a woman now, remember? And betrothed to my firstborn.” The queen sipped at her wine. “Were it anyone else outside the gates, I might hope to beguile him. But this is Stannis Baratheon. I’d have a better chance of seducing his horse.” She noticed the look on Sansa’s face, and laughed. “Have I shocked you, my lady?” She leaned close. “You little fool. Tears are not a woman’s only weapon. You’ve got another one between your legs, and you’d best learn to use it. You’ll find men use their swords freely enough. Both kinds of swords.”

Sansa was spared the need to reply when two Kettleblacks reentered the hall. Ser Osmund and his brothers had become great favorites about the castle; they were always ready with a smile and a jest, and got on with grooms and huntsmen as well as they did with knights and squires. With the serving wenches they got on best of all, it was gossiped. Of late Ser Osmund had taken Sandor Clegane’s place by Joffrey’s side, and Sansa had heard the women at the washing well saying he was as strong as the Hound, only younger and faster. If that was so, she wondered why she had never once heard of these Kettleblacks before Ser Osmund was named to the Kingsguard.

Osney was all smiles as he knelt beside the queen. “The hulks have gone up, Y’Grace. The whole Blackwater’s awash with wildfire. A hundred ships burning, maybe more.”

“And my son?”

“He’s at the Mud Gate with the Hand and the Kingsguard, Y’Grace. He spoke to the archers on the hoardings before, and gave them a few tips on handling a crossbow, he did. All agree, he’s a right brave boy.”

“He’d best remain a right live boy.” Cersei turned to his brother Osfryd, who was taller, sterner, and wore a drooping black mustache. “Yes?”

Osfryd had donned a steel halfhelm over his long black hair, and the look on his face was grim, “Y’Grace,” he said quietly, “the boys caught a groom and two maidservants trying to sneak out a postern with three of the king’s horses.”

“The night’s first traitors,” the queen said, “but not the last, I fear. Have Ser Ilyn see to them, and put their heads on pikes outside the stables as a warning.” As they left, she turned to Sansa. “Another lesson you should learn, if you hope to sit beside my son. Be gentle on a night like this and you’ll have treasons popping up all about you like mushrooms after a hard rain. The only way to keep your people loyal is to make certain they fear you more than they do the enemy.”

“I will remember, Your Grace,” said Sansa, though she had always heard that love was a surer route to the people’s loyalty than fear. If I am ever a queen, I’ll make them love me.

Crabclaw pies followed the salad. Then came mutton roasted with leeks and carrots, served in trenchers of hollowed bread. Lollys ate too fast, got sick, and retched all over herself and her sister. Lord Gyles coughed, drank, coughed, drank, and passed out. The queen gazed down in disgust to where he sprawled with his face in his trencher and his hand in a puddle of wine. “The gods must have been mad to waste manhood on the likes of him, and I must have been mad to demand his release.”

Osfryd Kettleblack returned, crimson cloak swirling. “There’s folks gathering in the square, Y’Grace, asking to take refuge in the castle. Not a mob, rich merchants and the like.”

“Command them to return to their homes,” the queen said. “If they won’t go, have our crossbowmen kill a few. No sorties; I won’t have the gates opened for any reason.”

“As you command.” He bowed and moved off.

The queen’s face was hard and angry. “Would that I could take a sword to their necks myself.” Her voice was starting to slur. “When we were little, Jaime and I were so much alike that even our lord father could not tell us apart. Sometimes as a lark we would dress in each other’s clothes and spend a whole day each as the other. Yet even so, when Jaime was given his first sword, there was none for me. ‘What do I get?’ I remember asking. We were so much alike, I could never understand why they treated us so differently. Jaime learned to fight with sword and lance and mace, while I was taught to smile and sing and please. He was heir to Casterly Rock, while I was to be sold to some stranger like a horse, to be ridden whenever my new owner liked, beaten whenever he liked, and cast aside in time for a younger filly. Jaime’s lot was to be glory and power, while mine was birth and moonblood.”

“But you were queen of all the Seven Kingdoms,” Sansa said.

“When it comes to swords, a queen is only a woman after all.”

Cersei’s wine cup was empty. The page moved to fill it again, but she turned it over and shook her head. “No more. I must keep a clear head.”

The last course was goat cheese served with baked apples. The scent of cinnamon filled the hall as Osney Kettleblack slipped in to kneel once more between them. “Y’Grace,” he murmured. “Stannis has landed men on the tourney grounds, and there’s more coming across. The Mud Gate’s under attack, and they’ve brought a ram to the King’s Gate. The Imp’s gone out to drive them off.”

“That will fill them with fear,” the queen said dryly. “He hasn’t taken Joff, I hope.”

“No, Y’Grace, the king’s with my brother at the Whores, flinging Antler Men into the river.”

“With the Mud Gate under assault? Folly. Tell Ser Osmund I want him out of there at once, it’s too dangerous. Fetch him back to the castle.”

“The Imp said-”

“It’s what I said that ought concern you.” Cersei’s eyes narrowed. “Your brother will do as he’s told, or I’ll see to it that he leads the next sortie himself, and you’ll go with him.”

After the meal had been cleared away, many of the guests asked leave to go to the sept. Cersei graciously granted their request. Lady Tanda and her daughters were among those who fled. For those who remained, a singer was brought forth to fill the hall with the sweet music of the high harp. He sang of Jonquil and Florian, of Prince Aemon the Dragonknight and his love for his brother’s queen, of Nymeria’s ten thousand ships. They were beautiful songs, but terribly sad. Several of the women began to weep, and Sansa felt her own eyes growing moist.

“Very good, dear.” The queen leaned close. “You want to practice those tears. You’ll need them for King Stannis.”

Sansa shifted nervously. “Your Grace?”

“Oh, spare me your hollow courtesies. Matters must have reached a desperate strait out there if they need a dwarf to lead them, so you might as well take off your mask. I know all about your little treasons in the godswood.”

“The godswood?” Don’t look at Ser Dontos, don’t, don’t, Sansa told herself. She doesn’t know, no one knows, Dontos promised me, my Florian would never fail me. “I’ve done no treasons. I only visit the godswood to pray.”

“For Stannis. Or your brother, it’s all the same. Why else seek your father’s gods? You’re praying for our defeat. What would you call that, if not treason?”

“I pray for Joffrey,” she insisted nervously.

“Why, because he treats you so sweetly?” The queen took a flagon of sweet plum wine from a passing serving girl and filled Sansa’s cup. “Drink,” she commanded coldly. “Perhaps it will give you the courage to deal with truth for a change.”

Sansa lifted the cup to her lips and took a sip. The wine was cloyingly sweet, but very strong.

“You can do better than that,” Cersei said. “Drain the cup, Sansa. Your queen commands you.” it almost gagged her, but Sansa emptied the cup, gulping down the thick sweet wine until her head was swimming.

“More?” Cersei asked.

“No. Please.”

The queen looked displeased. “When you asked about Ser Ilyn earlier, I lied to you. Would you like to hear the truth, Sansa? Would you like to know why he’s really here?”

She did not dare answer, but it did not matter. The queen raised a hand and beckoned, never waiting for a reply. Sansa had not even seen Ser Ilyn return to the hall, but suddenly there he was, striding from the shadows behind the dais as silent as a cat. He carried Ice unsheathed. Her father had always cleaned the blade in the godswood after he took a man’s head, Sansa recalled, but Ser Ilyn was not so fastidious. There was blood drying on the rippling steel, the red already fading to brown. “Tell Lady Sansa why I keep you by us,” said Cersei.

Ser Ilyn opened his mouth and emitted a choking rattle. His poxscarred face had no expression. “He’s here for us, he says,” the queen said. “Stannis may take the city and he may take the throne, but I will not suffer him to judge me. I do not mean for him to have us alive.”

“us?”

“You heard me. So perhaps you had best pray again, Sansa, and for a different outcome. The Starks will have no joy from the fall of House Lannister, I promise you.” She reached out and touched Sansa’s hair, brushing it lightly away from her neck.

TYRION

The slot in his helm limited Tyrion's vision to what was before him, but when he turned his head he saw three galleys beached on the tourney grounds, and a fourth, larger than the others, standing well out into the river, firing barrels of burning pitch from a catapult.

"Wedge," Tyrion commanded as his men streamed out of the sally port. They formed up in spearhead, with him at the point. Ser Mandon Moore took the place to his right, flames shimmering against the white enamel of his armor, his dead eyes shining passionlessly through his helm. He rode a coal-black horse barded all in white, with the pure white shield of the Kingsguard strapped to his arm. On the left, Tyrion was surprised to see Podrick Payne, a sword in his hand. "You're too young," he said at once. "Go back."

"I'm your squire, my lord."

Tyrion could spare no time for argument. "With me, then. Stay close." He kicked his horse into motion.

They rode knee to knee, following the line of the looming walls. Joffrey's standard streamed crimson and gold from Ser Mandon's staff, stag and lion dancing hoof to paw. They went from a walk to a trot, wheeling wide around the base of the tower. Arrows darted from the city walls while stones spun and tumbled overhead, crashing down blindly onto earth and water, steel and flesh. Ahead loomed the King's Gate and a surging mob of soldiers wrestling with a huge ram, a shaft of black oak with an iron head. Archers off the ships surrounded them, loosing their shafts at whatever defenders showed themselves on the gatehouse walls. "Lances," Tyrion commanded. He sped to a canter.

The ground was sodden and slippery, equal parts mud and blood. His stallion stumbled over a corpse, his hooves sliding and churning the earth, and for an instant Tyrion feared his charge would end with him tumbling from the saddle before he even reached the foe, but somehow he and his horse both managed to keep their balance. Beneath the gate men were turning, hurriedly trying to brace for the shock. Tyrion lifted his axe and shouted, "King's Landing!" Other voices took up the cry, and now the arrowhead flew, a long scream of steel and silk, pounding hooves and sharp blades kissed by fire.

Ser Mandon dropped the point of his lance at the last possible instant, and drove Joffrey's banner through the chest of a man in a studded jerkin, lifting him full off his feet before the shaft snapped. Ahead of Tyrion was a knight whose surcoat showed a fox peering through a ring of flowers. Florent was his first thought, but helmless ran a close second. He smashed the man in the face with all the weight of axe and arm and charging horse, taking off half his head. The shock of impact numbed his shoulder. Shagga would laugh at me, he thought, riding on.

A spear thudded against his shield. Pod galloped beside him, slashing down at every foe they passed. Dimly, he heard cheers from the men on the walls. The battering ram crashed down into the mud, forgotten in an instant as its handlers fled or turned to fight. Tyrion rode down an archer, opened a spearman from shoulder to armpit, glanced a blow off a swordfish-crested helm. At the ram his big red reared but the black stallion leapt the obstacle smoothly and Ser Mandon

flashed past him, death in snow-white silk. His sword sheared off limbs, cracked heads, broke shields asunder-though few enough of the enemy had made it across the river with shields intact. Tyrion urged his mount over the ram. Their foes were fleeing. He moved his head right to left and back again, but saw no sign of Podrick Payne. An arrow clattered against his cheek, missing his eye slit by an inch. His jolt of fear almost unhorsed him. If I'm to sit here like a stump, I had as well paint a target on my breastplate.

He spurred his horse back into motion, trotting over and around a scatter of corpses. Downriver, the Blackwater was jammed with the hulks of burning galleys. Patches of wildfire still floated atop the water, sending fiery green plumes swirling twenty feet into the air. They had dispersed the men on the battering ram, but he could see fighting all along the riverfront. Ser Balon Swann's men, most like, or Lancel's, trying to throw the enemy back into the water as they swarmed ashore off the burning ships. "We'll ride for the Mud Gate," he commanded.

Ser Mandon shouted, "The Mud Gate!" And they were off again. "King's Landing!" his men cried raggedly, and "Halfman! Halfman!" He wondered who had taught them that. Through the steel and padding of his helm, he heard anguished screams, the hungry crackle of flame, the shuddering of warhorns, and the brazen blast of trumpets. Fire was everywhere. Gods be good, no wonder the Hound was frightened. It's the flames he fears...

A splintering crash rang across the Blackwater as a stone the size of a horse landed square amidships on one of the galleys. Ours or theirs? Through the roiling smoke, he could not tell. His wedge was gone; every man was his own battle now. I should have turned back, he thought, riding on.

The axe was heavy in his fist. A handful still followed him, the rest dead or fled. He had to wrestle his stallion to keep his head to the east. The big destrier liked fire no more than Sandor Clegane had, but the horse was easier to cow.

Men were crawling from the river, men burned and bleeding, coughing up water, staggering, most dying. He led his troop among them, delivering quicker cleaner deaths to those strong enough to stand. The war shrank to the size of his eye slit. Knights twice his size fled from him, or stood and died. They seemed little things, and fearful. "Lannister!" he shouted, slaying. His arm was red to the elbow, glistening in the light off the river. When his horse reared again, he shook his axe at the stars and heard them call out "Halfman! Halfman!" Tyrion felt drunk.

The battle fever. He had never thought to experience it himself, though Jaime had told him of it often enough. How time seemed to blur and slow and even stop, how the past and the future vanished until there was nothing but the instant, how fear fled, and thought fled, and even your body. "You don't feel your wounds then, or the ache in your back from the weight of the armor, or the sweat running down into your eyes. You stop feeling, you stop thinking, you stop being you, there is only the fight, the foe, this man and then the next and the next and the next, and you know they are afraid and tired but you're not, you're alive, and death is all around you but their swords move so slowly, you can dance through them laughing." Battle fever. I am half a man and drunk with slaughter, let them kill me if they can!

They tried. Another spearman ran at him. Tyrion lopped off the head of his spear, then his hand, then his arm, trotting around him in a circle. An archer, bowless, thrust at him with an arrow, holding it as if it were a knife. The destrier kicked at the man's thigh to send him sprawling, and Tyrion barked laughter. He rode past a banner planted in the mud, one of Stannis's fiery hearts, and chopped the staff in two with a swing of his axe. A knight rose up from nowhere to hack at his shield with a two-handed greatsword, again and again, until someone thrust a dagger under his arm. One of Tyrion's men, perhaps. He never saw.

"I yield, ser," a different knight called out, farther down the river. "Yield. Ser knight, I yield to you. My pledge, here, here." The man lay in a puddle of black water, offering up a lobstered gauntlet in token of submission. Tyrion had to lean down to take it from him. As he did, a pot of wildfire burst overhead, spraying green flame. In the sudden stab of light he saw that the puddle was not black but red. The gauntlet still had the knight's hand in it. He flung it back. "Yield," the man sobbed hopelessly, helplessly. Tyrion reeled away.

A man-at-arms grabbed the bridle of his horse and thrust at Tyrion's face with a dagger. He knocked the blade aside and buried the axe in the nape of the man's neck. As he was wresting it free, a blaze of white appeared at the edge of his vision. Tyrion turned, thinking to find Ser Mandon Moore beside him again, but this was a different white knight. Ser Balon Swann wore the same armor, but his horse trappings bore the battling black-and-white swans of his House. He's more a spotted knight than a white one, Tyrion thought inanely. Every bit of Ser Balon was spattered with gore and smudged by smoke. He raised his mace to point downriver. Bits of brain and bone clung to its head. "My lord, look."

Tyrion swung his horse about to peer down the Blackwater. The current still flowed black and strong beneath, but the surface was a roil of blood and flame. The sky was red and orange and garish green. "What?" he said. Then he saw.

Steel-clad men-at-arms were clambering off a broken galley that had smashed into a pier. So many, where are they coming from? Squinting into the smoke and glare, Tyrion followed them back out into the river. Twenty galleys were jammed together out there, maybe more, it was hard to count. Their oars were crossed, their hulls locked together with grappling lines, they were impaled on each other's rams, tangled in webs of fallen rigging. One great hulk floated hull up between two smaller ships. Wrecks, but packed so closely that it was possible to leap from one deck to the other and so cross the Blackwater.

Hundreds of Stannis Baratheon's boldest were doing just that. Tyrion saw one great fool of a knight trying to ride across, urging a terrified horse over gunwales and oars, across tilting decks slick with blood and crackling with green fire. We made them a bloody bridge, he thought in dismay. Parts of the bridge were sinking and other parts were afire and the whole thing was creaking and shifting and like to burst asunder at any moment, but that did not seem to stop them. "Those are brave men," he told Ser Balon in admiration. "Let's go kill them."

He led them through the guttering fires and the soot and ash of the riverfront, pounding down a long stone quay with his own men and Ser Balon's behind him. Ser Mandon fell in with them, his shield a ragged ruin. Smoke and cinders swirled through the air, and the foe broke before

their charge, throwing themselves back into the water, knocking over other men as they fought to climb up. The foot of the bridge was a halfsunken enemy galley with Dragonsbane painted on her prow, her bottom ripped out by one of the sunken hulks Tyrion had placed between the quays. A spearman wearing the red crab badge of House Celtigar drove the point of his weapon up through the chest of Balon Swann's horse before he could dismount, spilling the knight from the saddle. Tyrion hacked at the man's head as he flashed by, and by then it was too late to rein up. His stallion leapt from the end of the quay and over a splintered gunwale, landing with a splash and a scream in ankle-deep water. Tyrion's axe went spinning, followed by Tyrion himself, and the deck rose up to give him a wet smack.

Madness followed. His horse had broken a leg and was screaming horribly. Somehow he managed to draw his dagger, and slit the poor creature's throat. The blood gushed out in a scarlet fountain, drenching his arms and chest. He found his feet again and lurched to the rail, and then he was fighting, staggering and splashing across crooked decks awash with water. Men came at him. Some he killed, some he wounded, and some went away, but always there were more. He lost his knife and gained a broken spear, he could not have said how. He clutched it and stabbed, shrieking curses. Men ran from him and he ran after them, clambering up over the rail to the next ship and then the next. His two white shadows were always with him; Balon Swann and Mandon Moore, beautiful in their pale plate. Surrounded by a circle of Velaryon spearmen, they fought back to back; they made battle as graceful as a dance.

His own killing was a clumsy thing. He stabbed one man in the kidney when his back was turned, and grabbed another by the leg and upended him into the river. Arrows hissed past his head and clattered off his armor; one lodged between shoulder and breastplate, but he never felt it. A naked man fell from the sky and landed on the deck, body bursting like a melon dropped from a tower. His blood splattered through the slit of Tyrion's helm. Stones began to plummet down, crashing through the decks and turning men to pulp, until the whole bridge gave a shudder and twisted violently underfoot, knocking him sideways.

Suddenly the river was pouring into his helm. He ripped it off and crawled along the listing deck until the water was only neck deep. A groaning filled the air, like the death cries of some enormous beast. The ship, he had time to think, the ship's about to tear loose. The broken galleys were ripping apart, the bridge breaking apart. No sooner had he come to that realization than he heard a sudden crack, loud as thunder, the deck lurched beneath him, and he slid back down into the water.

The list was so steep he had to climb back up, hauling himself along a snapped line inch by bloody inch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the hulk they'd been tangled with drifting downstream with the current, spinning slowly as men leapt over her side. Some wore Stannis's flaming heart, some Joffrey's stag-and-lion, some other badges, but it seemed to make no matter. Fires were burning upstream and down. On one side of him was a raging battle, a great confusion of bright banners waving above a sea of struggling men, shield walls forming and breaking, mounted knights cutting through the press, dust and mud and blood and smoke. On the other side, the Red Keep loomed high on its hill, spitting fire. They were on the wrong sides, though. For a

moment Tyrion thought he was going mad, that Stannis and the castle had traded places. How could Stannis cross to the north bank? Belatedly he realized that the deck was turning, and somehow he had gotten spun about, so castle and battle had changed sides. Battle, what battle, if Stannis hasn't crossed who is he fighting? Tyrion was too tired to make sense of it. His shoulder ached horribly, and when he reached up to rub it he saw the arrow, and remembered. I have to get off this ship. Downstream was nothing but a wall of fire, and if the wreck broke loose the current would take him right into it.

Someone was calling his name faintly through the din of battle. Tyrion tried to shout back. "Here! Here, I'm here, help me!" His voice sounded so thin he could scarcely hear himself. He pulled himself up the slanting deck, and grabbed for the rail. The hull slammed into the next galley over and rebounded so violently he was almost knocked into the water. Where had all his strength gone? It was all he could do to hang on.

"MY LORD! TAKE MY HAND! MY LORD TYRION!"

There on the deck of the next ship, across a widening gulf of black water, stood Ser Mandon Moore, a hand extended. Yellow and green fire shone against the white of his armor, and his lobstered gauntlet was sticky with blood, but Tyrion reached for it all the same, wishing his arms were longer. It was only at the very last, as their fingers brushed across the gap, that something niggled at him... Ser Mandon was holding out his left hand, why...

Was that why he reeled backward, or did he see the sword after all? He would never know. The point slashed just beneath his eyes, and he felt its cold hard touch and then a blaze of pain. His head spun around as if he'd been slapped. The shock of the cold water was a second slap more jolting than the first. He flailed for something to grab on to, knowing that once he went down he was not like to come back up. Somehow his hand found the splintered end of a broken oar. Clutching it tight as a desperate lover, he shinnied up foot by foot. His eyes were full of water, his mouth was full of blood, and his head throbbed horribly. Gods give me strength to reach the deck... There was nothing else, only the oar, the water, the deck.

Finally he rolled over the side and lay breathless and exhausted, flat on his back. Balls of green and orange flame crackled overhead, leaving streaks between the stars. He had a moment to think how pretty it was before Ser Mandon blocked out the view. The knight was a white steel shadow, his eyes shining darkly behind his helm. Tyrion had no more strength than a rag doll. Ser Mandon put the point of his sword to the hollow of his throat and curled both hands around the hilt.

And suddenly he lurched to the left, staggering into the rail. Wood split, and Ser Mandon Moore vanished with a shout and a splash. An instant later, the hulls came slamming together again, so hard the deck seemed to jump. Then someone was kneeling over him. "Jaime?" he croaked, almost choking on the blood that filled his mouth. Who else would save him, if not his brother?

"Be still, my lord, you're hurt bad." A boy's voice, that makes no sense, thought Tyrion. It sounded almost like Pod.

SANSA

When Ser Lancel Lannister told the queen that the battle was lost, she turned her empty wine cup in her hands and said, “Tell my brother, ser.” Her voice was distant, as if the news were of no great interest to her.

“Your brother’s likely dead.” Ser Lancel’s surcoat was soaked with the blood seeping out under his arm. When he had arrived in the hall, the sight of him had made some of the guests scream. “He was on the bridge of boats when it broke apart, we think. Ser Mandon’s likely gone as well, and no one can find the Hound. Gods be damned, Cersei, why did you have them fetch Joffrey back to the castle? The gold cloaks are throwing down their spears and running, hundreds of them. When they saw the king leaving, they lost all heart. The whole Blackwater’s awash with wrecks and fire and corpses, but we could have held it-”

Osney Kettleblack pushed past him. “There’s fighting on both sides of the river now, Y’Grace. It may be that some of Stannis’s lords are fighting each other, no one’s sure, it’s all confused over there. The Hound’s gone, no one knows where, and Ser Balon’s fallen back inside the city. The riverside’s theirs. They’re ramming at the King’s Gate again, and Ser Lancel’s right, your men are deserting the walls and killing their own officers. There’s mobs at the Iron Gate and the Gate of the Gods fighting to get out, and Flea Bottom’s one great drunken riot.”

Gods be good, Sansa thought, it is happening, Joffrey’s lost his head and so have I. She looked for Ser Ilyn, but the King’s justice was not to be seen. I can feel him, though. He’s close, I’ll not escape him, he’ll have my head.

Strangely calm, the queen turned to his brother Osfryd. “Raise the drawbridge and bar the doors. No one enters or leaves Maegor’s without my leave.”

“What about them women who went to pray?”

“They chose to leave my protection. Let them pray; perhaps the gods will defend them. Where’s my son?”

“The castle gatehouse. He wanted to command the crossbowmen. There’s a mob howling outside, half of them gold cloaks who came with him when we left the Mud Gate.”

“Bring him inside Maegor’s now”

“No!” Lancel was so angry he forgot to keep his voice down. Heads turned toward them as he shouted, “We’ll have the Mud Gate all over again. Let him stay where he is, he’s the king-”

“He’s my son.” Cersei Lannister rose to her feet. “You claim to be a Lannister as well, cousin, prove it. Osfryd, why are you standing there? Now means today.”

Osfryd Kettleblack hurried from the hall, his brother with him. Many of the guests were rushing out as well. Some of the women were weeping, some praying. Others simply remained at the tables and called for more wine. “Cersei,” Ser Lancel pleaded, “if we lose the castle, Joffrey will be killed in any case, you know that. Let him stay, I’ll keep him by me, I swear-”

“Get out of my way.” Cersei slammed her open palm into his wound. Ser Lancel cried out in pain and almost fainted as the queen swept from the room. She spared Sansa not so much as a glance. She’s forgotten me. Ser Ilyn will kill me and she won’t even think about it.

“Oh, gods,” an old woman wailed. “We’re lost, the battle’s lost, she’s running.” Several children were crying. They can smell the fear. Sansa found herself alone on the dais. Should she stay here, or run after the queen and plead for her life?

She never knew why she got to her feet, but she did. “Don’t be afraid,” she told them loudly. “The queen has raised the drawbridge. This is the safest place in the city. There’s thick walls, the moat, the spikes...”

“What’s happened?” demanded a woman she knew slightly, the wife of a lesser lordling. “What did Osney tell her? Is the king hurt, has the city fallen?”

“Tell us,” someone else shouted. one woman asked about her father, another her son.

Sansa raised her hands for quiet. “Joffrey’s come back to the castle. He’s not hurt. They’re still fighting, that’s all I know, they’re fighting bravely. The queen will be back soon.” The last was a lie, but she had to soothe them. She noticed the fools standing under the galley. “Moon Boy, make us laugh.”

Moon Boy did a cartwheel, and vaulted on top of a table. He grabbed up four wine cups and began to juggle them. Every so often one of them would come down and smash him in the head. A few nervous laughs echoed through the hall. Sansa went to Ser Lancel and knelt beside him. His wound was bleeding afresh where the queen had struck him. “Madness,” he gasped. “Gods, the Imp was right, was right...”

“Help him,” Sansa commanded two of the serving men. One just looked at her and ran, flagon and all. Other servants were leaving the hall as well, but she could not help that. Together, Sansa and the serving man got the wounded knight back on his feet. “Take him to Maester Frenken.” Lancel was one of them, yet somehow she still could not bring herself to wish him dead. I am soft and weak and stupid, just as Joffrey says. I should be killing him, not helping him.

The torches had begun to burn low, and one or two had flickered out. No one troubled to replace them. Cersei did not return. Ser Dontos climbed the dais while all eyes were on the other fool. “Go back to your bedchamber, sweet Jonquil,” he whispered. “Lock yourself in, you’ll be safer there. I’ll come for you when the battle’s done.”

Someone will come for me, Sansa thought, but will it be you, or will it be Ser Ilyn? For a mad moment she thought of begging Dontos to defend her. He had been a knight too, trained with the sword and sworn to defend the weak. No. He has not the courage, or the skill. I would only be killing him as well.

It took all the strength she had in her to walk slowly from the Queen’s Ballroom when she wanted so badly to run. When she reached the steps, she did run, up and around until she was breathless and dizzy. One of the guards knocked into her on the stair. A jeweled wine cup and a pair of silver candlesticks spilled out of the crimson cloak he’d wrapped them in and went clattering down the steps. He hurried after them, paying Sansa no mind once he decided she was not going to try and take his loot.

Her bedchamber was black as pitch. Sansa barred the door and fumbled through the dark to the window. When she ripped back the drapes, her breath caught in her throat.

The southern sky was aswirl with glowing, shifting colors, the reflections of the great fires that burned below. Baleful green tides moved against the bellies of the clouds, and pools of orange light spread out across the heavens. The reds and yellows of common flame warred against the emeralds and jades of wildfire, each color flaring and then fading, birthing armies of short-lived shadows to die again an instant later. Green dawns gave way to orange dusks in half a heartbeat. The air itself smelled burnt, the way a soup kettle sometimes smelled if it was left on the fire too long and all the soup boiled away. Embers drifted through the night air like swarms of fireflies.

Sansa backed away from the window, retreating toward the safety of her bed. I'll go to sleep, she told herself, and when I wake it will be a new day, and the sky will be blue again. The fighting will be done and someone will tell me whether I'm to live or die. "Lady," she whimpered softly, wondering if she would meet her wolf again when she was dead.

Then something stirred behind her, and a hand reached out of the dark and grabbed her wrist. Sansa opened her mouth to scream, but another hand clamped down over her face, smothering her. His fingers were rough and callused, and sticky with blood. "Little bird. I knew you'd come." The voice was a drunken rasp.

Outside, a swirling lance of jade light spit at the stars, filling the room with green glare. She saw him for a moment, all black and green, the blood on his face dark as tar, his eyes glowing like a dog's in the sudden glare. Then the light faded and he was only a hulking darkness in a stained white cloak.

"If you scream I'll kill you. Believe that." He took his hand from her mouth. Her breath was coming ragged. The Hound had a flagon of wine on her bedside table. He took a long pull.

"Don't you want to ask who's winning the battle, little bird?"

"Who?" she said, too frightened to defy him.

The Hound laughed. "I only know who's lost. Me."

He is drunker than I've ever seen him. He was sleeping in my bed. What does he want here?

"What have you lost?"

"All." The burnt half of his face was a mask of dried blood. "Bloody dwarf. Should have killed him. Years ago."

"He's dead, they say."

"Dead? No. Bugger that. I don't want him dead." He cast the empty flagon aside. "I want him burned. If the gods are good, they'll burn him, but I won't be here to see. I'm going."

"Going?" She tried to wriggle free, but his grasp was iron.

"The little bird repeats whatever she hears. Going, yes."

"Where will you go?"

"Away from here. Away from the fires. Go out the Iron Gate, I suppose. North somewhere, anywhere."

"You won't get out," Sansa said. "The queen's closed up Maegor's, and the city gates are shut as well."

"Not to me. I have the white cloak. And I have this." He patted the pommel of his sword. "The man who tries to stop me is a dead man. Unless he's on fire." He laughed bitterly.

“Why did you come here?”

“You promised me a song, little bird. Have you forgotten?”

She didn't know what he meant. She couldn't sing for him now, here, with the sky aswirl with fire and men dying in their hundreds and their thousands. “I can't,” she said. “Let me go, you're scaring me.”

“Everything scares you. Look at me. Look at me.”

The blood masked the worst of his scars, but his eyes were white and wide and terrifying. The burnt corner of his mouth twitched and twitched again. Sansa could smell him; a stink of sweat and sour wine and stale vomit, and over it all the reek of blood, blood, blood.

“I could keep you safe,” he rasped. “They're all afraid of me. No one would hurt you again, or I'd kill them.” He yanked her closer, and for a moment she thought he meant to kiss her. He was too strong to fight. She closed her eyes, wanting it to be over, but nothing happened. “Still can't bear to look, can you?” she heard him say. He gave her arm a hard wrench, pulling her around and shoving her down onto the bed. “I'll have that song. Florian and Jonquil, you said.” His dagger was out, poised at her throat. “Sing, little bird. Sing for your little life.”

Her throat was dry and tight with fear, and every song she had ever known had fled from her mind. Please don't kill me, she wanted to scream, please don't. She could feel him twisting the point, pushing it into her throat, and she almost closed her eyes again, but then she remembered. It was not the song of Florian and Jonquil, but it was a song. Her voice sounded small and thin and tremulous in her ears.

Gentle Mother, font of mercy, save our sons from war, we pray, stay the swords and stay the arrows, let them know a better day. Gentle Mother, strength of women, help our daughters through this fray, soothe the wrath and tame the fury, teach us all a kinder way.

She had forgotten the other verses. When her voice trailed off, she feared he might kill her, but after a moment the Hound took the blade from her throat, never speaking.

Some instinct made her lift her hand and cup his cheek with her fingers. The room was too dark for her to see him, but she could feel the stickiness of the blood, and a wetness that was not blood. “Little bird,” he said once more, his voice raw and harsh as steel on stone. Then he rose from the bed. Sansa heard cloth ripping, followed by the softer sound of retreating footsteps.

When she crawled out of bed, long moments later, she was alone. She found his cloak on the floor, twisted up tight, the white wool stained by blood and fire. The sky outside was darker by then, with only a few pale green ghosts dancing against the stars. A chill wind was blowing, banging the shutters. Sansa was cold. She shook out the torn cloak and huddled beneath it on the floor, shivering.

How long she stayed there she could not have said, but after a time she heard a bell ringing, far off across the city. The sound was a deepthroated bronze booming, coming faster with each knell. Sansa was wondering what it might mean when a second bell joined in, and a third, their voices calling across the hills and hollows, the alleys and towers, to every corner of King's Landing. She threw off the cloak and went to her window.

The first faint hint of dawn was visible in the east, and the Red Keep's own bells were ringing now, joining in the swelling river of sound that flowed from the seven crystal towers of the Great Sept of Baelor. They had rung the bells when King Robert died, she remembered, but this was different, no slow dolorous death knell but a joyful thunder. She could hear men shouting in the streets as well, and something that could only be cheers.

It was Ser Dontos who brought her the word. He staggered through her open door, wrapped her in his flabby arms, and whirled her around and around the room, whooping so incoherently that Sansa understood not a word of it. He was as drunk as the Hound had been, but in him it was a dancing happy drunk. She was breathless and dizzy when he let her down. "What is it?" She clutched at a bedpost. "What's happened? Tell me! "

"It's done! Done! Done! The city is saved. Lord Stannis is dead , Lord Stannis is fled, no one knows, no one cares, his host is broken, the danger's done. Slaughtered, scattered, or gone over, they say. Oh, the bright banners! The banners, Jonquil, the banners! Do you have any wine? We ought to drink to this day, yes. It means you're safe, don't you see?"

"Tell me what's happened!" Sansa shook him.

Ser Dontos laughed and hopped from one leg to the other, almost falling. "They came up through the ashes while the river was burning. The river, Stannis was neck deep in the river, and they took him from the rear. Oh, to be a knight again, to have been part of it! His own men hardly fought, they say. Some ran but more bent the knee and went over, shouting for Lord Renly! What must Stannis have thought when he heard that? I had it from Osney Kettleblack who had it from Ser Osmund, but Ser Balon's back now and his men say the same, and the gold cloaks as well. We're delivered, sweetling! They came up the roseroad and along the riverbank, through all the fields Stannis had burned, the ashes puffing up around their boots and turning all their armor grey, but oh! the banners must have been bright, the golden rose and golden lion and all the others, the Marbrand tree and the Rowan, Tarly's huntsman and Redwyne's grapes and Lady Oakheart's leaf. All the westermen, all the power of Highgarden and Casterly Rock! Lord Tywin himself had their right wing on the north side of the river, with Randyll Tarly commanding the center and Mace Tyrell the left, but the vanguard won the fight. They plunged through Stannis like a lance through a pumpkin, every man of them howling like some demon in steel. And do you know who led the vanguard? Do you? Do you? Do you? "

"Robb?" It was too much to be hoped, but...

"It was Lord Renly! Lord Renly in his green armor, with the fires shimmering off his golden antlers! Lord Renly with his tall spear in his hand! They say he killed Ser Guyard Morrigen himself in single combat, and a dozen other great knights as well. It was Renly, it was Renly, it was Renly! Oh! the banners, darling Sansa! Oh! to be a knight!"

DAENERYS

She was breaking her fast on a bowl of cold shrimp-and-persimmon soup when Irri brought her a Qartheen gown, an airy confection of ivory samite patterned with seed pearls. "Take it away," Dany said. "The docks are no place for lady's finery."

If the Milk Men thought her such a savage, she would dress the part for them. When she went to the stables, she wore faded sandsilk pants and woven grass sandals. Her small breasts moved freely beneath a painted Dothraki vest, and a curved dagger hung from her medallion belt. Jhiqui had braided her hair Dothraki fashion, and fastened a silver bell to the end of the braid. "I have won no victories," she tried telling her handmaid when the bell tinkled softly.

Jhiqui disagreed. "You burned the maegi in their house of dust and sent their souls to hell."

That was Drogon's victory, not mine, Dany wanted to say, but she held her tongue. The Dothraki would esteem her all the more for a few bells in her hair. She chimed as she mounted her silver mare, and again with every stride, but neither Ser Jorah nor her bloodriders made mention of it. To guard her people and her dragons in her absence, she chose Rakharo. Jhogo and Aggo would ride with her to the waterfront.

They left the marble palaces and fragrant gardens behind and made their way through a poorer part of the city where modest brick houses turned blind walls to the street. There were fewer horses and camels to be seen, and a dearth of palanquins, but the streets teemed with children, beggars, and skinny dogs the color of sand. Pale men in dusty linen skirts stood beneath arched doorways to watch them pass. They know who I am, and they do not love me. Dany could tell from the way they looked at her.

Ser Jorah would sooner have tucked her inside her palanquin, safely hidden behind silken curtains, but she refused him. She had reclined too long on satin cushions, letting oxen bear her hither and yon. At least when she rode she felt as though she was getting somewhere.

It was not by choice that she sought the waterfront. She was fleeing again. Her whole life had been one long flight, it seemed. She had begun running in her mother's womb, and never once stopped. How often had she and Viserys stolen away in the black of night, a bare step ahead of the Usurper's hired knives? But it was run or die. Xaro had learned that Pyat Pree was gathering the surviving warlocks together to work ill on her.

Dany had laughed when he told her. "Was it not you who told me warlocks were no more than old soldiers, vainly boasting of forgotten deeds and lost prowess?"

Xaro looked troubled. "And so it was, then. But now? I am less certain. It is said that the glass candles are burning in the house of Urrathon Night-Walker, that have not burned in a hundred years. Ghost grass grows in the Garden of Gehane, phantom tortoises have been seen carrying messages between the windowless houses on Warlock's Way, and all the rats in the city are chewing off their tails. The wife of Mathos Mallarawan, who once mocked a warlock's drab moth-eaten robe, has gone mad and will wear no clothes at all. Even fresh-washed silks make her feel as though a thousand insects were crawling on her skin. And Blind Sybassion the Eater of Eyes can see again, or so his slaves do swear. A man must wonder." He sighed. "These are

strange times in Qarth. And strange times are bad for trade. It grieves me to say so, yet it might be best if you left Qarth entirely, and sooner rather than later.” Xaro stroked her fingers reassuringly. “You need not go alone, though. You have seen dark visions in the Palace of Dust, but Xaro has dreamed brighter dreams. I see you happily abed, with our child at your breast. Sail with me around the Jade Sea, and we can yet make it so! It is not too late. Give me a son, my sweet song of joy!”

Give you a dragon, you mean. “I will not wed you, Xaro.”

His face had grown cold at that. “Then go.”

“But where?”

“Somewhere far from here.”

Well, perhaps it was time. The people of her khalasar had welcomed the chance to recover from the ravages of the red waste, but now that they were plump and rested once again, they began to grow unruly. Dothraki were not accustomed to staying long in one place. They were a warrior people, not made for cities. Perhaps she had lingered in Qarth too long, seduced by its comforts and its beauties. It was a city that always promised more than it would give you, it seemed to her, and her welcome here had turned sour since the House of the Undying had collapsed in a great gout of smoke and flame. Overnight the Qartheen had come to remember that dragons were dangerous. No longer did they vie with each other to give her gifts. Instead the Tourmaline Brotherhood had called openly for her expulsion, and the Ancient Guild of Spicers for her death. It was all Xaro could do to keep the Thirteen from joining them.

But where am I to go? Ser Jorah proposed that they journey farther east, away from her enemies in the Seven Kingdoms. Her bloodriders would sooner have returned to their great grass sea, even if it meant braving the red waste again. Dany herself had toyed with the idea of settling in Vaes Tolorro until her dragons grew great and strong. But her heart was full of doubts. Each of these felt wrong, somehow... and even when she decided where to go, the question of how she would get there remained troublesome.

Xaro Xhoan Daxos would be no help to her, she knew that now. For all his professions of devotion, he was playing his own game, not unlike Pyat Pree. The night he asked her to leave, Dany had begged one last favor of him. “An army, is it?” Xaro asked. “A kettle of gold? A galley, perhaps?”

Dany blushed. She hated begging. “A ship, yes.”

Xaro’s eyes had glittered as brightly as the jewels in his nose. “I am a trader, Khaleesi. So perhaps we should speak no more of giving, but rather of trade. For one of your dragons, you shall have ten of the finest ships in my fleet. You need only say that one sweet word.”

“No,” she said.

“Alas,” Xaro sobbed, “that was not the word I meant.”

“Would you ask a mother to sell one of her children?”

“Whyever not? They can always make more. Mothers sell their children every day.”

“Not the Mother of Dragons.”

“Not even for twenty ships?”

“Not for a hundred.”

His mouth curled downward. “I do not have a hundred. But you have three dragons. Grant me one, for all my kindnesses. You will still have two and thirty ships as well.”

Thirty ships would be enough to land a small army on the shore of Westeros. But I do not have a small army. “How many ships do you own, Xaro?”

“Eighty-three, if one does not count my pleasure barge.”

“And your colleagues in the Thirteen?”

“Among us all, perhaps a thousand.”

“And the Spicers and the Tourmaline Brotherhood?”

“Their trifling fleets are of no account.”

“Even so,” she said, “tell me.”

“Twelve or thirteen hundred for the Spicers. No more than eight hundred for the Brotherhood.”

“And the Asshai’i, the Braavosi, the Summer islanders, the Ibbenese, and all the other peoples who sail the great salt sea, how many ships do they have? All together?”

“Many and more,” he said irritably. “What does this matter?”

“I am trying to set a price on one of the three living dragons in the world.” Dany smiled at him sweetly. “It seems to me that one-third of all the ships in the world would be fair.”

Xaro’s tears ran down his cheeks on either side of his jewel-encrusted nose. “Did I not warn you not to enter the Palace of Dust? This is the very thing I feared. The whispers of the warlocks have made you as mad as Mallarawan’s wife. A third of all the ships in the world? Pah. Pah, I say. Pah.”

Dany had not seen him since. His seneschal brought her messages, each cooler than the last. She must quit his house. He was done feeding her and her people. He demanded the return of his gifts, which she had accepted in bad faith. Her only consolation was that at least she’d had the great good sense not to marry him.

The warlocks whispered of three treasons... once for blood and once for gold and once for love. The first traitor was surely Mirri Maz Duur, who had murdered Khal Drogo and their unborn son to avenge her people. Could Pyat Pree and Xaro Xhoan Daxos be the second and the third? She did not think so. What Pyat did was not for gold, and Xaro had never truly loved her.

The streets grew emptier as they passed through a district given over to gloomy stone warehouses. Aggo went before her and Jhogo behind, leaving Ser Jorah Mormont at her side. Her bell rang softly, and Dany found her thoughts returning to the Palace of Dust once more, as the tongue returns to a space left by a missing tooth. Child of three, they had called her, daughter of death, slayer of lies, bride of fire. So many threes. Three fires, three mounts to ride, three treasons. “The dragon has three heads,” she sighed. “Do you know what that means, Jorah?”

“Your Grace? The sigil of House Targaryen is a three-headed dragon, red on black.”

“I know that. But there are no three-headed dragons.”

“The three heads were Aegon and his sisters.”

“Visenya and Rhaenys,” she recalled. “I am descended from Aegon and Rhaenys through their son Aenys and their grandson Jaehaerys.”

“Blue lips speak only lies, isn’t that what Xaro told you? Why do you care what the warlocks whispered? All they wanted was to suck the life from you, you know that now.”

“Perhaps,” she said reluctantly. “Yet the things I saw.”

“A dead man in the prow of a ship, a blue rose, a banquet of blood... what does any of it mean, Khaleesi? A mummer’s dragon, you said. What is a mummer’s dragon, pray?”

“A cloth dragon on poles,” Dany explained. “Mummers use them in their follies, to give the heroes something to fight.”

Ser Jorah frowned.

Dany could not let it go. “His is the song of ice and fire, my brother said. I’m certain it was my brother. Not Viserys, Rhaegar. He had a harp with silver strings.”

Ser Jorah’s frown deepened until his eyebrows came together. “Prince Rhaegar played such a harp,” he conceded. “You saw him?”

She nodded. “There was a woman in a bed with a babe at her breast. My brother said the babe was the prince that was promised and told her to name him Aegon.”

“Prince Aegon was Rhaegar’s heir by Elia of Dorne,” Ser Jorah said. “But if he was this prince that was promised, the promise was broken along with his skull when the Lannisters dashed his head against a wall.”

“I remember,” Dany said sadly. “They murdered Rhaegar’s daughter as well, the little princess. Rhaenys, she was named, like Aegon’s sister. There was no Visenya, but he said the dragon has three heads. What is the song of ice and fire?”

“It’s no song I’ve ever heard.”

“I went to the warlocks hoping for answers, but instead they’ve left me with a hundred new questions.”

By then there were people in the streets once more. “Make way,” Aggo shouted, while Jhogo sniffed at the air suspiciously. “I smell it, Khaleesi,” he called. “The poison water.” The Dothraki distrusted the sea and all that moved upon it. Water that a horse could not drink was water they wanted no part of. They will learn, Dany resolved. I braved their sea with Khal Drogo. Now they can brave mine.

Qarth was one of the world’s great ports, its great sheltered harbor a riot of color and clangor and strange smells. Winesinks, warehouses, and gaming dens lined the streets, cheek by jowl with cheap brothels and the temples of peculiar gods. Cutpurses, cutthroats, spellsellers, and moneychangers mingled with every crowd. The waterfront was one great marketplace where the buying and selling went on all day and all night, and goods might be had for a fraction of what they cost at the bazaar, if a man did not ask where they came from. Wized old women bent like hunchbacks sold flavored waters and goat’s milk from glazed ceramic jugs strapped to their shoulders. Seamen from half a hundred nations wandered amongst the stalls, drinking spiced liquors and trading jokes in queer-sounding tongues. The air smelled of salt and frying fish, of hot tar and honey, of incense and oil and sperm.

Aggo gave an urchin a copper for a skewer of honey-roasted mice and nibbled them as he rode. Jhogo bought a handful of fat white cherries. Elsewhere they saw beautiful bronze daggers for

sale, dried squids and carved onyx, a potent magical elixir made of virgin's milk and shade of the evening, even dragon's eggs which looked suspiciously like painted rocks.

As they passed the long stone quays reserved for the ships of the Thirteen, she saw chests of saffron, frankincense, and pepper being off-loaded from Xaro's ornate Vermillion Kiss. Beside her, casks of wine, bales of sourleaf, and pallets of striped hides were being trundled up the gangplank onto the *Bride in Azure*, to sail on the evening tide. Farther along, a crowd had gathered around the Spicer galley *Sunblaze* to bid on slaves. It was well known that the cheapest place to buy a slave was right off the ship, and the banners floating from her masts proclaimed that the *Sunblaze* had just arrived from Astapor on Slaver's Bay.

Dany would get no help from the Thirteen, the Tourmaline Brotherhood, or the Ancient Guild of Spicers. She rode her silver past several miles of their quays, docks, and storehouses, all the way out to the far end of the horseshoe-shaped harbor where the ships from the Summer islands, Westeros, and the Nine Free Cities were permitted to dock.

She dismounted beside a gaming pit where a basilisk was tearing a big red dog to pieces amidst a shouting ring of sailors. "Aggo, Jhogo, you will guard the horses while Ser Jorah and I speak to the captains."

"As you say, Khaleesi. We will watch you as you go."

It was good to hear men speaking Valyrian once more, and even the Common Tongue, Dany thought as they approached the first ship. Sailors, dockworkers, and merchants alike gave way before her, not knowing what to make of this slim young girl with silver-gold hair who dressed in the Dothraki fashion and walked with a knight at her side. Despite the heat of the day, Ser Jorah wore his green wool surcoat over chainmail, the black bear of Mormont sewn on his chest. But neither her beauty nor his size and strength would serve with the men whose ships they needed.

"You require passage for a hundred Dothraki, all their horses, yourself and this knight, and three dragons?" said the captain of the great cog *Ardent Friend* before he walked away laughing. When she told a Lyseni on the *Trumpeteer* that she was Daenerys Stormborn, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, he gave her a deadface look and said, "Aye, and I'm Lord Tywin Lannister and shit gold every night." The cargomaster of the Myrish galley *Silken Spirit* opined that dragons were too dangerous at sea, where any stray breath of flame might set the rigging afire. The owner of *Lord Faro's Belly* would risk dragons, but not Dothraki. "I'll have no such godless savages in my Belly, I'll not." The two brothers who captained the sister ships *Quicksilver* and *Greyhound* seemed sympathetic and invited them into the cabin for a glass of Arbor red. They were so courteous that Dany was hopeful for a time, but in the end the price they asked was far beyond her means, and might have been beyond Xaro's. *Pinchbottom Petto* and *Sloe-Eyed Maid* were too small for her needs, *Bravo* was bound for the Jade Sea, and Magister Manolo scarce looked seaworthy.

As they made their way toward the next quay, Ser Jorah laid a hand against the small of her back. "Your Grace. You are being followed. No, do not turn." He guided her gently toward a

brass-seller's booth. "This is a noble work, my queen," he proclaimed loudly, lifting a large platter for her inspection. "See how it shines in the sun?"

The brass was polished to a high sheen. Dany could see her face in it... and when Ser Jorah angled it to the right, she could see behind her. "I see a fat brown man and an older man with a staff. Which is it?"

"Both of them," Ser Jorah said. "They have been following us since we left Quicksilver."

The ripples in the brass stretched the strangers queerly, making one man seem long and gaunt, the other immensely squat and broad. "A most excellent brass, great lady," the merchant exclaimed. "Bright as the sun! And for the Mother of Dragons, only thirty honors."

The platter was worth no more than three. "Where are my guards?" Dany declared. "This man is trying to rob me!" For Jorah, she lowered her voice and spoke in the Common Tongue. "They may not mean me ill. Men have looked at women since time began, perhaps it is no more than that."

The brass-seller ignored their whispers. "Thirty? Did I say thirty? Such a fool I am. The price is twenty honors."

"All the brass in this booth is not worth twenty honors," Dany told him as she studied the reflections. The old man had the look of Westeros about him, and the brown-skinned one must weigh twenty stone. The Usurper offered a lordship to the man who kills me, and these two are far from home. Or could they be creatures of the warlocks, meant to take me unawares?

"Ten, Khaleesi, because you are so lovely. Use it for a looking glass. Only brass this fine could capture such beauty."

"It might serve to carry nightsoil. If you threw it away, I might pick it up, so long as I did not need to stoop. But pay for it?" Dany shoved the platter back into his hands. "Worms have crawled up your nose and eaten your wits."

"Eight honors," he cried. "My wives will beat me and call me fool, but I am a helpless child in your hands. Come, eight, that is less than it is worth."

"What do I need with dull brass when Xaro Xhoan Daxos feeds me off plates of gold?" As she turned to walk off, Dany let her glance sweep over the strangers. The brown man was near as wide as he'd looked in the platter, with a gleaming bald head and the smooth cheeks of a eunuch. A long curving arakh was thrust through the sweat-stained yellow silk of his bellyband. Above the silk, he was naked but for an absurdly tiny iron-studded vest. Old scars crisscrossed his tree-trunk arms, huge chest, and massive belly, pale against his nut-brown skin.

The other man wore a traveler's cloak of undyed wool, the hood thrown back. Long white hair fell to his shoulders, and a silky white beard covered the lower half of his face. He leaned his weight on a hardwood staff as tall as he was. Only fools would stare so openly if they meant me harm. All the same, it might be prudent to head back toward Jhogo and Aggo. "The old man does not wear a sword," she said to Jorah in the Common Tongue as she drew him away.

The brass merchant came hopping after them. "Five honors, for five it is yours, it was meant for you."

Ser Jorah said, "A hardwood staff can crack a skull as well as any mace."

“Four! I know you want it!” He danced in front of them, scampering backward as he thrust the platter at their faces.

“Do they follow?”

“Lift that up a little higher,” the knight told the merchant. “Yes. The old man pretends to linger at a potter’s stall, but the brown one has eyes only for you.”

“Two honors! Two! Two!” The merchant was panting heavily from the effort of running backward.

“Pay him before he kills himself,” Dany told Ser Jorah, wondering what she was going to do with a huge brass platter. She turned back as he reached for his coins, intending to put an end to this mummer’s farce. The blood of the dragon would not be herded through the bazaar by an old man and a fat eunuch.

A Qartheen stepped into her path. “Mother of Dragons, for you.” He knelt and thrust a jewel box into her face.

Dany took it almost by reflex. The box was carved wood, its mother-of-pearl lid inlaid with jasper and chalcedony. “You are too generous.” She opened it. Within was a glittering green scarab carved from onyx and emerald. Beautiful, she thought. This will help pay for our passage. As she reached inside the box, the man said, “I am so sorry,” but she hardly heard.

The scarab unfolded with a hiss.

Dany caught a glimpse of a malign black face, almost human, and an arched tail dripping venom... and then the box flew from her hand in pieces, turning end over end. Sudden pain twisted her fingers. As she cried out and clutched her hand, the brass merchant let out a shriek, a woman screamed, and suddenly the Qartheen were shouting and pushing each other aside. Ser Jorah slammed past her, and Dany stumbled to one knee. She heard the hiss again. The old man drove the butt of his staff into the ground, Aggo came riding through an eggseller’s stall and vaulted from his saddle, Jhogo’s whip cracked overhead, Ser Jorah slammed the eunuch over the head with the brass platter, sailors and whores and merchants were fleeing or shouting or both...

“Your Grace, a thousand pardons.” The old man knelt. “It’s dead. Did I break your hand?”

She closed her fingers, wincing. “I don’t think so.”

“I had to knock it away,” he started, but her bloodriders were on him before he could finish. Aggo kicked his staff away and Jhogo seized him round the shoulders, forced him to his knees, and pressed a dagger to his throat. “Khaleesi, we saw him strike you. Would you see the color of his blood? “

“Release him.” Dany climbed to her feet. “Look at the bottom of his staff, blood of my blood.” Ser Jorah had been shoved off his feet by the eunuch. She ran between them as arakh and longsword both came flashing from their sheaths. “Put down your steel! Stop it!”

“Your Grace?” Mormont lowered his sword only an inch. “These men attacked you.”

“They were defending me.” Dany snapped her hand to shake the sting from her fingers. “It was the other one, the Qartheen.” When she looked around he was gone. “He was a Sorrowful Man. There was a mantichore in that jewel box he gave me. This man knocked it out of my hand.” The

brass merchant was still rolling on the ground. She went to him and helped him to his feet.

“Were you stung?”

“No, good lady,” he said, shaking, “or else I would be dead. But it touched me, aieeee, when it fell from the box it landed on my arm.” He had soiled himself, she saw, and no wonder.

She gave him a silver for his trouble and sent him on his way before she turned back to the old man with the white beard. “Who is it that I owe my life to?”

“You owe me nothing, Your Grace. I am called Arstan, though Belwas named me Whitebeard on the voyage here.” Though Jhogo had released him the old man remained on one knee. Aggo picked up his staff, turned it over, cursed softly in Dothraki, scraped the remains of the manticores off on a stone, and handed it back.

“And who is Belwas?” she asked.

The huge brown eunuch swaggered forward, sheathing his arakh. “I am Belwas. Strong Belwas they name me in the fighting pits of Meereen. Never did I lose.” He slapped his belly, covered with scars. “I let each man cut me once, before I kill him. Count the cuts and you will know how many Strong Belwas has slain.”

Dany had no need to count his scars; there were many, she could see at a glance. “And why are you here, Strong Belwas?”

“From Meereen I am sold to Qohor, and then to Pentos and the fat man with sweet stink in his hair. He it was who send Strong Belwas back across the sea, and old Whitebeard to serve him.”

The fat man with sweet stink in his hair “Illyrio?” she said.

“You were sent by Magister Illyrio?”

“We were, Your Grace,” old Whitebeard replied. “The Magister begs your kind indulgence for sending us in his stead, but he cannot sit a horse as he did in his youth, and sea travel upsets his digestion.” Earlier he had spoken in the Valyrian of the Free Cities, but now he changed to the Common Tongue. “I regret if we caused you alarm. If truth be told, we were not certain, we expected someone more... more...”

“Regal?” Dany laughed. She had no dragon with her, and her raiment was hardly queenly. “You speak the Common Tongue well, Arstan. Are you of Westeros?”

“I am. I was born on the Dornish Marches, Your Grace. As a boy I squired for a knight of Lord Swann’s household.” He held the tall staff upright beside him like a lance in need of a banner.

“Now I squire for Belwas.”

“A bit old for such, aren’t you?” Ser Jorah had shouldered his way to her side, holding the brass platter awkwardly under his arm. Belwas’s hard head had left it badly bent.

“Not too old to serve my liege, Lord Mormont.”

“You know me as well?”

“I saw you fight a time or two. At Lannisport where you near unhorsed the Kingslayer. And on Pyke, there as well. You do not recall, Lord Mormont?”

Ser Jorah frowned. “Your face seems familiar, but there were hundreds at Lannisport and thousands on Pyke. And I am no lord. Bear Island was taken from me. I am but a knight.”

“A knight of my Queensguard.” Dany took his arm. “And my true friend and good counselor.” She studied Arstan’s face. He had a great dignity to him, a quiet strength she liked. “Rise, Arstan Whitebeard. Be welcome, Strong Belwas. Ser Jorah you know. Ko Aggo and Ko Jhogo are blood of my blood. They crossed the red waste with me, and saw my dragons born.”

“Horse boys.” Belwas grinned toothily. “Belwas has killed many horse boys in the fighting pits. They jingle when they die.”

Aggo’s arakh leapt to his hand. “Never have I killed a fat brown man. Belwas will be the first.”

“Sheath your steel, blood of my blood,” said Dany, “this man comes to serve me. Belwas, you will accord all respect to my people, or you will leave my service sooner than you’d wish, and with more scars than when you came.”

The gap-toothed smile faded from the giant’s broad brown face, replaced by a confused scowl. Men did not often threaten Belwas, it would seem, and less so girls a third his size.

Dany gave him a smile, to take a bit of the sting from the rebuke. “Now tell me, what would Magister Illyrio have of me, that he would send you all the way from Pentos?”

“He would have dragons,” said Belwas gruffly, “and the girl who makes them. He would have you.”

“Belwas has the truth of us, Your Grace,” said Arstan. “We were told to find you and bring you back to Pentos. The Seven Kingdoms have need of you. Robert the Usurper is dead, and the realm bleeds. When we set sail from Pentos there were four kings in the land, and no justice to be had.”

Joy bloomed in her heart, but Dany kept it from her face. “I have three dragons,” she said, “and more than a hundred in my khalasar, with all their goods and horses.”

“It is no matter,” boomed Belwas. “We take all. The fat man hires three ships for his little silverhair queen.”

“It is so, Your Grace,” Arstan Whitebeard said. “The great cog Saduleon is berthed at the end of the quay, and the galleys Summer Sun and Foso’s Prank are anchored beyond the breakwater.”

Three heads has the dragon, Dany thought, wondering. “I shall tell my people to make ready to depart at once. But the ships that bring me home must bear different names.”

“As you wish,” said Arstan. “What names would you prefer?”

“Vhagar,” Daenerys told him. “Meraxes. And Balerion. Paint the names on their hulls in golden letters three feet high, Arstan. I want every man who sees them to know the dragons are returned.”

ARYA

The heads had been dipped in tar to slow the rot. Every morning when Arya went to the well to draw fresh water for Roose Bolton's basin, she had to pass beneath them. They faced outward, so she never saw their faces, but she liked to pretend that one of them was Joffrey's. She tried to picture how his pretty face would look dipped in tar. If I was a crow I could fly down and peck off his stupid fat pouty lips.

The heads never lacked for attendants. The carrion crows wheeled about the gatehouse in raucous unkindness and quarreled upon the ramparts over every eye, screaming and cawing at each other and taking to the air whenever a sentry passed along the battlements. Sometimes the maester's ravens joined the feast as well, flapping down from the rookery on wide black wings. When the ravens came the crows would scatter, only to return the moment the larger birds were gone.

Do the ravens remember Maester Tothmure? Arya wondered. Are they sad for him? When they quork at him, do they wonder why he doesn't answer? Perhaps the dead could speak to them in some secret tongue the living could not hear.

Tothmure had been sent to the axe for dispatching birds to Casterly Rock and King's Landing the night Harrenhal had fallen, Lucan the armorer for making weapons for the Lannisters, Goodwife Harra for telling Lady Whent's household to serve them, the steward for giving Lord Tywin the keys to the treasure vault. The cook was spared (some said because he'd made the weasel soup), but stocks were hammered together for pretty Pia and the other women who'd shared their favors with Lannister soldiers. Stripped and shaved, they were left in the middle ward beside the bear pit, free for the use of any man who wanted them.

Three Frey men-at-arms were using them that morning as Arya went to the well. She tried not to look, but she could hear the men laughing. The pail was very heavy once full. She was turning to bring it back to Kingspyre when Goodwife Amabel seized her arm. The water went sloshing over the side onto Amabel's legs. "You did that on purpose," the woman screeched.

"What do you want?" Arya squirmed in her grasp. Amabel had been half-crazed since they'd cut Harra's head off.

"See there?" Amabel pointed across the yard at Pia. "When this northman falls you'll be where she is."

"Let me go." She tried to wrench free, but Amabel only tightened her fingers.

"He will fall too, Harrenhal pulls them all down in the end. Lord Tywin's won now, he'll be marching back with all his power, and then it will be his turn to punish the disloyal. And don't think he won't know what you did!" The old woman laughed. "I may have a turn at you myself. Harra had an old broom, I'll save it for you. The handle's cracked and splintery--"

Arya swung the bucket. The weight of the water made it turn in her hands, so she didn't smash Amabel's head in as she wanted, but the woman let go of her anyway when the water came out and drenched her. "Don't ever touch me," Arya shouted, "or I'll kill you. You get away."

Sopping, Goodwife Amabel jabbed a thin finger at the flayed man on the front of Arya's tunic. "You think you're safe with that little bloody man on your teat, but you're not! The Lannisters are coming! See what happens when they get here."

Three-quarters of the water had splashed out on the ground, so Arya had to return to the well. If I told Lord Bolton what she said, her head would be up next to Harra's before it got dark, she thought as she drew up the bucket again. She wouldn't, though.

Once, when there had been only half as many heads, Gendry had caught Arya looking at them. "Admiring your work?" he asked.

He was angry because he'd liked Lucan, she knew, but it still wasn't fair. "It's Steelshanks Walton's work," she said defensively. "And the Mummers, and Lord Bolton."

"And who gave us all them? You and your weasel soup."

Arya punched his arm. "It was just hot broth. You hated Ser Amory too."

"I hate this lot worse. Ser Amory was fighting for his lord, but the Mummers are sellswords and turncloaks. Half of them can't even speak the Common Tongue. Septon Utt likes little boys, Qyburn does black magic, and your friend Biter eats people."

The worst thing was, she couldn't even say he was wrong. The Brave Companions did most of the foraging for Harrenhal, and Roose Bolton had given them the task of rooting out Lannisters. Vargo Hoat had divided them into four bands, to visit as many villages as possible. He led the largest group himself, and gave the others to his most trusted captains. She had heard Rorge laughing over Lord Vargo's way of finding traitors. All he did was return to places he had visited before under Lord Tywin's banner and seize those who had helped him. Many had been bought with Lannister silver, so the Mummers often returned with bags of coin as well as baskets of heads. "A riddle!" Shagwell would shout gleefully. "If Lord Bolton's goat eats the men who fed Lord Lannister's goat, how many goats are there?"

"One," Arya said when he asked her.

"Now there's a weasel clever as a goat!" the fool tittered.

Rorge and Biter were as bad as the others. Whenever Lord Bolton took a meal with the garrison, Arya would see them there among the rest. Biter gave off a stench like bad cheese, so the Brave Companions made him sit down near the foot of the table where he could grunt and hiss to himself and tear his meat apart with fingers and teeth. He would sniff at Arya when she passed, but it was Rorge who scared her most. He sat up near Faithful Uryswyk, but she could feel his eyes crawling over her as she went about her duties.

Sometimes she wished she had gone off across the narrow sea with Jaqen H'ghar. She still had the stupid coin he'd given her, a piece of iron no larger than a penny and rusted along the rim. One side had writing on it, queer words she could not read. The other showed a man's head, but so worn that all his features had rubbed off. He said it was of great value, but that was probably a lie too, like his name and even his face. That made her so angry that she threw the coin away, but after an hour she got to feeling bad and went and found it again, even though it wasn't worth anything.

She was thinking about the coin as she crossed the Flowstone Yard, struggling with the weight of the water in her pail. “Nan,” a voice called out. “Put down that pail and come help me.”

Elmar Frey was no older than she was, and short for his age besides. He had been rolling a barrel of sand across the uneven stone, and was red-faced from exertion. Arya went to help him. Together they pushed the barrel all the way to the wall and back again, then stood it upright.

She could hear the sand shifting around inside as Elmar pried open the lid and pulled out a chainmail hauberk. “Do you think it’s clean enough?” As Roose Bolton’s squire, it was his task to keep his mail shiny bright.

“You need to shake out the sand. There’s still spots of rust. See?” She pointed. “You’d best do it again.”

“You do it.” Elmar could be friendly when he needed help, but afterward he would always remember that he was a squire and she was only a serving girl. He liked to boast how he was the son of the Lord of the Crossing, not a nephew or a bastard or a grandson but a trueborn son, and on account of that he was going to marry a princess.

Arya didn’t care about his precious princess, and didn’t like him giving her commands. “I have to bring m’lord water for his basin. He’s in his bedchamber being leeches. Not the regular black leeches but the big pale ones.”

Elmar’s eyes got as big as boiled eggs. Leeches terrified him, especially the big pale ones that looked like jelly until they filled up with blood. “I forgot, you’re too skinny to push such a heavy barrel.”

“I forgot, you’re stupid.” Arya picked up the pail. “Maybe you should get leeches too. There’s leeches in the Neck as big as pigs.” She left him there with his barrel.

The lord’s bedchamber was crowded when she entered. Qyburn was in attendance, and dour Walton in his mail shirt and greaves, plus a dozen Freys, all brothers, half brothers, and cousins. Roose Bolton lay abed, naked. Leeches clung to the inside of his arms and legs and dotted his pallid chest, long translucent things that turned a glistening pink as they fed. Bolton paid them no more mind than he did Arya.

“We must not allow Lord Tywin to trap us here at Harrenhal Ser Aenys Frey was saying as Arya filled the washbasin. A grey stooped giant of a man with watery red eyes and huge gnarled hands, Ser Aenys had brought fifteen hundred Frey swords south to Harrenhal, yet it often seemed as if he were helpless to command even his own brothers. “The castle is so large it requires an army to hold it, and once surrounded we cannot feed an army. Nor can we hope to lay in sufficient supplies, The country is ash, the villages given over to wolves, the harvest burnt or stolen. Autumn is on us, yet there is no food in store and none being planted. We live on forage, and if the Lannisters deny that to us, we will be down to rats and shoe leather in a moon’s turn.”

“I do not mean to be besieged here.” Roose Bolton’s voice was so soft that men had to strain to hear it, so his chambers were always strangely hushed.

“What, then?” demanded Ser Jared Frey, who was lean, balding, and pockmarked. “Is Edmure Tully so drunk on his victory that he thinks to give Lord Tywin battle in the open field?”

If he does he'll beat them, Arya thought. He'll beat them as he did on the Red Fork, you'll see. Unnoticed, she went to stand by Qyburn.

"Lord Tywin is many leagues from here," Bolton said calmly. "He has many matters yet to settle at King's Landing. He will not march on Harrenhal for some time."

Ser Aenys shook his head stubbornly. "You do not know the Lannisters as we do, my lord. King Stannis thought that Lord Tywin was a thousand leagues away as well, and it undid him."

The pale man in the bed smiled faintly as the leeches nursed of his blood. "I am not a man to be undone, ser."

"Even if Riverrun marshals all its strength and the Young Wolf wins back from the west, how can we hope to match the numbers Lord Tywin can send against us? When he comes, he will come with far more power than he commanded on the Green Fork. Highgarden has joined itself to Joffrey's cause, I remind you!"

"I had not forgotten."

"I have been Lord Tywin's captive once," said Ser Hosteen, a husky man with a square face who was said to be the strongest of the Freys. "I have no wish to enjoy Lannister hospitality again."

Ser Harys Haigh, who was a Frey on his mother's side, nodded vigorously. "If Lord Tywin could defeat a seasoned man like Stannis Baratheon, what chance will our boy king have against him?" He looked round to his brothers and cousins for support, and several of them muttered agreement.

"Someone must have the courage to say it," Ser Hosteen said. "The war is lost. King Robb must be made to see that."

Roose Bolton studied him with pale eyes. "His Grace has defeated the Lannisters every time he has faced them in battle."

"He has lost the north," insisted Hosteen Frey. "He has lost Winterfell! His brothers are dead..."

For a moment Arya forgot to breathe. Dead? Bran and Rickon, dead? What does he mean? What does he mean about Winterfell, Joffrey could never take Winterfell, never, Robb would never let him. Then she remembered that Robb was not at Winterfell. He was away in the west, and Bran was crippled, and Rickon only four. It took all her strength to remain still and silent, the way Syrio Forel had taught her, to stand there like a stick of furniture. She felt tears gathering in her eyes, and willed them away. It's not true, it can't be true, it's just some Lannister lie.

"Had Stannis won, all might have been different," Ronel Rivers said wistfully. He was one of Lord Walder's bastards.

"Stannis lost," Ser Hosteen said bluntly. "Wishing it were otherwise will not make it so. King Robb must make his peace with the Lannisters. He must put off his crown and bend the knee, little as he may like it."

"And who will tell him so?" Roose Bolton smiled. "It is a fine thing to have so many valiant brothers in such troubled times. I shall think on all you've said."

His smile was dismissal. The Freys made their courtesies and shuffled out, leaving only Qyburn, Steelshanks Walton, and Arya. Lord Bolton beckoned her closer. "I am bled sufficiently. Nan, you may remove the leeches."

"At once, my lord." It was best never to make Roose Bolton ask twice. Arya wanted to ask him what Ser Hosteen had meant about Winterfell, but she dared not. I'll ask Elmar, she thought. Elmar will tell me. The leeches wriggled slowly between her fingers as she plucked them carefully from the lord's body, their pale bodies moist to the touch and distended with blood. They're only leeches, she reminded herself. If I closed my hand, they'd squish between my fingers.

"There is a letter from your lady wife." Qyburn pulled a roll of parchment from his sleeve. Though he wore maester's robes, there was no chain about his neck; it was whispered that he had lost it for dabbling in necromancy.

"You may read it," Bolton said.

The Lady Walda wrote from the Twins almost every day, but all the letters were the same. "I pray for you morn, noon, and night, my sweet lord," she wrote, "and count the days until you share my bed again. Return to me soon, and I will give you many trueborn sons to take the place of your dear Domic and rule the Dreadfort after you." Arya pictured a plump pink baby in a cradle, covered with plump pink leeches.

She brought Lord Bolton a damp washcloth to wipe down his soft hairless body. "I will send a letter of my own," he told the onetime maester.

"To the Lady Walda?"

"To Ser Helman Tallhart."

A rider from Ser Helman had come two days past. Tallhart men had taken the castle of the Darrys, accepting the surrender of its Lannister garrison after a brief siege.

"Tell him to put the captives to the sword and the castle to the torch, by command of the king. Then he is to join forces with Robett Glover and strike east toward Duskendale. Those are rich lands, and hardly touched by the fighting. It is time they had a taste. Glover has lost a castle, and Tallhart a son. Let them take their vengeance on Duskendale."

"I shall prepare the message for your seal, my lord."

Arya was glad to hear that the castle of the Darrys would be burned. That was where they'd brought her when she'd been caught after her fight with Joffrey, and where the queen had made her father kill Sansa's wolf. It deserves to burn. She wished that Robett Glover and Ser Helman Tallhart would come back to Harrenhal, though; they had marched too quickly, before she'd been able to decide whether to trust them with her secret.

"I will hunt today," Roose Bolton announced as Qyburn helped him into a quilted jerkin.

"Is it safe, my lord?" Qyburn asked. "Only three days past, Septon Utt's men were attacked by wolves. They came right into his camp, not five yards from the fire, and killed two horses."

"It is wolves I mean to hunt. I can scarcely sleep at night for the howling." Bolton buckled on his belt, adjusting the hang of sword and dagger. "It's said that direwolves once roamed the north

in great packs of a hundred or more, and feared neither man nor mammoth, but that was long ago and in another land. It is queer to see the common wolves of the south so bold.”

“Terrible times breed terrible things, my lord.”

Bolton showed his teeth in something that might have been a smile. “Are these times so terrible, Maester?”

“Summer is gone and there are four kings in the realm.”

“One king may be terrible, but four?” He shrugged. “Nan, my fur cloak.” She brought it to him. “My chambers will be clean and orderly upon my return,” he told her as she fastened it. “And tend to Lady Walda’s letter.”

“As you say, my lord.”

The lord and maester swept from the room, giving her not so much as a backward glance. When they were gone, Arya took the letter and carried it to the hearth, stirring the logs with a poker to wake the flames anew. She watched the parchment twist, blacken, and flare up. If the Lannisters hurt Bran and Rickon, Robb will kill them every one. He’ll never bend the knee, never, never, never. He’s not afraid of any of them. Curls of ash floated up the chimney. Arya squatted beside the fire, watching them rise through a veil of hot tears. If Winterfell is truly gone, is this my home now? Am I still Arya, or only Nan the serving girl, for forever and forever and forever?

She spent the next few hours tending to the lord’s chambers. She swept out the old rushes and scattered fresh sweetsmelling ones, laid a fresh fire in the hearth, changed the linens and fluffed the featherbed, emptied the chamber pots down the privy shaft and scrubbed them out, carried an armload of soiled clothing to the washerwomen, and brought up a bowl of crisp autumn pears from the kitchen. When she was done with the bedchamber, she went down half a flight of stairs to do the same in the great solar, a spare drafty room as large as the halls of many a smaller castle. The candles were down to stubs, so Arya changed them out. Under the windows was a huge oaken table where the lord wrote his letters. She stacked the books, changed the candles, put the quills and inks and sealing wax in order.

A large ragged sheepskin was tossed across the papers. Arya had started to roll it up when the colors caught her eye: the blue of lakes and rivers, the red dots where castles and citie’s could be found, the green of woods. She spread it out instead. THE LANDS OF THE TRIDENT, said the ornate script beneath the map. The drawing showed everything from the Neck to the Blackwater Rush. There’s Harrenhal at the top of the big lake, she realized, but where’s Riverrun? Then she saw. It’s not so far...

The afternoon was still young by the time she was done, so Arya took herself off to the godswood. Her duties were lighter as Lord Bolton’s cupbearer than they had been under Weese or even Pinkeye, though they required dressing like a page and washing more than she liked. The hunt would not return for hours, so she had a little time for her needlework.

She slashed at birch leaves till the splintery point of the broken broomstick was green and sticky. “Ser Gregor,” she breathed. “Dunsen, Polliver, Raff the Sweetling.” She spun and leapt and balanced on the balls of her feet, darting this way and that, knocking pinecones flying. “The Tickler,” she called out one time, “the Hound,” the next. “Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei.”

The bole of an oak loomed before her, and she lunged to drive her point through it, grunting “Joffrey, Joffrey, Joffrey.” Her arms and legs were dappled by sunlight and the shadows of leaves. A sheen of sweat covered her skin by the time she paused. The heel of her right foot was bloody where she’d skinned it, so she stood one-legged before the heart tree and raised her sword in salute. “Valar morghulis,” she told the old gods of the north. She liked how the words sounded when she said them.

As Arya crossed the yard to the bathhouse, she spied a raven circling down toward the rookery, and wondered where it had come from and what message it carried. Might be it’s from Robb, come to say it wasn’t true about Bran and Rickon. She chewed on her lip, hoping. If I had wings I could fly back to Winterfell and see for myself. And if it was true, I’d just fly away, fly up past the moon and the shining stars, and see all the things in Old Nan’s stories, dragons and sea monsters and the Titan of Braavos, and maybe I wouldn’t ever fly back unless I wanted to.

The hunting party returned near evenfall with nine dead wolves. Seven were adults, big grey-brown beasts, savage and powerful, their mouths drawn back over long yellow teeth by their dying snarls. But the other two had only been pups. Lord Bolton gave orders for the skins to be sewn into a blanket for his bed. “Cubs still have that soft fur, my lord,” one of his men pointed out. “Make you a nice warm pair of gloves.”

Bolton glanced up at the banners waving above the gatehouse towers. “As the Starks are wont to remind us, winter is coming. Have it done.” When he saw Arya looking on, he said, “Nan, I’ll want a flagon of hot spice wine, I took a chill in the woods. See that it doesn’t get cold. I’m of a mind to sup alone. Barley bread, butter, and boar.”

“At once, my lord.” That was always the best thing to say.

Hot Pie was making oatcakes when she entered the kitchen. Three other cooks were boning fish, while a spit boy turned a boar over the flames. “My lord wants his supper, and hot spice wine to wash it down,” Arya announced, “and he doesn’t want it cold.” One of the cooks washed his hands, took out a kettle, and filled it with a heavy, sweet red. Hot Pie was told to crumble in the spices as the wine heated. Arya went to help.

“I can do it,” he said sullenly. “I don’t need you to show me how to spice wine.”

He hates me too, or else he’s scared of me. She backed away, more sad than angry. When the food was ready, the cooks covered it with a silver cover and wrapped the flagon in a thick towel to keep it warm. Dusk was settling outside. On the walls the crows muttered round the heads like courtiers round a king. One of the guards held the door to Kingspyre. “Hope that’s not weasel soup,” he jested.

Roose Bolton was seated by the hearth reading from a thick leatherbound book when she entered. “Light some candles,” he commanded her as he turned a page. “It grows gloomy in here.”

She placed the food at his elbow and did as he bid her, filling the room with flickering light and the scent of cloves. Bolton turned a few more pages with his finger, then closed the book and placed it carefully in the fire. He watched the flames consume it, pale eyes shining with reflected light. The old dry leather went up with a whoosh, and the yellow pages stirred as they burned, as

if some ghost were reading them. "I will have no further need of you tonight," he said, never looking at her.

She should have gone, silent as a mouse, but something had hold of her. "My lord," she asked, "will you take me with you when you leave Harrenhal?"

He turned to stare at her, and from the look in his eyes it was as if his supper had just spoken to him. "Did I give you leave to question me, Nan?"

"No, my lord." She lowered her eyes.

"You should not have spoken, then. Should you?"

"No. My lord."

For a moment he looked amused. "I will answer you, just this once. I mean to give Harrenhal to Lord Vargo when I return to the north. You will remain here, with him."

"But I don't-" she started.

He cut her off. "I am not in the habit of being questioned by servants, Nan. Must I have your tongue out?"

He would do it as easily as another man might cuff a dog, she knew. "No, my lord."

"Then I'll hear no more from you?"

"No, my lord."

"Go, then. I shall forget this insolence."

Arya went, but not to her bed. When she stepped out into the darkness of the yard, the guard on the door nodded at her and said, "Storm coming. Smell the air?" The wind was gusting, flames swirling off the torches mounted atop the walls beside the rows of heads. On her way to the godswood, she passed the Wailing Tower where once she had lived in fear of Weese. The Freys had taken it for their own since Harrenhal's fall. She could hear angry voices coming from a window, many men talking and arguing all at once. Elmar was sitting on the steps outside, alone.

"What's wrong?" Arya asked him when she saw the tears shining on his cheeks.

"My princess," he sobbed. "We've been dishonored, Aenys says. There was a bird from the Twins. My lord father says I'll need to marry someone else, or be a septon."

A stupid princess, she thought, that's nothing to cry over. "My brothers might be dead," she confided.

Elmar gave her a scornful look. "No one cares about a serving girl's brothers."

It was hard not to hit him when he said that. "I hope your princess dies" she said, and ran off before he could grab her.

In the godswood she found her broomstick sword where she had left it, and carried it to the heart tree. There she knelt. Red leaves rustled. Red eyes peered inside her. The eyes of the gods. "Tell me what to do, you gods," she prayed.

For a long moment there was no sound but the wind and the water and the creak of leaf and limb. And then, far far off, beyond the godswood and the haunted towers and the immense stone walls of Harrenhal, from somewhere out in the world, came the long lonely howl of a wolf. Gooseprickles rose on Arya's skin, and for an instant she felt dizzy. Then, so faintly, it seemed

as if she heard her father's voice. "When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives," he said.

"But there is no pack," she whispered to the weirwood. Bran and Rickon were dead, the Lannisters had Sansa, Jon had gone to the Wall. "I'm not even me now, I'm Nan."

"You are Arya of Winterfell, daughter of the north. You told me you could be strong. You have the wolf blood in you."

"The wolf blood." Arya remembered now. "I'll be as strong as Robb. I said I would." She took a deep breath, then lifted the broomstick in both hands and brought it down across her knee. It broke with a loud crack, and she threw the pieces aside. I am a direwolf, and done with wooden teeth.

That night she lay in her narrow bed upon the scratchy straw, listening to the voices of the living and the dead whisper and argue as she waited for the moon to rise. They were the only voices she trusted anymore. She could hear the sound of her own breath, and the wolves as well, a great pack of them now. They are closer than the one I heard in the godswood, she thought. They are calling to me.

Finally she slipped from under the blanket, wriggled into a tunic, and padded barefoot down the stairs. Roose Bolton was a cautious man, and the entrance to Kingspyre was guarded day and night, so she had to slip out of a narrow cellar window. The yard was still, the great castle lost in haunted dreams. Above, the wind keened through the Wailing Tower.

At the forge she found the fires extinguished and the doors closed and barred. She crept in a window, as she had once before. Gendry shared a mattress with two other apprentice smiths. She crouched in the loft for a long time before her eyes adjusted enough for her to be sure that he was the one on the end. Then she put a hand over his mouth and pinched him. His eyes opened. He could not have been very deeply asleep. "Please," she whispered. She took her hand off his mouth and pointed.

For a moment she did not think he understood, but then he slid out from under the blankets. Naked, he padded across the room, shrugged into a loose roughspun tunic, and climbed down from the loft after her. The other sleepers did not stir. "What do you want now?" Gendry said in a low angry voice.

"A sword."

"Blackthumb keeps all the blades locked up, I told you that a hundred times. Is this for Lord Leech?"

"For me. Break the lock with your hammer."

"They'll break my hand," he grumbled. "Or worse."

"Not if you run off with me."

"Run, and they'll catch you and kill you."

"They'll do you worse. Lord Bolton is giving Harrenhal to the Bloody Mummies, he told me so."

Gendry pushed black hair out of his eyes. "So?"

She looked right at him, fearless. “So when Vargo Hoat’s the lord, he’s going to cut off the feet of all the servants to keep them from running away. The smiths too.”

“That’s only a story,” he said scornfully.

“No, it’s true, I heard Lord Vargo say so,” she lied. “He’s going to cut one foot off everyone. The left one. Go to the kitchens and wake Hot Pie, he’ll do what you say. We’ll need bread or oakcakes or something. You get the swords and I’ll do the horses. We’ll meet near the postern in the east wall, behind the Tower of Ghosts. No one ever comes there.”

“I know that gate. It’s guarded, same as the rest.”

“So? You won’t forget the swords?”

“I never said I’d come.”

“No. But if you do, you won’t forget the swords?”

He frowned. “No,” he said at last. “I guess I won’t.”

Arya reentered Kingspyre the same way she had left it, and stole up the winding steps listening for footfalls. In her cell, she stripped to the skin and dressed herself carefully, in two layers of smallclothes, warm stockings, and her cleanest tunic. It was Lord Bolton’s livery. On the breast was sewn his sigil, the flayed man of the Dreadfort. She tied her shoes, threw a wool cloak over her skinny shoulders, and knotted it under her throat. Quiet as a shadow, she moved back down the stairs. Outside the lord’s solar she paused to listen at the door, easing it open slowly when she heard only silence.

The sheepskin map was on the table, beside the remains of Lord Bolton’s supper. She rolled it up tight and thrust it through her belt. He’d left his dagger on the table as well, so she took that too, just in case Gendry lost his courage.

A horse neighed softly as she slipped into the darkened stables. The grooms were all asleep. She prodded one with her toe until he sat up groggily and said, “Eh? Whas?”

“Lord Bolton requires three horses saddled and bridled.”

The boy got to his feet, pushing straw from his hair. “Wha, at this hour? Horses, you say?” He blinked at the sigil on her tunic. “Whas he want horses for, in the dark?”

“Lord Bolton is not in the habit of being questioned by servants.” She crossed her arms.

The stableboy was still looking at the flayed man. He knew what it meant. “Three, you say?”

“One two three. Hunting horses. Fast and surefoot.” Arya helped him with the bridles and saddles, so he would not need to wake any of the others. She hoped they would not hurt him afterward, but she knew they probably would.

Leading the horses across the castle was the worst part. She stayed in the shadow of the curtain wall whenever she could, so the sentries walking their rounds on the ramparts above would have needed to look almost straight down to see her. And if they do, what of it? I’m my lord’s own cupbearer. It was a chill dank autumn night. Clouds were blowing in from the west, hiding the stars, and the Wailing Tower screamed mournfully at every gust of wind. It smells like rain. Arya did not know whether that would be good or bad for their escape.

No one saw her, and she saw no one, only a grey and white cat creeping along atop the godswood wall. It stopped and spit at her, waking memories of the Red Keep and her father and

Syrio Forel. "I could catch you if I wanted," she called to it softly, "but I have to go, cat." The cat hissed again and ran off.

The Tower of Ghosts was the most ruinous of Harrenhal's five immense towers. It stood dark and desolate behind the remains of a collapsed sept where only rats had come to pray for near three hundred years. It was there she waited to see if Gendry and Hot Pie would come. It seemed as though she waited a long time. The horses nibbled at the weeds that grew up between the broken stones while the clouds swallowed the last of the stars. Arya took out the dagger and sharpened it to keep her hands busy. Long smooth strokes, the way Syrio had taught her. The sound calmed her.

She heard them coming long before she saw them. Hot Pie was breathing heavily, and once he stumbled in the dark, barked his shin, and cursed loud enough to wake half of Harrenhal. Gendry was quieter, but the swords he was carrying rang together as he moved. "Here I am." She stood. "Be quiet or they'll hear you."

The boys picked their way toward her over tumbled stones. Gendry was wearing oiled chainmail under his cloak, she saw, and he had his blacksmith's hammer slung across his back. Hot Pie's red round face peered out from under a hood. He had a sack of bread dangling from his right hand and a big wheel of cheese under his left arm. "There's a guard on that postern," said Gendry quietly. "I told you there would be."

"You stay here with the horses," said Arya. "I'll get rid of him. Come quick when I call."

Gendry nodded. Hot Pie said, "Hoot like an owl when you want us to come."

"I'm not an owl," said Arya. "I'm a wolf. I'll howl."

Alone, she slid through the shadow of the Tower of Ghosts. She walked fast, to keep ahead of her fear, and it felt as though Syrio Forel walked beside her, and Yoren, and Jaqen H'ghar, and Jon Snow. She had not taken the sword Gendry had brought her, not yet. For this the dagger would be better. It was good and sharp. This postern was the least of Harrenhal's gates, a narrow door of stout oak studded with iron nails, set in an angle of the wall beneath a defensive tower. Only one man was set to guard it, but she knew there would be sentries up in that tower as well, and others nearby walking the walls. Whatever happened, she must be quiet as a shadow. He must not call out. A few scattered raindrops had begun to fall. She felt one land on her brow and run slowly down her nose.

She made no effort to hide, but approached the guard openly, as if Lord Bolton himself had sent her. He watched her come, curious as to what might bring a page here at this black hour. When she got closer, she saw that he was a northman, very tall and thin, huddled in a ragged fur cloak. That was bad. She might have been able to trick a Frey or one of the Brave Companions, but the Dreadfort men had served Roose Bolton their whole life, and they knew him better than she did. If I tell him I am Arya Stark and command him to stand aside... No, she dare not. He was a northman, but not a Winterfell man. He belonged to Roose Bolton.

When she reached him she pushed back her cloak so he would see the flayed man on her breast. "Lord Bolton sent me."

"At this hour? Why for?"

She could see the gleam of steel under the fur, and she did not know if she was strong enough to drive the point of the dagger through chainmail. His throat, it must be his throat, but he's too tall, I'll never reach it. For a moment she did not know what to say. For a moment she was a little girl again, and scared, and the rain on her face felt like tears.

"He told me to give all his guards a silver piece, for their good service." The words seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Silver, you say?" He did not believe her, but he wanted to; silver was silver, after all. "Give it over, then."

Her fingers dug down beneath her tunic and came out clutching the coin Jaqen had given her. In the dark the iron could pass for tarnished silver. She held it out... and let it slip through her fingers.

Cursing her softly, the man went to a knee to grope for the coin in the dirt and there was his neck right in front of her. Arya slid her dagger out and drew it across his throat, as smooth as summer silk. His blood covered her hands in a hot gush and he tried to shout but there was blood in his mouth as well.

"Valar morghulis," she whispered as he died.

When he stopped moving, she picked up the coin. Outside the walls of Harrenhal, a wolf howled long and loud. She lifted the bar, set it aside, and pulled open the heavy oak door. By the time Hot Pie and Gendry came up with the horses, the rain was falling hard. "You killed him!" Hot Pie gasped.

"What did you think I would do?" Her fingers were sticky with blood, and the smell was making her mare skittish. It's no matter, she thought, swinging up into the saddle. The rain will wash them clean again.

SANSA

The throne room was a sea of jewels, furs, and bright fabrics. Lords and ladies filled the back of the hall and stood beneath the high windows, jostling like fishwives on a dock.

The denizens of Joffrey's court had striven to outdo each other today. Jalabhar Xho was all in feathers, a plumage so fantastic and extravagant that he seemed like to take flight. The High Septon's crystal crown fired rainbows through the air every time he moved his head. At the council table, Queen Cersei shimmered in a cloth-of-gold gown slashed in burgundy velvet, while beside her Varys fussed and simpered in a lilac brocade. Moon Boy and Ser Dontos wore new suits of motley, clean as a spring morning. Even Lady Tanda and her daughters looked pretty in matching gowns of turquoise silk and vair, and Lord Gyles was coughing into a square of scarlet silk trimmed with golden lace. King Joffrey sat above them all, amongst the blades and barbs of the Iron Throne. He was in crimson samite, his black mantle studded with rubies, on his head his heavy golden crown.

Squirring through a press of knights, squires, and rich townfolk, Sansa reached the front of the gallery just as a blast of trumpets announced the entry of Lord Tywin Lannister.

He rode his warhorse down the length of the hall and dismounted before the Iron Throne. Sansa had never seen such armor; all burnished red steel, inlaid with golden scrollwork and ornamentation. His rondels were sunbursts, the roaring lion that crowned his helm had ruby eyes, and a lioness on each shoulder fastened a cloth-of-gold cloak so long and heavy that it draped the hindquarters of his charger. Even the horse's armor was gilded, and his bardings were shimmering crimson silk emblazoned with the lion of Lannister.

The Lord of Casterly Rock made such an impressive figure that it was a shock when his destrier dropped a load of dung right at the base of the throne. Joffrey had to step gingerly around it as he descended to embrace his grandfather and proclaim him Savior of the City. Sansa covered her mouth to hide a nervous smile.

Joff made a show of asking his grandfather to assume governance of the realm, and Lord Tywin solemnly accepted the responsibility, "until Your Grace does come of age." Then squires removed his armor and Joff fastened the Hand's chain of office around his neck. Lord Tywin took a seat at the council table beside the queen. After the destrier was led off and his homage removed, Cersei nodded for the ceremonies to continue.

A fanfare of brazen trumpets greeted each of the heroes as he stepped between the great oaken doors. Heralds cried his name and deeds for all to hear, and the noble knights and highborn ladies cheered as lustily as cutthroats at a cockfight. Pride of place was given to Mace Tyrell, the Lord of Highgarden, a once-powerful man gone to fat, yet still handsome. His sons followed him in; Ser Loras and his older brother Ser Garlan the Gallant. The three dressed alike, in green velvet trimmed with sable.

The king descended the throne once more to greet them, a great honor. He fastened about the throat of each a chain of roses wrought in soft yellow gold, from which hung a golden disc with the lion of Lannister picked out in rubies. "The roses support the lion, as the might of

Highgarden supports the realm,” proclaimed Joffrey. “If there is any boon you would ask of me, ask and it shall be yours.”

And now it comes, thought Sansa.

“Your Grace,” said Ser Loras, “I beg the honor of serving in your Kingsguard, to defend you against your enemies.”

Joffrey drew the Knight of Flowers to his feet and kissed him on his cheek. “Done, brother.”

Lord Tyrell bowed his head. “There is no greater pleasure than to serve the King’s Grace. If I was deemed worthy to join your royal council, you would find none more loyal or true.”

Joff put a hand on Lord Tyrell’s shoulder and kissed him when he stood. “Your wish is granted.”

Ser Garlan Tyrell, five years senior to Ser Loras, was a taller bearded version of his more famous younger brother. He was thicker about the chest and broader at the shoulders, and though his face was comely enough, he lacked Ser Loras’s startling beauty. “Your Grace,” Garlan said when the king approached him, “I have a maiden sister, Margaery, the delight of our House. She was wed to Renly Baratheon, as you know, but Lord Renly went to war before the marriage could be consummated, so she remains innocent. Margaery has heard tales of your wisdom, courage, and chivalry, and has come to love you from afar. I beseech you to send for her, to take her hand in marriage, and to wed your House to mine for all time.”

King Joffrey made a show of looking surprised. “Ser Garlan, your sister’s beauty is famed throughout the Seven Kingdoms, but I am promised to another. A king must keep his word.”

Queen Cersei got to her feet in a rustle of skirts. “Your Grace, in the judgment of your small council, it would be neither proper nor wise for you to wed the daughter of a man beheaded for treason, a girl whose brother is in open rebellion against the throne even now. Sire, your councillors beg you, for the good of your realm, set Sansa Stark aside. The Lady Margaery will make you a far more suitable queen.”

Like a pack of trained dogs, the lords and ladies in the hall began to shout their pleasure. “Margaery,” they called. “Give us Margaery!” and “No traitor queens! Tyrell! Tyrell!”

Joffrey raised a hand. “I would like to heed the wishes of my people, Mother, but I took a holy vow.”

The High Septon stepped forward. “Your Grace, the gods hold bethrothal solemn, but your father, King Robert of blessed memory, made this pact before the Starks of Winterfell had revealed their falseness. Their crimes against the realm have freed you from any promise you might have made. So far as the Faith is concerned, there is no valid marriage contract ‘twixt you and Sansa Stark.”

A tumult of cheering filled the throne room, and cries of “Margaery, Margaery” erupted all around her. Sansa leaned forward, her hands tight around the gallery’s wooden rail. She knew what came next, but she was still frightened of what Joffrey might say, afraid that he would refuse to release her even now, when his whole kingdom depended upon it. She felt as if she were back again on the marble steps outside the Great Sept of Baelor, waiting for her prince to

grant her father mercy, and instead hearing him command Ilyn Payne to strike off his head. Please, she prayed fervently, make him say it, make him say it.

Lord Tywin was looking at his grandson. Joff gave him a sullen glance, shifted his feet, and helped Ser Garlan Tyrell to rise. “The gods are good. I am free to heed my heart. I will wed your sweet sister, and gladly, ser.” He kissed Ser Garlan on a bearded cheek as the cheers rose all around them.

Sansa felt curiously light-headed. I am free. She could feel eyes upon her. I must not smile, she reminded herself. The queen had warned her; no matter what she felt inside, the face she showed the world must look distraught. “I will not have my son humiliated,” Cersei said. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes. But if I’m not to be queen, what will become of me?”

“That will need to be determined. For the moment, you shall remain here at court, as our ward.”

“I want to go home.”

The queen was irritated by that. “You should have learned by now, none of us get the things we want.”

I have, though, Sansa thought. I am free of Joffrey. I will not have to kiss him, nor give him my maidenhood, nor bear him children. Let Margaery Tyrell have all that, poor girl.

By the time the outburst died down, the Lord of Highgarden had been seated at the council table, and his sons had joined the other knights and lordlings beneath the windows. Sansa tried to look forlorn and abandoned as other heroes of the Battle of the Blackwater were summoned forth to receive their rewards.

Paxter Redwyne, Lord of the Arbor, marched down the length of the hall flanked by his twin sons Horror and Slobber, the former limping from a wound taken in the battle. After them followed Lord Mathis Rowan in a snowy doublet with a great tree worked upon the breast in gold thread; Lord Randyll Tarly, lean and balding, a greatsword across his back in a jeweled scabbard; Ser Kevan Lannister, a thickset balding man with a close-trimmed beard; Ser Addam Marbrand, coppery hair streaming to his shoulders; the great western lords Lydden, Crakehall, and Brax.

Next came four of lesser birth who had distinguished themselves in the fighting: the one-eyed knight Ser Philip Foote, who had slain Lord Bryce Caron in single combat; the freerider Lothor Brune, who’d cut his way through half a hundred Fossoway men-at-arms to capture Ser Jon of the green apple and kill Ser Bryan and Ser Edwyd of the red, thereby winning himself the name Lothor Apple-Eater; Willit, a grizzled man-at-arms in the service of Ser Harys Swyft, who’d pulled his master from beneath his dying horse and defended him against a dozen attackers; and a downycheeked squire named Josmyn Peckledon, who had killed two knights, wounded a third, and captured two more, though he could not have been more than fourteen. Willit was borne in on a litter, so grievous were his wounds.

Ser Kevan had taken a seat beside his brother Lord Tywin. When the heralds had finished telling of each hero’s deeds, he rose. “It is His Grace’s wish that these good men be rewarded for their valor. By his decree, Ser Philip shall henceforth be Lord Philip of House Foote, and to him

shall go all the lands, rights, and incomes of House Caron. Lothor Brune to be raised to the estate of knighthood, and granted land and keep in the riverlands at war's end. To Josmyn Peckledon, a sword and suit of plate, his choice of any warhorse in the royal stables, and knighthood as soon as he shall come of age. And lastly, for Goodman Willit, a spear with a silver-banded haft, a hauberk of new-forged ringmail, and a full helm with visor. Further, the goodman's sons shall be taken into the service of House Lannister at Casterly Rock, the elder as a squire and the younger as a page, with the chance to advance to knighthood if they serve loyally and well. To all this, the King's Hand and the small council consent."

The captains of the king's warships Wildwind, Prince Aemon, and River Arrow were honored next, along with some under officers from Godsgrace, Lance, Lady of Silk, and Ramshead. As near as Sansa could tell, their chief accomplishment had been surviving the battle on the river, a feat that few enough could boast. Hallyne the Pyromancer and the masters of the Alchemists' Guild received the king's thanks as well, and Hallyne was raised to the style of lord, though Sansa noted that neither lands nor castle accompanied the title, which made the alchemist no more a true lord than Varys was. A more significant lordship by far was granted to Ser Lancel Lannister. Joffrey awarded him the lands, castle, and rights of House Darry, whose last child lord had perished during the fighting in the riverlands, "leaving no trueborn heirs of lawful Darry blood, but only a bastard cousin."

Ser Lancel did not appear to accept the title; the talk was, his wound might cost him his arm or even his life. The Imp was said to be dying as well, from a terrible cut to the head.

When the herald called, "Lord Petyr Baelish," he came forth dressed all in shades of rose and plum, his cloak patterned with mockingbirds. She could see him smiling as he knelt before the Iron Throne. He looks so pleased. Sansa had not heard of Littlefinger doing anything especially heroic during the battle, but it seemed he was to be rewarded all the same.

Ser Kevan got back to his feet. "It is the wish of the King's Grace that his loyal councillor Petyr Baelish be rewarded for faithful service to crown and realm. Be it known that Lord Baelish is granted the castle of Harrenhal with all its attendant lands and incomes, there to make his seat and rule henceforth as Lord Paramount of the Trident. Petyr Baelish and his sons and grandsons shall hold and enjoy these honors until the end of time, and all the lords of the Trident shall do him homage as their rightful liege. The King's Hand and the small council consent."

On his knees, Littlefinger raised his eyes to King Joffrey. "I thank you humbly, Your Grace. I suppose this means I'll need to see about getting some sons and grandsons."

Joffrey laughed, and the court with him. Lord Paramount of the Trident, Sansa thought, and Lord of Harrenhal as well. She did not understand why that should make him so happy; the honors were as empty as the title granted to Hallyne the Pyromancer. Harrenhal was cursed, everyone knew that, and the Lannisters did not even hold it at present. Besides, the lords of the Trident were sworn to Riverrun and House Tully, and to the King in the North; they would never accept Littlefinger as their liege. Unless they are made to. Unless my brother and my uncle and my grandfather are all cast down and killed. The thought made Sansa anxious, but she told

herself she was being silly. Robb has beaten them every time. He'll beat Lord Baelish too, if he must.

More than six hundred new knights were made that day. They had held their vigil in the Great Sept of Baelor all through the night and crossed the city barefoot that morning to prove their humble hearts. Now they came forward dressed in shifts of undyed wool to receive their knighthoods from the Kingsguard. It took a long time, since only three of the Brothers of the White Sword were on hand to dub them. Mandon Moore had perished in the battle, the Hound had vanished, Aerys Oakheart was in Dorne with Princess Myrcella, and Jaime Lannister was Robb's captive, so the Kingsguard had been reduced to Balon Swann, Meryn Trant, and Osmund Kettleblack. Once knighted, each man rose, buckled on his swordbelt, and stood beneath the windows. Some had bloody feet from their walk through the city, but they stood tall and proud all the same, it seemed to Sansa.

By the time all the new knights had been given their sers the hall was growing restive, and none more so than Joffrey. Some of those in the gallery had begun to slip quietly away, but the notables on the floor were trapped, unable to depart without the king's leave. Judging by the way he was fidgeting atop the Iron Throne, Joff would willingly have granted it, but the day's work was far from done. For now the coin was turned over, and the captives were ushered in.

There were great lords and noble knights in that company too: sour old Lord Celtigar, the Red Crab; Ser Bonifer the Good; Lord Estermont, more ancient even than Celtigar; Lord Varner, who hobbled the length of the hall on a shattered knee, but would accept no help; Ser Mark Mullendore, grey-faced, his left arm gone to the elbow; fierce Red Ronnet of Griffin Roost; Ser Dermot of the Rainwood; Lord Willurn and his sons Josua and Elyas; Ser Jon Fossoway; Ser Timon the Scrapesword; Aurane, the bastard of Driftmark; Lord Staedmon, called Pennylover; hundreds of others.

Those who had changed their allegiance during the battle needed only to swear fealty to Joffrey, but the ones who had fought for Stannis until the bitter end were compelled to speak. Their words decided their fate. If they begged forgiveness for their treasons and promised to serve loyally henceforth, Joffrey welcomed them back into the king's peace and restored them to all their lands and rights. A handful remained defiant, however. "Do not imagine this is done, boy," warned one, the bastard son of some Florent or other. "The Lord of Light protects King Stannis, now and always. All your swords and all your scheming shall not save you when his hour comes."

"Your hour is come right now." Joffrey beckoned to Ser Ilyn Payne to take the man out and strike his head off. But no sooner had that one been dragged away than a knight of solemn mien with a fiery heart on his surcoat shouted out, "Stannis is the true king! A monster sits the Iron Throne, an abomination born of incest!"

"Be silent," Ser Kevan Lannister bellowed.

The knight raised his voice instead. "Joffrey is the black worm eating the heart of the realm! Darkness was his father, and death his mother! Destroy him before he corrupts you all! Destroy them all, queen whore and king worm, vile dwarf and whispering spider, the false flowers. Save

yourselves!” One of the gold cloaks knocked the man off his feet, but he continued to shout. “The scouring fire will come! King Stannis will return! “

Joffrey lurched to his feet. “I’m king! Kill him! Kill him now! I command it.” He chopped down with his hand, a furious, angry gesture... and screeched in pain when his arm brushed against one of the sharp metal fangs that surrounded him. The bright crimson samite of his sleeve turned a darker shade of red as his blood soaked through it. “Mother!” he wailed.

With every eye on the king, somehow the man on the floor wrested a spear away from one of the gold cloaks, and used it to push himself back to his feet. “The throne denies him!” he cried. “He is no king!”

Cersei was running toward the throne, but Lord Tywin remained still as stone. He had only to raise a finger, and Ser Meryn Trant moved forward with drawn sword. The end was quick and brutal. The gold cloaks seized the knight by the arms. “No king!” he cried again as Ser Meryn drove the point of his longsword through his chest.

Joff fell into his mother’s arms. Three maesters came hurrying forward, to bundle him out through the king’s door. Then everyone began talking at once. When the gold cloaks dragged off the dead man, he left a trail of bright blood across the stone floor. Lord Baelish stroked his beard while Varys whispered in his ear. Will they dismiss us now, Sansa wondered. A score of captives still waited, though whether to pledge fealty or shout curses, who could say?

Lord Tywin rose to his feet. “We continue,” he said in a clear strong voice that silenced the murmurs. “Those who wish to ask pardon for their treasons may do so. We will have no more follies.” He moved to the Iron Throne and there seated himself on a step, a mere three feet off the floor.

The light outside the windows was fading by the time the session drew to a close. Sansa felt limp with exhaustion as she made her way down from the gallery. She wondered how badly Joffrey had cut himself. They say the Iron Throne can be perilous cruel to those who were not meant to sit it.

Back in the safety of her own chambers, she hugged a pillow to her face to muffle a squeal of joy. Oh, gods be good, he did it, he put me aside in front of everyone. When a serving girl brought her supper, she almost kissed her. There was hot bread and fresh-churned butter, a thick beef soup, capon and carrots, and peaches in honey. Even the food tastes sweeter, she thought.

Come dark, she slipped into a cloak and left for the godswood. Ser Osmund Kettleblack was guarding the drawbridge in his white armor. Sansa tried her best to sound miserable as she bid him a good evening. From the way he leered at her, she was not sure she had been wholly convincing.

Dontos waited in the leafy moonlight. “Why so sadface?” Sansa asked him gaily. “You were there, you heard. Joff put me aside, he’s done with me, he’s...”

He took her hand. “Oh, Jonquil, my poor Jonquil, you do not understand. Done with you? They’ve scarcely begun.”

Her heart sank. “What do you mean?”

“The queen will never let you go, never. You are too valuable a hostage. And Joffrey... sweetling, he is still king. If he wants you in his bed, he will have you, only now it will be bastards he plants in your womb instead of trueborn sons.”

“No,” Sansa said, shocked. “He let me go, he...”

Ser Dontos planted a slobbery kiss on her ear. “Be brave. I swore to see you home, and now I can. The day has been chosen.”

“When?” Sansa asked. “When will we go?”

“The night of Joffrey’s wedding. After the feast. All the necessary arrangements have been made. The Red Keep will be full of strangers. Half the court will be drunk and the other half will be helping Joffrey bed his bride. For a little while, you will be forgotten, and the confusion will be our friend.”

“The wedding won’t be for a moon’s turn yet. Margaery Tyrell is at Highgarden, they’ve only now sent for her.”

“You’ve waited so long, be patient awhile longer. Here, I have something for you.” Ser Dontos fumbled in his pouch and drew out a silvery spiderweb, dangling it between his thick fingers.

It was a hair net of fine-spun silver, the strands so thin and delicate the net seemed to weigh no more than a breath of air when Sansa took it in her fingers. Small gems were set wherever two strands crossed, so dark they drank the moonlight. “What stones are these?”

“Black amethysts from Asshai. The rarest kind, a deep true purple by daylight.”

“It’s very lovely,” Sansa said, thinking, It is a ship I need, not a net for my hair.

“Lovelier than you know, sweet child. It’s magic, you see. It’s justice you hold. It’s vengeance for your father.” Dontos leaned close and kissed her again. “It’s home.”

THEON

Maester Luwin came to him when the first scouts were seen outside the walls. “My lord prince,” he said, “you must yield.”

Theon stared at the platter of oakcakes, honey, and blood sausage they’d brought him to break his fast. Another sleepless night had left his nerves raw, and the very sight of food sickened him. “There has been no reply from my uncle?”

“None,” the maester said. “Nor from your father on Pyke.”

“Send more birds.”

“It will not serve. By the time the birds reach-”

“Send them!” Knocking the platter of food aside with a swipe of his arm, he pushed off the blankets and rose from Ned Stark’s bed naked and angry. “Or do you want me dead? Is that it, Luwin? The truth now.”

The small grey man was unafraid. “My order serves.”

“Yes, but whom?”

“The realm,” Maester Luwin said, “and Winterfell. Theon, once I taught you sums and letters, history and warcraft. And might have taught you more, had you wished to learn. I will not claim to bear you any great love, no, but I cannot hate you either. Even if I did, so long as you hold Winterfell I am bound by oath to give you counsel. So now I counsel you to yield.”

Theon stooped to scoop a puddled cloak off the floor, shook off the rushes, and draped it over his shoulders. A fire, I’ll have a fire, and clean garb. Where’s Wex? I’ll not go to my grave in dirty clothes.

“You have no hope of holding here,” the maester went on. “If your lord father meant to send you aid, he would have done so by now. It is the Neck that concerns him. The battle for the north will be fought amidst the ruins of Moat Cailin.”

“That may be so,” said Theon. “And so long as I hold Winterfell, Ser Rodrik and Stark’s lords bannermen cannot march south to take my uncle in the rear.” I am not so innocent of warcraft as you think, old man. “I have food enough to stand a year’s siege, if need be.”

“There will be no siege. Perhaps they will spend a day or two fashioning ladders and tying grapnels to the ends of ropes. But soon enough they will come over your walls in a hundred places at once. You may be able to hold the keep for a time, but the castle will fall within the hour. You would do better to open your gates and ask for mercy? I know what kind of mercy they have for me.”

“There is a way.”

“I am ironborn,” Theon reminded him. “I have my own way. What choice have they left me? No, don’t answer, I’ve heard enough of your counsel. Go and send those birds as I commanded, and tell Lorren I want to see him. And Wex as well. I’ll have my mail scoured clean, and my garrison assembled in the yard.”

For a moment he thought the maester was going to defy him. But finally Luwin bowed stiffly. “As you command.”

They made a pitifully small assembly; the ironmen were few, the yard large. “The northmen will be on us before nightfall,” he told them. “Ser Rodrik Cassel and all the lords who have come to his call. I will not run from them. I took this castle and I mean to hold it, to live or die as Prince of Winterfell. But I will not command any man to die with me. If you leave now, before Ser Rodrik’s main force is upon us, there’s still a chance you may win free.” He unsheathed his longsword and drew a line in the dirt. “Those who would stay and fight, step forward.”

No one spoke. The men stood in their mail and fur and boiled leather, as still as if they were made of stone. A few exchanged looks. Urzen shuffled his feet. Dykk Harlaw hawked and spat. A finger of wind ruffled Enderhar’s long fair hair.

Theon felt as though he were drowning. Why am I surprised? he thought bleakly. His father had forsaken him, his uncles, his sister, even that wretched creature Reek. Why should his men prove any more loyal? There was nothing to say, nothing to do. He could only stand there beneath the great grey walls and the hard white sky, sword in hand, waiting, waiting...

Wex was the first to cross the line. Three quick steps and he stood at Theon’s side, slouching. Shamed by the boy, Black Lorren followed, all scowls. “Who else?” he demanded. Red Rolfe came forward. Kromm. Werlag. Tymor and his brothers. Ulf the Ill. Harrag Sheepstealer. Four Harlaws and two Botleys. Kenned the Whale was the last. Seventeen in all.

Urzen was among those who did not move, and Stygg, and every man of the ten that Asha had brought from Deepwood Motte. “Go, then,” Theon told them. “Run to my sister. She’ll give you all a warm welcome, I have no doubt.”

Stygg had the grace at least to look ashamed. The rest moved off without a word. Theon turned to the seventeen who remained. “Back to the walls. If the gods should spare us, I shall remember every man of you.”

Black Lorren stayed when the others had gone. “The castle folk will turn on us soon as the fight begins.”

“I know that. What would you have me do?”

“Put them out,” said Lorren. “Every one.”

Theon shook his head. “Is the noose ready?”

“It is. You mean to use it?”

“Do you know a better way?”

“Aye. I’ll take my axe and stand on that drawbridge, and let them come try me. One at a time, two, three, it makes no matter. None will pass the moat while I still draw breath.”

He means to die, thought Theon. It’s not victory he wants, it’s an end worthy of a song. “We’ll use the noose.”

“As you say,” Lorren replied, contempt in his eyes.

Wex helped garb him for battle. Beneath his black surcoat and golden mantle was a shirt of well-oiled ringmail, and under that a layer of stiff boiled leather. Once armed and armored, Theon climbed the watchtower at the angle where the eastern and southern walls came together to have a look at his doom. The northmen were spreading out to encircle the castle. It was hard to judge their numbers. A thousand at least; perhaps twice that many. Against seventeen. They’d

brought catapults and scorpions. He saw no siege towers rumbling up the kingsroad, but there was timber enough in the wolfswood to build as many as were required.

Theon studied their banners through Maester Luwin's Myrish lens tube. The Cerwyn battle-axe flapped bravely wherever he looked, and there were Tallhart trees as well, and mermen from White Harbor. Less common were the sigils of Flint and Karstark. Here and there he even saw the bull moose of the Hornwoods. But no Glovers, Asha saw to them, no Boltons from the Dreadfort, no Umbers come down from the shadow of the Wall. Not that they were needed. Soon enough the boy Cley Cerwyn appeared before the gates carrying a peace banner on a tall staff, to announce that Ser Rodrik Cassel wished to parley with Theon Turncloak.

Turncloak. The name was bitter as bile. He had gone to Pyke to lead his father's longships against Lannisport, he remembered. "I shall be out shortly," he shouted down. "Alone."

Black Lorren disapproved. "Only blood can wash out blood," he declared. "Knights may keep their truces with other knights, but they are not so careful of their honor when dealing with those they deem outlaw."

Theon bristled. "I am the Prince of Winterfell and heir to the Iron Islands. Now go find the girl and do as I told you."

Black Lorren gave him a murderous look. "Aye, Prince."

He's turned against me too, Theon realized. Of late it seemed to him as if the very stones of Winterfell had turned against him. If I die, I die friendless and abandoned. What choice did that leave him, but to live?

He rode to the gatehouse with his crown on his head. A woman was drawing water from the well, and Gage the cook stood in the door of the kitchens. They hid their hatred behind sullen looks and faces blank as slate, yet he could feel it all the same.

When the drawbridge was lowered, a chill wind sighed across the moat. The touch of it made him shiver. It is the cold, nothing more, Theon told himself, a shiver, not a tremble. Even brave men shiver. Into the teeth of that wind he rode, under the portcullis, over the drawbridge. The outer gates swung open to let him pass. As he emerged beneath the walls, he could sense the boys watching from the empty sockets where their eyes had been.

Ser Rodrik waited in the market astride his dappled gelding. Beside him, the direwolf of Stark flapped from a staff borne by young Cley Cerwyn. They were alone in the square, though Theon could see archers on the roofs of surrounding houses, spearmen to his right, and to his left a line of mounted knights beneath the merman-and-trident of House Manderly. Every one of them wants me dead. Some were boys he'd drunk with, dined with, even wined with, but that would not save him if he fell into their hands.

"Ser Rodrik." Theon reined to a halt. "It grieves me that we must meet as foes."

"My own grief is that I must wait a while to hang you." The old knight spat onto the muddy ground. "Theon Turncloak."

"I am a Greyjoy of Pyke," Theon reminded him. "The cloak my father swaddled me in bore a kraken, not a direwolf."

"For ten years you have been a ward of Stark."

“Hostage and prisoner, I call it.”

“Then perhaps Lord Eddard should have kept you chained to a dungeon wall. Instead he raised you among his own sons, the sweet boys you have butchered, and to my undying shame I trained you in the arts of war. Would that I had thrust a sword through your belly instead of placing one in your hand.”

“I came out to parley, not to suffer your insults. Say what you have to say, old man. What would you have of me?”

“Two things,” the old man said. “Winterfell, and your life. Command your men to open the gates and lay down their arms. Those who murdered no children shall be free to walk away, but you shall be held for King Robb’s justice. May the gods take pity on you when he returns.”

“Robb will never look on Winterfell again,” Theon promised. “He will break himself on Moat Cailin, as every southron army has done for ten thousand years. We hold the north now, ser.”

“You hold three castles,” replied Ser Rodrik, “and this one I mean to take back, Turncloak.”

Theon ignored that. “Here are my terms. You have until evenfall to disperse. Those who swear fealty to Balon Greyjoy as their king and to myself as Prince of Winterfell will be confirmed in their rights and properties and suffer no harm. Those who defy us will be destroyed.”

Young Cerwyn was incredulous. “Are you mad, Greyjoy?”

Ser Rodrik shook his head. “Only vain, lad. Theon has always had too lofty an opinion of himself, I fear.” The old man jabbed a finger at him. “Do not imagine that I need wait for Robb to fight his way up the Neck to deal with the likes of you. I have near two thousand men with me... and if the tales be true, you have no more than fifty.”

Seventeen, in truth. Theon made himself smile. “I have something better than men.” And he raised a fist over his head, the signal Black Lorren had been told to watch for.

The walls of Winterfell were behind him, but Ser Rodrik faced them squarely and could not fail to see. Theon watched his face. When his chin quivered under those stiff white whiskers, he knew just what the old man was seeing. He is not surprised, he thought with sadness, but the fear is there.

“This is craven,” Ser Rodrik said. “To use a child so... this is despicable.”

“Oh, I know,” said Theon. “It’s a dish I tasted myself, or have you forgotten? I was ten when I was taken from my father’s house, to make certain he would raise no more rebellions.”

“It is not the same!”

Theon’s face was impassive. “The noose I wore was not made of hempen rope, that’s true enough, but I felt it all the same. And it chafed, Ser Rodrik. It chafed me raw.” He had never quite realized that until now, but as the words came spilling out he saw the truth of them.

“No harm was ever done you.”

“And no harm will be done your Beth, so long as you-”

Ser Rodrik never gave him the chance to finish. “Viper,” the knight declared, his face red with rage beneath those white whiskers. “I gave you the chance to save your men and die with some small shred of honor, Turncloak. I should have known that was too much to ask of a childkiller.”

His hand went to the hilt of his sword. "I ought cut you down here and now and put an end to your lies and deceits. By the gods, I should."

Theon did not fear a doddering old man, but those watching archers and that line of knights were a different matter. If the swords came out his chances of getting back to the castle alive were small to none. "Forswear your oath and murder me, and you will watch your little Beth strangle at the end of a rope."

Ser Rodrik's knuckles had gone white, but after a moment he took his hand off the swordhilt. "Truly, I have lived too long."

"I will not disagree, ser. Will you accept my terms?"

"I have a duty to Lady Catelyn and House Stark."

"And your own House? Beth is the last of your blood."

The old knight drew himself up straight. "I offer myself in my daughter's place. Release her, and take me as your hostage. Surely the castellan of Winterfell is worth more than a child."

"Not to me." A valiant gesture, old man, but I am not that great a fool. "Not to Lord Manderly or Leobald Tallhart either, I'd wager." Your sorry old skin is worth no more to them than any other man's. "No, I'll keep the girl... and keep her safe, so long as you do as I've commanded you. Her life is in your hands."

"Gods be good, Theon, how can you do this? You know I must attack, have sworn..."

"If this host is still in arms before my gate when the sun sets, Beth will hang," said Theon. "Another hostage will follow her to the grave at first light, and another at sunset. Every dawn and every dusk will mean a death, until you are gone. I have no lack of hostages." He did not wait for a reply, but wheeled Smiler around and rode back toward the castle. He went slowly at first, but the thought of those archers at his back soon drove him to a canter. The small heads watched him come from their spikes, their tarred and flayed faces looming larger with every yard; between them stood little Beth Cassel, noosed and crying. Theon put his heel into Smiler and broke into a hard gallop. Smiler's hooves clattered on the drawbridge, like drumbeats.

In the yard he dismounted and handed his reins to Wex. "It may stay them," he told Black Lorren. "We'll know by sunset. Take the girl in till then, and keep her somewhere safe." Under the layers of leather, steel, and wool, he was slick with sweat. "I need a cup of wine. A vat of wine would do even better."

A fire had been laid in Ned Stark's bedchamber. Theon sat beside it and filled a cup with a heavy-bodied red from the castle vaults, a wine as sour as his mood. They will attack, he thought gloomily, staring at the flames. Ser Rodrik loves his daughter, but he is still castellan, and most of all a knight. Had it been Theon with a noose around his neck and Lord Balon commanding the army without, the warhorns would already have sounded the attack, he had no doubt. He should thank the gods that Ser Rodrik was not ironborn. The men of the green lands were made of softer stuff, though he was not certain they would prove soft enough.

If not, if the old man gave the command to storm the castle regardless, Winterfell would fall; Theon entertained no delusions on that count. His seventeen might kill three, four, five times their own number, but in the end they would be overwhelmed.

Theon stared at the flames over the rim of his wine goblet, brooding on the injustice of it all. "I rode beside Robb Stark in the Whispering Wood," he muttered. He had been frightened that night, but not like this. It was one thing to go into battle surrounded by friends, and another to perish alone and despised. Mercy, he thought miserably.

When the wine brought no solace, Theon sent Wex to fetch his bow and took himself to the old inner ward. There he stood, loosing shaft after shaft at the archery butts until his shoulders ached and his fingers were bloody, pausing only long enough to pull the arrows from the targets for another round. I saved Bran's life with this bow, he reminded himself. Would that I could save my own. Women came to the well, but did not linger; whatever they saw on Theon's face sent them away quickly.

Behind him the broken tower stood, its summit as jagged as a crown where fire had collapsed the upper stories long ago. As the sun moved, the shadow of the tower moved as well, gradually lengthening, a black arm reaching out for Theon Greyjoy. By the time the sun touched the wall, he was in its grasp. If I hang the girl, the northmen will attack at once, he thought as he loosed a shaft. If I do not hang her, they will know my threats are empty. He knocked another arrow to his bow. There is no way out, none.

"If you had a hundred archers as good as yourself, you might have a chance to hold the castle," a voice said softly.

When he turned, Maester Luwin was behind him. "Go away," Theon told him. "I have had enough of your counsel."

"And life? Have you had enough of that, my lord prince?"

He raised the bow. "One more word and I'll put this shaft through your heart."

"You won't."

Theon bent the bow, drawing the grey goose feathers back to his cheek. "Care to make a wager?"

"I am your last hope, Theon."

I have no hope, he thought. Yet he lowered the bow half an inch and said, "I will not run."

"I do not speak of running. Take the black."

"The Night's Watch?" Theon let the bow unbend slowly and pointed the arrow at the ground.

"Ser Rodrik has served House Stark all his life, and House Stark has always been a friend to the Watch. He will not deny you. Open your gates, lay down your arms, accept his terms, and he must let you take the black."

A brother of the Night's Watch. It meant no crown, no sons, no wife... but it meant life, and life with honor. Ned Stark's own brother had chosen the Watch, and Jon Snow as well.

I have black garb aplenty, once I tear the krakens off Even my horse is black. I could rise high in the Watch-chief of rangers, likely even Lord Commander. Let Asha keep the bloody islands, they're as dreary as she is. If I served at Eastwatch, I could command my own ship, and there's fine hunting beyond the Wall. As for women, what wildling woman wouldn't want a prince in her bed? A slow smile crept across his face, A black cloak can't be turned. I'd be as good as any man...

“PRINCE THEON!” The sudden shout shattered his daydream. Kromm was loping across the ward. “The northmen-”

He felt a sudden sick sense of dread. “Is it the attack?”

Maester Luwin clutched his arm. “There’s still time. Raise a peace banner-”

“They’re fighting,” Kromm said urgently. “More men came up, hundreds of them, and at first they made to join the others. But now they’ve fallen on them!”

“Is it Asha?” Had she come to save him after all?

But Kromm gave a shake of his head. “No. These are northmen, I tell you. With a bloody man on their banner.”

The flayed man of the Dreadfort. Reek had belonged to the Bastard of Bolton before his capture, Theon recalled. It was hard to believe that a vile creature like him could sway the Boltons to change their allegiance, but nothing else made sense. “I’ll see this for myself,” Theon said.

Maester Luwin trailed after him. By the time they reached the battlements, dead men and dying horses were strewn about the market square outside the gates. He saw no battle lines, only a swirling chaos of banners and blades. Shouts and screams rang through the cold autumn air. Ser Rodrik seemed to have the numbers, but the Dreadfort men were better led, and had taken the others unawares. Theon watched them charge and wheel and charge again, chopping the larger force to bloody pieces every time they tried to form up between the houses. He could hear the crash of iron axeheads on oaken shields over the terrified trumpeting of a maimed horse. The inn was burning, he saw.

Black Lorren appeared beside him and stood silently for a time. The sun was low in the west, painting the fields and houses all a glowing red. A thin wavering cry of pain drifted over the walls, and a warhorn sounded off beyond the burning houses. Theon watched a wounded man drag himself painfully across the ground, smearing his life’s blood in the dirt as he struggled to reach the well that stood at the center of the market square. He died before he got there. He wore a leather jerkin and conical halfhelm, but no badge to tell which side he’d fought on.

The crows came in the blue dust, with the evening stars. “The Dothraki believe the stars are spirits of the valiant dead,” Theon said. Maester Luwin had told him that, a long time ago.

“Dothraki?”

“The horselords across the narrow sea.”

“Oh. Them.” Black Lorren frowned through his beard. “Savages believe all manner of foolish things.”

As the night grew darker and the smoke spread it was harder to make out what was happening below, but the din of steel gradually diminished to nothing, and the shouts and warhorns gave way to moans and piteous wailing. Finally a column of mounted men rode out of the drifting smoke. At their head was a knight in dark armor. His rounded helm gleamed a sullen red, and a pale pink cloak streamed from his shoulders. Outside the main gate he reined up, and one of his men shouted for the castle to open.

“Are you friend or foe?” Black Lorren bellowed down.

“Would a foe bring such fine gifts?” Red Helm waved a hand, and three corpses were dumped in front of the gates. A torch was waved above the bodies, so the defenders upon the walls might see the faces of the dead.

“The old castellan,” said Black Lorren.

“With Leobald Tallhart and Cley Cerwyn.” The boy lord had taken an arrow in the eye, and Ser Rodrik had lost his left arm at the elbow. Maester Luwin gave a wordless cry of dismay, turned away from the battlements, and fell to his knees sick.

“The great pig Manderly was too craven to leave White Harbor, or we would have brought him as well,” shouted Red Helm.

I am saved, Theon thought. So why did he feel so empty? This was victory, sweet victory, the deliverance he had prayed for. He glanced at Maester Luwin. To think how close I came to yielding, and taking the black...

“Open the gates for our friends.” Perhaps tonight Theon would sleep without fear of what his dreams might bring.

The Dreadfort men made their way across the moat and through the inner gates. Theon descended with Black Lorren and Maester Luwin to meet them in the yard. Pale red permons trailed from the ends of a few lances, but many more carried battle-axes and greatswords and shields hacked half to splinters. “How many men did you lose?” Theon asked Red Helm as he dismounted.

“Twenty or thirty.” The torchlight glittered off the chipped enamel of his visor. His helm and gorget were wrought in the shape of a man’s face and shoulders, skinless and bloody, mouth open in a silent howl of anguish.

“Ser Rodrik had you five-to-one.”

“Aye, but he thought us friends. A common mistake. When the old fool gave me his hand, I took half his arm instead. Then I let him see my face.” The man put both hands to his helm and lifted it off his head, holding it in the crook of his arm.

“Reek,” Theon said, disquieted. How did a serving man get such fine armor?

The man laughed. “The wretch is dead.” He stepped closer. “The girl’s fault. If she had not run so far, his horse would not have lamed, and we might have been able to flee. I gave him mine when I saw the riders from the ridge. I was done with her by then, and he liked to take his turn while they were still warm. I had to pull him off her and shove my clothes into his hands—calfskin boots and velvet doublet, silver-chased swordbelt, even my sable cloak. Ride for the Dreadfort, I told him, bring all the help you can. Take my horse, he’s swifter, and here, wear the ring my father gave me, so they’ll know you came from me. He’d learned better than to question me. By the time they put that arrow through his back, I’d smeared myself with the girl’s filth and dressed in his rags. They might have hanged me anyway, but it was the only chance I saw.” He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. “And now, my sweet prince, there was a woman promised me, if I brought two hundred men. Well, I brought three times as many, and no green boys nor fieldhands neither, but my father’s own garrison.”

Theon had given his word. This was not the time to flinch. Pay him his pound of flesh and deal with him later. “Harrag,” he said, “go to the kennels and bring Palla out for... ?”

“Ramsay.” There was a smile on his plump lips, but none in those pale eyes. “Snow, my wife called me before she ate her fingers, but I say Bolton.” His smile curdled. “So you’d offer me a kennel girl for my good service, is that the way of it?”

There was a tone in his voice Theon did not like, no more than he liked the insolent way the Dreadfort men were looking at him. “She was what was promised.”

“She smells of dogshit. I’ve had enough of bad smells, as it happens. I think I’ll have your bedwarmer instead. What do you call her? Kyra?”

“Are you mad?” Theon said angrily. “I’ll have you-”

The Bastard’s backhand caught him square, and his cheekbone shattered with a sickening crunch beneath the lobstered steel. The world vanished in a red roar of pain.

Sometime later, Theon found himself on the ground. He rolled onto his stomach and swallowed a mouthful of blood. Close the gates! he tried to shout, but it was too late. The Dreadfort men had cut down Red Rolfe and Kenned, and more were pouring through, a river of mail and sharp swords. There was a ringing in his ears, and horror all around him. Black Lorren had his sword out, but there were already four of them pressing in on him. He saw Ulf go down with a crossbow bolt through the belly as he ran for the Great Hall. Maester Luwin was trying to reach him when a knight on a warhorse planted a spear between his shoulders, then swung back to ride over him. Another man whipped a torch round and round his head and then lofted it toward the thatched roof of the stables. “Save me the Freys,” the Bastard was shouting as the flames roared upward, “and burn the rest. Burn it, burn it all.”

The last thing Theon Greyjoy saw was Smiler, kicking free of the burning stables with his mane ablaze, screaming, rearing...

TYRION

He dreamed of a cracked stone ceiling and the smells of blood and shit and burnt flesh. The air was full of acrid smoke. Men ere groaning and whimpering all around him, and from time to time a scream would pierce the air, thick with pain. When he tried to move, he found that he had fouled his own bedding. The smoke in the air made his eyes water. Am I crying? He must not let his father see. He was a Lannister of Casterly Rock. A lion, I must be a lion, live a lion, die a lion. He hurt so much, though. Too weak to groan, he lay in his own filth and shut his eyes. Nearby someone was cursing the gods in a heavy, monotonous voice. He listened to the blasphemies and wondered if he was dying. After a time the room faded.

He found himself outside the city, walking through a world without color. Ravens soared through a grey sky on wide black wings, while carrion crows rose from their feasts in furious clouds wherever he set his steps. White maggots burrowed through black corruption. The wolves were grey, and so were the silent sisters; together they stripped the flesh from the fallen. There were corpses strewn all over the tourney fields. The sun was a hot white penny, shining down upon the grey river as it rushed around the charred bones of sunken ships. From the pyres of the dead rose black columns of smoke and white-hot ashes. My work, thought Tyrion Lannister. They died at my command.

At first there was no sound in the world, but after a time he began to hear the voices of the dead, soft and terrible. They wept and moaned, they begged for an end to pain, they cried for help and wanted their mothers. Tyrion had never known his mother. He wanted Shae, but she was not there. He walked alone amidst grey shadows, trying to remember...

The silent sisters were stripping the dead men of their armor and clothes. All the bright dyes had leached out from the surcoats of the slain; they were garbed in shades of white and grey, and their blood was black and crusty. He watched their naked bodies lifted by arm and leg, to be carried swinging to the pyres to join their fellows. Metal and cloth were thrown in the back of a white wooden wagon, pulled by two tall black horses.

So many dead, so very many. Their corpses hung limply, their faces slack or stiff or swollen with gas, unrecognizable, hardly human. The garments the sisters took from them were decorated with black hearts, grey lions, dead flowers, and pale ghostly stags. Their armor was all dented and gashed, the chainmail riven, broken, slashed. Why did I kill them all? He had known once, but somehow he had forgotten.

He would have asked one of the silent sisters, but when he tried to speak he found he had no mouth. Smooth seamless skin covered his teeth. The discovery terrified him. How could he live without a mouth? He began to run. The city was not far. He would be safe inside the city, away from all these dead. He did not belong with the dead. He had no mouth, but he was still a living man. No, a lion, a lion, and alive. But when he reached the city walls, the gates were shut against him.

It was dark when he woke again. At first he could see nothing, but after a time the vague outlines of a bed appeared around him. The drapes were drawn, but he could see the shape of

carved bedposts, and the droop of the velvet canopy over his head. Under him was the yielding softness of a featherbed, and the pillow beneath his head was goose down. My own bed, I am in my own bed, in my own bedchamber.

It was warm inside the drapes, under the great heap of furs and blankets that covered him. He was sweating. Fever, he thought groggily. He felt so weak, and the pain stabbed through him when he struggled to lift his hand. He gave up the effort. His head felt enormous, as big as the bed, too heavy to raise from the pillow. His body he could scarcely feel at all. How did I come here? He tried to remember. The battle came back in fits and flashes. The fight along the river, the knight who'd offered up his gauntlet, the bridge of ships...

Ser Mandon. He saw the dead empty eyes, the reaching hand, the green fire shining against the white enamel plate. Fear swept over him in a cold rush; beneath the sheets he could feel his bladder letting go. He would have cried out, if he'd had a mouth. No, that was the dream, he thought, his head pounding. Help me, someone help me. Jaime, Shae, Mother, someone... Tasha...

No one heard. No one came. Alone in the dark, he fell back into piss scented sleep. He dreamed his sister was standing over his bed, with their lord father beside her, frowning. It had to be a dream, since Lord Tywin was a thousand leagues away, fighting Robb Stark in the west. Others came and went as well. Varys looked down on him and sighed, but Littlefinger made a quip. Bloody treacherous bastard, Tyrion thought venomously, we sent you to Bitterbridge and you never came back. Sometimes he could hear them talking to one another, but he did not understand the words. Their voices buzzed in his ears like wasps muffled in thick felt.

He wanted to ask if they'd won the battle. We must have, else I'd be a head on a spike somewhere. If I live, we won. He did not know what pleased him more: the victory, or the fact he had been able to reason it out. His wits were coming back to him, however slowly. That was good. His wits were all he had.

The next time he woke, the draperies had been pulled back, and Podrick Payne stood over him with a candle. When he saw Tyrion open his eyes he ran off. No, don't go, help me, help, he tried to call, but the best he could do was a muffled moan. I have no mouth. He raised a hand to his face, his every movement pained and fumbling. His fingers found stiff cloth where they should have found flesh, lips, teeth. Linen. The lower half of his face was bandaged tightly, a mask of hardened plaster with holes for breathing and feeding.

A short while later Pod reappeared. This time a stranger was with him, a maester chained and robed. "My lord, you must be still," the man murmured. "You are grievous hurt. You will do yourself great injury. Are you thirsty?"

He managed an awkward nod. The maester inserted a curved copper funnel through the feeding hole over his mouth and poured a slow trickle down his throat. Tyrion swallowed, scarcely tasting. Too late he realized the liquid was milk of the poppy. By the time the maester removed the funnel from his mouth, he was already spiraling back to sleep.

This time he dreamed he was at a feast, a victory feast in some great hall. He had a high seat on the dais, and men were lifting their goblets and hailing him as hero. Marillion was there, the

singer who'd journeyed with them through the Mountains of the Moon. He played his woodharp and sang of the imp's daring deeds. Even his father was smiling with approval. When the song was over, Jaime rose from his place, commanded Tyrion to kneel, and touched him first on one shoulder and then on the other with his golden sword, and he rose up a knight. Shae was waiting to embrace him. She took him by the hand, laughing and teasing, calling him her giant of Lannister.

He woke in darkness to a cold empty room. The draperies had been drawn again. Something felt wrong, turned around, though he could not have said what. He was alone once more. Pushing back the blankets, he tried to sit, but the pain was too much and he soon subsided, breathing raggedly. His face was the least part of it. His right side was one huge ache, and a stab of pain went through his chest whenever he lifted his arm. What's happened to me? Even the battle seemed half a dream when he tried to think back on it. I was hurt more badly than I knew Ser Mandon...

The memory frightened him, but Tyrion made himself hold it, turn it in his head, stare at it hard. He tried to kill me, no mistake. That part was not a dream. He would have cut me in half if Pod had not... Pod, where's Pod?

Gritting his teeth, he grabbed hold of the bed hangings and yanked. The drapes ripped free of the canopy overhead and tumbled down, half on the rushes and half on him. Even that small effort had dizzied him. The room whirled around him, all bare walls and dark shadows, with a single narrow window. He saw a chest he'd owned, an untidy pile of his clothing, his battered armor. This is not my bedchamber, he realized. Not even the Tower of the Hand. Someone had moved him. His shout of anger came out as a muffled moan. They have moved me here to die, he thought as he gave up the struggle and closed his eyes once more. The room was dank and cold, and he was burning.

He dreamed of a better place, a snug little cottage by the sunset sea. The walls were lopsided and cracked and the floor had been made of packed earth, but he had always been warm there, even when they let the fire go out. She used to tease me about that, he remembered. I never thought to feed the fire, that had always been a servant's task. "We have no servants," she would remind me, and I would say, "You have me, I'm your servant," and she would say, "A lazy servant. What do they do with lazy servants in Casterly Rock, my lord?" and he would tell her, "They kiss them." That would always make her giggle. "They do not neither. They beat them, I bet," she would say, but he would insist, "No, they kiss them, just like this." He would show her how. "They kiss their fingers first, every one, and they kiss their wrists, yes, and inside their elbows. Then they kiss their funny ears, all our servants have funny ears. Stop laughing! And they kiss their cheeks and they kiss their noses with the little bump in them, there, so, like that, and they kiss their sweet brows and their hair and their lips, their... mmmm... mouths... so..."

They would kiss for hours, and spend whole days doing no more than lolling in bed, listening to the waves, and touching each other. Her body was a wonder to him, and she seemed to find delight in his. Sometimes she would sing to him. I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair. "I love you, Tyrion," she would whisper before they went to sleep at night. "I love

your lips. I love your voice, and the words you say to me, and how you treat me gentle. I love your face.”

“My face?”

“Yes. Yes. I love your hands, and how you touch me. Your cock, I love your cock, I love how it feels when it’s in me.”

“It loves you too, my lady.”

“I love to say your name. Tyrion Lannister. It goes with mine. Not the Lannister, Vother part. Tyrion and Tysha. Tysha and Tyrion. Tyrion. My lord Tyrion...”

Lies, he thought, all feigned, all for gold, she was a whore, Jaime’s whore, Jaime’s gift, my lady of the lie. Her face seemed to fade away, dissolving behind a veil of tears, but even after she was gone he could still hear the faint, far-off sound of her voice, calling his name. my lord, can you hear me? My lord? Tyrion? My lord? My lord?”

Through a haze of popped sleep, he saw a soft pink face leaning over him. He was back in the dank room with the torn bed hangings, and the face was wrong, not hers, too round, with a brown fringe of beard. “Do you thirst, my lord? I have your milk, your good milk. You must not fight, no, don’t try to move, you need your rest.” He had the copper funnel in one damp pink hand and a flask in the other.

As the man leaned close, Tyrion’s fingers slid underneath his chain of many metals, grabbed, pulled. The maester dropped the flask, spilling milk of the poppy all over the blanket. Tyrion twisted until he could feel the links digging into the flesh of the man’s fat neck. “No. More,” he croaked, so hoarse he was not certain he had even spoken. But he must have, for the maester choked out a reply. “Unhand, please, my lord... need your milk, the pain... the chain, don’t, unhand, no...”

The pink face was beginning to purple when Tyrion let go. The maester reeled back, sucking in air. His reddened throat showed deep white gouges where the links had pressed. His eyes were white too. Tyrion raised a hand to his face and made a ripping motion over the hardened mask. And again. And again.

“You... you want the bandages off, is that it?” the maester said at last. “But I’m not to... that would be... be most unwise, my lord. You are not yet healed, the queen would...”

The mention of his sister made Tyrion growl. Are you one of hers, then? He pointed a finger at the maester, then coiled his hand into a fist. Crushing, choking, a promise, unless the fool did as he was bid.

Thankfully, he understood. “I... I will do as my lord commands, to be sure, but... this is unwise, your wounds.”

“Do. It.” Louder that time.

Bowing, the man left the room, only to return a few moments later, bearing a long knife with a slender sawtooth blade, a basin of water, a pile of soft cloths, and several flasks. By then Tyrion had managed to squirm backward a few inches, so he was half sitting against his pillow. The maester bade him be very still as he slid the tip of the knife in under his chin, beneath the mask.

A slip of the hand here, and Cersei will be free of me, he thought. He could feel the blade sawing through the stiffened linen, only inches above his throat.

Fortunately this soft pink man was not one of his sister's braver creatures. After a moment he felt cool air on his cheeks. There was pain as well, but he did his best to ignore that. The maester discarded the bandages, still crusty with potion. "Be still now, I must wash out the wound." His touch was gentle, the water warm and soothing. The wound, Tyrion thought, remembering a sudden flash of bright silver that seemed to pass just below his eyes. "This is like to sting some," the maester warned as he wet a cloth with wine that smelled of crushed herbs. It did more than sting. It traced a line of fire all the way across Tyrion's face, and twisted a burning poker up his nose. His fingers clawed the bedclothes and he sucked in his breath, but somehow he managed not to scream. The maester was clucking like an old hen. "It would have been wiser to leave the mask in place until the flesh had knit, my lord. Still, it looks clean, good, good. When we found you down in that cellar among the dead and dying, your wounds were filthy. One of your ribs was broken, doubtless you can feel it, the blow of some mace perhaps, or a fall, it's hard to say. And you took an arrow in the arm, there where it joins the shoulder. It showed signs of mortification, and for a time I feared you might lose the limb, but we treated it with boiling wine and maggots, and now it seems to be healing clean."

"Name," Tyrion breathed up at him. "Name."

The maester blinked. "Why, you are Tyrion Lannister, my lord. Brother to the queen. Do you remember the battle? Sometimes with head wounds—"

"Your name." His throat was raw, and his tongue had forgotten how to shape the words.

"I am Maester Ballabar."

"Ballabar," Tyrion repeated. "Bring me. Looking glass."

"my lord," the maester said, "I would not counsel... that might be, ah, unwise, as it were... your wound..."

"Bring it," he had to say. His mouth was stiff and sore, as if a punch had split his lip. "And drink. Wine. No poppy."

The maester rose flush-faced and hurried off. He came back with a flagon of pale amber wine and a small silvered looking glass in an ornate golden frame. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he poured half a cup of wine and held it to Tyrion's swollen lips. The trickle went down cool, though he could hardly taste it. "More," he said when the cup was empty. Maester Ballabar poured again. By the end of the second cup, Tyrion Lannister felt strong enough to face his face. He turned over the glass, and did not know whether he ought to laugh or cry. The gash was long and crooked, starting a hair under his left eye and ending on the right side of his jaw. Three-quarters of his nose was gone, and a chunk of his lip. Someone had sewn the torn flesh together with catgut, and their clumsy stitches were still in place across the seam of raw, red, half-healed flesh. "Pretty," he croaked, flinging the glass aside.

He remembered now. The bridge of boats, Ser Mandon Moore, a hand, a sword coming at his face. If I had not pulled back, that cut would have taken off the top of my head. Jaime had always said that Ser Mandon was the most dangerous of the Kingsguard, because his dead empty

eyes gave no hint to his intentions. I should never have trusted any of them. He'd known that Ser Meryn and Ser Boros were his sister's, and Ser Osmund later, but he had let himself believe that the others were not wholly lost to honor. Cersei must have paid him to see that I never came back from the battle. Why else? I never did Ser Mandon any harm that I know of. Tyrion touched his face, plucking at the proud flesh with blunt thick fingers. Another gift from my sweet sister.

The maester stood beside the bed like a goose about to take flight. "My lord, there, there will most like be a scar..."

"Most like?" His snort of laughter turned into a wince of pain. There would be a scar, to be sure. Nor was it likely that his nose would be growing back anytime soon. It was not as if his face had ever been fit to look at. "Teach me, not to, play with, axes." His grin felt tight. "Where, are we? What, what place?" It hurt to talk, but Tyrion had been too long in silence.

"Ah, you are in Maegor's Holdfast, my lord. A chamber over the Queen's Ballroom. Her Grace wanted you kept close, so she might watch over you herself."

I'll wager she did. "Return me," Tyrion commanded. "Own bed. Own chambers." Where I will have my own men about me, and my own maester too, if I find one I can trust.

"Your own... my lord, that would not be possible. The King's Hand has taken up residence in your former chambers."

"I Am. King's Hand." He was growing exhausted by the effort of speaking, and confused by what he was hearing.

Maester Ballabar looked distressed. "No, my lord, I... you were wounded, near death. Your lord father has taken up those duties now. Lord Tywin, he..."

"Here? "

"Since the night of the battle. Lord Tywin saved us all. The smallfolk say it was King Renly's ghost, but wiser men know better. It was your father and Lord Tyrell, with the Knight of Flowers and Lord Littlefinger. They rode through the ashes and took the usurper Stannis in the rear. It was a great victory, and now Lord Tywin has settled into the Tower of the Hand to help His Grace set the realm to rights, gods be praised."

"Gods be praised," Tyrion repeated hollowly. His bloody father and bloody Littlefinger and Renly's ghost? "I want..." Who do I want? He could not tell pink Ballabar to fetch him Shae. Who could he send for, who could he trust? Varys? Bronn? Ser Jacelyn? "...my squire," he finished. "Pod. Payne." It was Pod on the bridge of boats, the lad saved my life.

"The boy? The odd boy?"

"Odd boy. Podrick. Payne. You go. Send him."

"As you will, my lord." Maester Ballabar bobbed his head and hurried out. Tyrion could feel the strength seeping out of him as he waited. He wondered how long he had been here, asleep. Cersei would have me sleep forever, but I won't be so obliging.

Podrick Payne entered the bedchamber timid as a mouse. "My lord?" He crept close to the bed. How can a boy so bold in battle be so frightened in a sickroom? Tyrion wondered. "I meant to stay by you, but the maester sent me away."

“Send him away. Hear me. Talk’s hard. Need dreamwine. Dreamwine, not milk of the poppy. Go to Frenken. Frenken, not Ballabar. Watch him make it. Bring it here.” Pod stole a glance at Tyrion’s face, and just as quickly averted his eyes. Well, I cannot blame him for that. “I want,” Tyrion went on, “mine own. Guard. Bronn. Where’s Bronn?”

“They made him a knight.”

Even frowning hurt. “Find him. Bring him.”

“As you say. My lord. Bronn.”

Tyrion seized the lad’s wrist. “Ser Mandon?”

The boy flinched. “I n-never meant to k-k-k-k-”

“Dead? You’re, certain? Dead?”

He shuffled his feet, sheepish. “Drowned.”

“Good. Say nothing. Of him. Of me. Any of it. Nothing.”

By the time his squire left, the last of Tyrion’s strength was gone as well. He lay back and closed his eyes. Perhaps he would dream of Tysha again. I wonder how she’d like my face now, he thought bitterly.

JON

When Qhorin Halfhand told him to find some brush for a fire, Jon knew their end was near.

It will be good to feel warm again, if only for a little while, he told himself while he hacked bare branches from the trunk of a dead tree. Ghost sat on his haunches watching, silent as ever. Will he howl for me when I'm dead, as Bran's wolf howled when he fell? Jon wondered. Will Shaggydog howl, far off in Winterfell, and Grey Wind and Nymeria, wherever they might be?

The moon was rising behind one mountain and the sun sinking behind another as Jon struck sparks from flint and dagger, until finally a wisp of smoke appeared. Qhorin came and stood over him as the first flame rose up flickering from the shavings of bark and dead dry pine needles. "As shy as a maid on her wedding night," the big ranger said in a soft voice, "and near as fair. Sometimes a man forgets how pretty a fire can be."

He was not a man you'd expect to speak of maids and wedding nights. So far as Jon knew, Qhorin had spent his whole life in the Watch. Did he ever love a maid or have a wedding? He could not ask. Instead he fanned the fire. When the blaze was all a crackle, he peeled off his stiff gloves to warm his hands, and sighed, wondering if ever a kiss had felt as good. The warmth spread through his fingers like melting butter.

The Halfhand eased himself to the ground and sat cross-legged by the fire, the flickering light playing across the hard planes of his face. Only the two of them remained of the five rangers who had fled the Skirling Pass, back into the blue-grey wilderness of the Frostfangs.

At first Jon had nursed the hope that Squire Dalbridge would keep the wildlings bottled up in the pass. But when they'd heard the call of a far off horn every man of them knew the squire had fallen. Later they spied the eagle soaring through the dusk on great blue-grey wings and Stonesnake unslung his bow, but the bird flew out of range before he could so much as string it. Ebben spat and muttered darkly of wargs and skinchangers.

They glimpsed the eagle twice more the day after, and heard the hunting horn behind them echoing against the mountains. Each time it seemed a little louder, a little closer. When night fell, the Halfhand told Ebben to take the squire's garron as well as his own, and ride east for Mormont with all haste, back the way they had come. The rest of them would draw off the pursuit. "Send Jon," Ebben had urged. "He can ride as fast as me."

"Jon has a different part to play."

"He is half a boy still."

"No," said Qhorin, "he is a man of the Night's Watch."

When the moon rose, Ebben parted from them. Stonesnake went east with him a short way, then doubled back to obscure their tracks, and the three who remained set off toward the southwest.

After that the days and nights blurred one into the other. They slept in their saddles and stopped only long enough to feed and water the garrons, then mounted up again. Over bare rock they rode, through gloomy pine forests and drifts of old snow, over icy ridges and across shallow

rivers that had no names. Sometimes Qhorin or Stonesnake would loop back to sweep away their tracks, but it was a futile gesture. They were watched. At every dawn and every dusk they saw the eagle soaring between the peaks, no more than a speck in the vastness of the sky.

They were scaling a low ridge between two snowcapped peaks when a shadowcat came snarling from its lair, not ten yards away. The beast was gaunt and half-starved, but the sight of it sent Stonesnake's mare into a panic; she reared and ran, and before the ranger could get her back under control she had stumbled on the steep slope and broken a leg.

Ghost ate well that day, and Qhorin insisted that the rangers mix some of the garron's blood with their oats, to give them strength. The taste of that foul porridge almost choked Jon, but he forced it down. They each cut a dozen strips of raw stringy meat from the carcass to chew on as they rode, and left the rest for the shadowcats.

There was no question of riding double. Stonesnake offered to lay in wait for the pursuit and surprise them when they came. Perhaps he could take a few of them with him down to hell. Qhorin refused. "if any man in the Night's Watch can make it through the Frostfangs alone and afoot, it is you, brother. You can go over mountains that a horse must go around. Make for the Fist. Tell Mormont what Jon saw, and how. Tell him that the old powers are waking, that he faces giants and wargs and worse. Tell him that the trees have eyes again."

He has no chance, Jon thought when he watched Stonesnake vanish over a snow-covered ridge, a tiny black bug crawling across a rippling expanse of white.

After that, every night seemed colder than the night before, and more lonely. Ghost was not always with them, but he was never far either. Even when they were apart, Jon sensed his nearness. He was glad for that. The Halfhand was not the most companionable of men. Qhorin's long grey braid swung slowly with the motion of his horse. Often they would ride for hours without a word spoken, the only sounds the soft scrape of horseshoes on stone and the keening of the wind, which blew endlessly through the heights. When he slept, he did not dream; not of wolves, nor his brothers, nor anything. Even dreams cannot live up here, he told himself.

"Is your sword sharp, Jon Snow?" asked Qhorin Halfhand across the flickering fire.

"My sword is Valyrian steel. The Old Bear gave it to me."

"Do you remember the words of your vow?"

"Yes." They were not words a man was like to forget. Once said, they could never be unsaid. They changed your life forever.

"Say them again with me, Jon Snow."

"If you like." Their voices blended as one beneath the rising moon, while Ghost listened and the mountains themselves bore witness. "Night gathers, and now my watch begins. It shall not end until my death. I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post. I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men. I pledge my life and honor to the Night's Watch, for this night and all the nights to come."

When they were done, there was no sound but the faint crackle of the flames and a distant sigh of wind. Jon opened and closed his burnt fingers, holding tight to the words in his mind, praying that his father's gods would give him the strength to die bravely when his hour came. It would not be long now. The garrons were near the end of their strength. Qhorin's mount would not last another day, Jon suspected.

The flames were burning low by then, the warmth fading. "The fire will soon go out," Qhorin said, "but if the Wall should ever fall, all the fires will go out."

There was nothing Jon could say to that. He nodded.

"We may escape them yet," the ranger said. "Or not."

"I'm not afraid to die." It was only half a lie.

"It may not be so easy as that, Jon."

He did not understand. "What do you mean?"

"If we are taken, you must yield."

"Yield?" He blinked in disbelief. The wildlings did not make captives of the men they called the crows. They killed them, except for... "They only spare oathbreakers. Those who join them, like Mance Rayder."

"And you."

"No." He shook his head. "Never. I won't."

"You will. I command it of you."

"Command it? But... "

"Our honor means no more than our lives, so long as the realm is safe. Are you a man of the Night's Watch?"

"Yes, but-"

"There is no but, Jon Snow. You are, or you are not."

Jon sat up straight. "I am."

"Then hear me. If we are taken, you will go over to them, as the wildling girl you captured once urged you. They may demand that you cut your cloak to ribbons, that you swear them an oath on your father's grave, that you curse your brothers and your Lord Commander. You must not balk, whatever is asked of you. Do as they bid you... but in your heart, remember who and what you are. Ride with them, eat with them, fight with them, for as long as it takes. And watch."

"For what?" Jon asked.

"Would that I knew," said Qhorin. "Your wolf saw their diggings in the valley of the Milkwater. What did they seek, in such a bleak and distant place? Did they find it? That is what you must learn, before you return to Lord Mormont and your brothers. That is the duty I lay on you, Jon Snow."

"I'll do as you say," Jon said reluctantly, "but... you will tell them, won't you? The Old Bear, at least? You'll tell him that I never broke my oath."

Qhorin Halfhand gazed at him across the fire, his eyes lost in pools of shadow. "When I see him next. I swear it." He gestured at the fire. "More wood. I want it bright and hot."

Jon went to cut more branches, snapping each one in two before tossing it into the flames. The tree had been dead a long time, but it seemed to live again in the fire, as fiery dancers woke within each stick of wood to whirl and spin in their glowing gowns of yellow, red, and orange.

“Enough,” Qhorin said abruptly. “Now we ride.”

“Ride?” It was dark beyond the fire, and the night was cold. “Ride where?”

“Back.” Qhorin mounted his weary garron one more time. “The fire will draw them past, I hope. Come, brother.”

Jon pulled on his gloves again and raised his hood. Even the horses seemed reluctant to leave the fire. The sun was long gone, and only the cold silver shine of the half-moon remained to light their way over the treacherous ground that lay behind them. He did not know what Qhorin had in mind, but perhaps it was a chance. He hoped so. I do not want to play the oathbreaker, even for good reason.

They went cautiously, moving as silent as man and horse could move, retracing their steps until they reached the mouth of a narrow defile where an icy little stream emerged from between two mountains. Jon remembered the place. They had watered the horses here before the sun went down.

“The water’s icing up,” Qhorin observed as he turned aside, “Else we’d ride in the streambed. But if we break the ice, they are like to see. Keep close to the cliffs. There’s a crook a half mile on that will hide us.” He rode into the defile. Jon gave one last wistful look to their distant fire, and followed.

The farther in they went, the closer the cliffs pressed to either side. They followed the moonlit ribbon of stream back toward its source. Icicles bearded its stony banks, but Jon could still hear the sound of rushing water beneath the thin hard crust.

A great jumble of fallen rock blocked their way partway up, where a section of the cliff face had fallen, but the surefooted little garrons were able to pick their way through. Beyond, the walls pinched in sharply, and the stream led them to the foot of a tall twisting waterfall. The air was full of mist, like the breath of some vast cold beast. The tumbling waters shone silver in the moonlight. Jon looked about in dismay. There is no way out. He and Qhorin might be able to climb the cliffs, but not with the horses. He did not think they would last long afoot.

“Quickly now,” the Halfhand commanded. The big man on the small horse rode over the ice-slick stones, right into the curtain of water, and vanished. When he did not reappear, Jon put his heels into his horse and went after. His garron did his best to shy away. The falling water slapped at them with frozen fists, and the shock of the cold seemed to stop Jon’s breath.

Then he was through; drenched and shivering, but through.

The cleft in the rock was barely large enough for man and horse to pass, but beyond, the walls opened up and the floor turned to soft sand. Jon could feel the spray freezing in his beard. Ghost burst through the waterfall in an angry rush, shook droplets from his fur, sniffed at the darkness suspiciously, then lifted a leg against one rocky wall. Qhorin had already dismounted. Jon did the same. “You knew this place was here.”

“When I was no older than you, I heard a brother tell how he followed a shadowcat through these falls.” He unsaddled his horse, removed her bit and bridle, and ran his fingers through her shaggy mane. “There is a way through the heart of the mountain. Come dawn, if they have not found us, we will press on. The first watch is mine, brother.” Qhorin seated himself on the sand, his back to a wall, no more than a vague black shadow in the gloom of the cave. Over the rush of falling waters, Jon heard a soft sound of steel on leather that could only mean that the Halfhand had drawn his sword.

He took off his wet cloak, but it was too cold and damp here to strip down any further. Ghost stretched out beside him and licked his glove before curling up to sleep. Jon was grateful for his warmth. He wondered if the fire was still burning outside, or if it had gone out by now. If the Wall should ever fall, all the fires will go out. The moon shone through the curtain of falling water to lay a shimmering pale stripe across the sand, but after a time that too faded and went dark.

Sleep came at last, and with it nightmares. He dreamed of burning castles and dead men rising unquiet from their graves. It was still dark when Qhorin woke him. While the Halfhand slept, Jon sat with his back to the cave wall, listening to the water and waiting for the dawn.

At break of day, they each chewed a half-frozen strip of horsemeat, then saddled their garrons once again, and fastened their black cloaks around their shoulders. During his watch the Halfhand had made a halfdozen torches, soaking bundles of dry moss with the oil he carried in his saddlebag. He lit the first one now and led the way down into the dark, holding the pale flame up before him. Jon followed with the horses. The stony path twisted and turned, first down, then up, then down more steeply. In spots it grew so narrow it was hard to convince the garrons they could squeeze through. By the time we come out we will have lost them, he told himself as they went. Not even an eagle can see through solid stone. We will have lost them, and we will ride hard for the Fist, and tell the Old Bear all we know.

But when they emerged back into the light long hours later, the eagle was waiting for them, perched on a dead tree a hundred feet up the slope. Ghost went bounding up the rocks after it, but the bird flapped its wings and took to the air.

Qhorin’s mouth tightened as he followed its flight with his eyes.

“Here is as good a place as any to make a stand,” he declared. “The mouth of the cave shelters us from above, and they cannot get behind us without passing through the mountain. Is your sword sharp, Jon Snow?”

“Yes,” he said.

“We’ll feed the horses. They’ve served us bravely, poor beasts.”

Jon gave his garron the last of the oats and stroked his shaggy mane while Ghost prowled restlessly amongst the rocks. He pulled his gloves on tighter and flexed his burnt fingers. I am the shield that guards the realms of men.

A hunting horn echoed through the mountains, and a moment later Jon heard the baying of hounds. “They will be with us soon,” announced Qhorin. “Keep your wolf in hand.”

“Ghost, to me,” Jon called. The direwolf returned reluctantly to his side, tail held stiffly behind him.

The wildlings came boiling over a ridge not half a mile away. Their hounds ran before them, snarling grey-brown beasts with more than a little wolf in their blood. Ghost bared his teeth, his fur bristling. “Easy,” Jon murmured. “Stay.” Overhead he heard a rustle of wings. The eagle landed on an outcrop of rock and screamed in triumph.

The hunters approached warily, perhaps fearing arrows. Jon counted fourteen, with eight dogs. Their large round shields were made of skins stretched over woven wicker and painted with skulls. About half of them hid their faces behind crude helms of wood and boiled leather. On either wing, archers notched shafts to the strings of small wood-and-horn bows, but did not loose. The rest seemed to be armed with spears and mauls. One had a chipped stone axe. They wore only what bits of armor they had looted from dead rangers or stolen during raids. Wildlings did not mine or smelt, and there were few smiths and fewer forges north of the Wall.

Qhorin drew his longsword. The tale of how he had taught himself to fight with his left hand after losing half of his right was part of his legend; it was said that he handled a blade better now than he ever had before. Jon stood shoulder to shoulder with the big ranger and pulled Longclaw from its sheath. Despite the chill in the air, sweat stung his eyes.

Ten yards below the cave mouth the hunters halted. Their leader came on alone, riding a beast that seemed more goat than horse, from the surefooted way it climbed the uneven slope. As man and mount grew nearer Jon could hear them clattering; both were armored in bones. Cow bones, sheep bones, the bones of goats and aurochs and elk, the great bones of the hairy mammoths... and human bones as well.

“Rattleshirt,” Qhorin called down, icy-polite.

“To crows I be the Lord o’ Bones.” The rider’s helm was made from the broken skull of a giant, and all up and down his arms bearclaws had been sewn to his boiled leather.

Qhorin snorted. “I see no lord. Only a dog dressed in chickenbones, who rattles when he rides.”

The wildling hissed in anger, and his mount reared. He did rattle, Jon could hear it; the bones were strung together loosely, so they clacked and clattered when he moved. “It’s your bones I’ll be rattling soon, Halfhand. I’ll boil the flesh off you and make a byrnie from your ribs. I’ll carve your teeth to cast me runes, and eat me oaten porridge from your skull.”

“If you want my bones, come get them.”

That, Rattleshirt seemed reluctant to do. His numbers meant little in the close confines of the rocks where the black brothers had taken their stand; to winkle them out of the cave the wildlings would need to come up two at a time. But another of his company edged a horse up beside him, one of the fighting women called spearwives. “We are four-and-ten to two, crows, and eight dogs to your wolf,” she called. “Fight or run, you are ours.”

“Show them,” commanded Rattleshirt.

The woman reached into a bloodstained sack and drew out a trophy. Ebben had been bald as an egg, so she dangled the head by an ear. “He died brave,” she said.

“But he died,” said Rattleshirt, “same like you.” He freed his battleaxe, brandishing it above his head. Good steel it was, with a wicked gleam to both blades; Ebben was never a man to neglect his weapons. The other wildlings crowded forward beside him, yelling taunts. A few chose Jon for their mockery. “Is that your wolf, boy?” a skinny youth called, unlimbering a stone flail. “He’ll be my cloak before the sun is down.” On the other side of the line, another spearwife opened her ragged furs to show Jon a heavy white breast. “Does the baby want his momma? Come, have a suck o’ this, boy.” The dogs were barking too.

“They would shame us into folly.” Qhorin gave Jon a long look. “Remember your orders.”

“Belike we need to flush the crows,” Rattleshirt bellowed over the clamor. “Feather them!”

“No!” The word burst from Jon’s lips before the bowmen could loose. He took two quick steps forward. “We yield!”

“They warned me bastard blood was craven,” he heard Qhorin Halfhand say coldly behind him. “I see it is so. Run to your new masters, coward.”

Face reddening, Jon descended the slope to where Rattleshirt sat his horse. The wildling stared at him through the eyeholes of his helm, and said, “The free folk have no need of cravens.”

“He is no craven.” One of the archers pulled off her sewn sheepskin helm and shook out a head of shaggy red hair. “This is the Bastard o’ Winterfell, who spared me. Let him live.”

Jon met Ygritte’s eyes, and had no words.

“Let him die,” insisted the Lord of Bones. “The black crow is a tricky bird. I trust him not.”

On a rock above them, the eagle flapped its wings and split the air with a scream of fury.

“The bird hates you, Jon Snow,” said Ygritte. “And well he might. He was a man, before you killed him.”

“I did not know,” said Jon truthfully, trying to remember the face of the man he had slain in the pass. “You told me Mance would take me.”

“And he will,” Ygritte said.

“Mance is not here,” said Rattleshirt. “Ragwyle, gut him.”

The big spearwife narrowed her eyes and said, “If the crow would join the free folk, let him show us his prowess and prove the truth of him.”

“I’ll do whatever you ask.” The words came hard, but Jon said them.

Rattleshirt’s bone armor clattered loudly as he laughed. “Then kill the Halfhand, bastard.”

“As if he could,” said Qhorin. “Turn, Snow, and die.”

And then Qhorin’s sword was coming at him and somehow Longclaw leapt upward to block. The force of impact almost knocked the bastard blade from Jon’s hand, and sent him staggering backward. You must not balk, whatever is asked of you. He shifted to a two-hand grip, quick enough to deliver a stroke of his own, but the big ranger brushed it aside with contemptuous ease. Back and forth they went, black cloaks swirling, the youth’s quickness against the savage strength of Qhorin’s left-hand cuts. The Halfhand’s longsword seemed to be everywhere at once, raining down from one side and then the other, driving him where he would, keeping him off balance. Already he could feel his arms growing numb.

Even when Ghost's teeth closed savagely around the ranger's calf, somehow Qhorin kept his feet. But in that instant, as he twisted, the opening was there. Jon planted and pivoted. The ranger was leaning away, and for an instant it seemed that Jon's slash had not touched him. Then a string of red tears appeared across the big man's throat, bright as a ruby necklace, and the blood gushed out of him, and Qhorin Halfhand fell.

Ghost's muzzle was dripping red, but only the point of the bastard blade was stained, the last half inch. Jon pulled the direwolf away and knelt with one arm around him. The light was already fading in Qhorin's eyes. "...sharp," he said, lifting his maimed fingers. Then his hand fell, and he was gone.

He knew, he thought numbly. He knew what they would ask of me.

He thought of Samwell Tarly then, of Grenn and Dolorous Edd, of Pyp and Toad back at Castle Black. Had he lost them all, as he had lost Bran and Rickon and Robb? Who was he now? What was he?

"Get him up." Rough hands dragged him to his feet. Jon did not resist. "Do you have a name?" Ygritte answered for him. "His name is Jon Snow. He is Eddard Stark's blood, of Winterfell." Ragwyle laughed. "Who would have thought it? Qhorin Halfhand slain by some lordling's byblow."

"Gut him." That was Rattleshirt, still ahorse. The eagle flew to him and perched atop his bony helm, screeching.

"He yielded," Ygritte reminded them.

"Aye, and slew his brother," said a short homely man in a rust-eaten iron halfhelm.

Rattleshirt rode closer, bones clattering. "The wolf did his work for him. It were foully done. The Halfhand's death was mine."

"We all saw how eager you were to take it," mocked Ragwyle.

"He is a warg," said the Lord of Bones, "and a crow. I like him not."

"A warg he may be," Ygritte said, "but that has never frightened us." Others shouted agreement. Behind the eyeholes of his yellowed skull Rattleshirt's stare was malignant, but he yielded grudgingly. These are a free folk indeed, thought Jon.

They burned Qhorin Halfhand where he'd fallen, on a pyre made of pine needles, brush, and broken branches. Some of the wood was still green, and it burned slow and smoky, sending a black plume up into the bright hard blue of the sky. Afterward Rattleshirt claimed some charred bones, while the others threw dice for the ranger's gear. Ygritte won his cloak.

"Will we return by the Skirling Pass?" Jon asked her. He did not know if he could face those heights again, or if his garron could survive a second crossing.

"No," she said. "There's nothing behind us." The look she gave him was sad. "By now Mance is well down the Milkwater, marching on your Wall."

BRAN

The ashes fell like a soft grey snow.

He padded over dry needles and brown leaves, to the edge of the wood where the pines grew thin. Beyond the open fields he could see the great piles of man-rock stark against the swirling flames. The wind blew hot and rich with the smell of blood and burnt meat, so strong he began to slaver.

Yet as one smell drew them onward, others warned them back. He sniffed at the drifting smoke. Men, many men, many horses, and fire, fire, fire. No smell was more dangerous, not even the hard cold smell of iron, the stuff of manclaws and hardskin. The smoke and ash clouded his eyes, and in the sky he saw a great winged snake whose roar was a river of flame. He bared his teeth, but then the snake was gone. Behind the cliffs tall fires were eating up the stars.

All through the night the fires crackled, and once there was a great roar and a crash that made the earth jump under his feet. Dogs barked and whined and horses screamed in terror. Howls shuddered through the night; the howls of the man-pack, wails of fear and wild shouts, laughter and screams. No beast was as noisy as man. He pricked up his ears and listened, and his brother growled at every sound. They prowled under the trees as a piney wind blew ashes and embers through the sky. In time the flames began to dwindle, and then they were gone. The sun rose grey and smoky that morning.

Only then did he leave the trees, stalking slow across the fields. His brother ran with him, drawn to the smell of blood and death. They padded silent through the dens the men had built of wood and grass and mud. Many and more were burned and many and more were collapsed; others stood as they had before. Yet nowhere did they see or scent a living man. Crows blanketed the bodies and leapt into the air screeching when his brother and he came near. The wild dogs slunk away before them.

Beneath the great grey cliffs a horse was dying noisily, struggling to rise on a broken leg and screaming when he fell. His brother circled round him, then tore out his throat while the horse kicked feebly and rolled his eyes. When he approached the carcass his brother snapped at him and laid back his ears, and he cuffed him with a forepaw and bit his leg. They fought amidst the grass and dirt and falling ashes beside the dead horse, until his brother rolled on his back in submission, tail tucked low. One more bite at his upturned throat; then he fed, and let his brother feed, and licked the blood off his black fur.

The dark place was pulling at him by then, the house of whispers where all men were blind. He could feel its cold fingers on him. The stony smell of it was a whisper up the nose. He struggled against the pull. He did not like the darkness. He was wolf. He was hunter and stalker and slayer, and he belonged with his brothers and sisters in the deep woods, running free beneath a starry sky. He sat on his haunches, raised his head, and howled. I will not go, he cried. I am wolf, I will not go. Yet even so the darkness thickened, until it covered his eyes and filled his nose and stopped his ears, so he could not see or smell or hear or run, and the grey cliffs were gone and

the dead horse was gone and his brother was gone and all was black and still and black and cold and black and dead and black...

"Bran," a voice was whispering softly. "Bran, come back. Come back now, Bran. Bran..."

He closed his third eye and opened the other two, the old two, the blind two. In the dark place all men were blind. But someone was holding him. He could feel arms around him, the warmth of a body snuggled close. He could hear Hodor singing "Hodor, hodor, hodor," quietly to himself.

"Bran?" It was Meera's voice. "You were thrashing, making terrible noises. What did you see?"

"Winterfell." His tongue felt strange and thick in his mouth. One day when I come back I won't know how to talk anymore. "It was Winterfell. It was all on fire. There were horse smells, and steel, and blood. They killed everyone, Meera."

He felt her hand on his face, stroking back his hair. "You're all sweaty," she said. "Do you need a drink?"

"A drink," he agreed. She held a skin to his lips, and Bran swallowed so fast the water ran out of the corner of his mouth. He was always weak and thirsty when he came back. And hungry too. He remembered the dying horse, the taste of blood in his mouth, the smell of burnt flesh in the morning air. "How long?"

"Three days," said Jojen. The boy had come up softfoot, or perhaps he had been there all along; in this blind black world, Bran could not have said. "We were afraid for you."

"I was with Summer," Bran said.

"Too long. You'll starve yourself. Meera dribbled a little water down your throat, and we smeared honey on your mouth, but it is not enough."

"I ate," said Bran. "We ran down an elk and had to drive off a treecat that tried to steal him." The cat had been tan-and-brown, only half the size of the direwolves, but fierce. He remembered the musky smell of him, and the way he had snarled down at them from the limb of the oak.

"The wolf ate," Jojen said. "Not you. Take care, Bran. Remember who you are."

He remembered who he was all too well; Bran the boy, Bran the broken. Better Bran the beastling. Was it any wonder he would sooner dream his Summer dreams, his wolf dreams? Here in the chill damp darkness of the tomb his third eye had finally opened. He could reach Summer whenever he wanted, and once he had even touched Ghost and talked to Jon. Though maybe he had only dreamed that. He could not understand why Jojen was always trying to pull him back now. Bran used the strength of his arms to squirm to a sitting position. "I have to tell Osha what I saw. Is she here? Where did she go?"

The wildling woman herself gave answer. "Nowhere, m'lord. I've had my fill o' blundering in the black." He heard the scrape of a heel on stone, turned his head toward the sound, but saw nothing. He thought he could smell her, but he wasn't sure. All of them stank alike, and he did not have Summer's nose to tell one from the other. "Last night I pissed on a king's foot," Osha went on. "Might be it was morning, who can say? I was sleeping, but now I'm not." They all slept a lot, not only Bran. There was nothing else to do, Sleep and eat and sleep again, and sometimes talk a little... but not too much, and only in whispers, just to be safe. Osha might have

liked it better if they had never talked at all, but there was no way to quiet Rickon, or to stop Hodor from muttering, “Hodor, hodor, hodor,” endlessly to himself.

“Osha,” Bran said, “I saw Winterfell burning.” Off to his left, he could hear the soft sound of Rickon’s breathing.

“A dream,” said Osha.

“A wolf dream,” said Bran. “I smelled it too. Nothing smells like fire, or blood.”

“Whose blood?”

“Men, horses, dogs, everyone. We have to go see.”

“This scrawny skin of mine’s the only one I got,” said Osha. “That squid prince catches hold o’ me, they’ll strip it off my back with a whip.”

Meera’s hand found Bran’s in the darkness and gave his fingers a squeeze. “I’ll go if you’re afraid.”

Bran heard fingers fumbling at leather, followed by the sound of steel on flint. Then again. A spark flew, caught. Osha blew softly. A long pale flame awoke, stretching upward like a girl on her toes. Osha’s face floated above it. She touched the flame with the head of a torch. Bran had to squint as the pitch began to burn, filling the world with orange glare. The light woke Rickon, who sat up yawning.

When the shadows moved, it looked for an instant as if the dead were rising as well. Lyanna and Brandon, Lord Rickard Stark their father, Lord Edwyle his father, Lord Willam and his brother Artos the Implacable, Lord Donnor and Lord Beron and Lord Rodwell, one-eyed Lord Jonnel, Lord Barth and Lord Brandon and Lord Cregan who had fought the Dragonknight. On their stone chairs they sat with stone wolves at their feet. This was where they came when the warmth had seeped out of their bodies; this was the dark hall of the dead, where the living feared to tread.

And in the mouth of the empty tomb that waited for Lord Eddard Stark, beneath his stately granite likeness, the six fugitives huddled round their little cache of bread and water and dried meat. “Little enough left,” Osha muttered as she blinked down on their stores. “I’d need to go up soon to steal food in any case, or we’d be down to eating Hodor.”

“Hodor,” Hodor said, grinning at her.

“Is it day or night up there?” Osha wondered. “I’ve lost all count o’ such.”

“Day,” Bran told her, “but it’s dark from all the smoke.”

“M’lord is certain?”

Never moving his broken body, he reached out all the same, and for an instant he was seeing double. There stood Osha holding the torch, and Meera and Jojen and Hodor, and the double row of tall granite pillars and long dead lords behind them stretching away into darkness... but there was Winterfell as well, grey with drifting smoke, the massive oak-and-iron gates charred and askew, the drawbridge down in a tangle of broken chains and missing planks. Bodies floated in the moat, islands for the crows.

“Certain,” he declared.

Osha chewed on that a moment. "I'll risk a look then. I want the lot o' you close behind. Meera, get Bran's basket."

"Are we going home?" Rickon asked excitedly. "I want my horse. And I want applecakes and butter and honey, and Shaggy. Are we going where Shaggydog is?"

"Yes," Bran promised, "but you have to be quiet."

Meera strapped the wicker basket to Hodor's back and helped lift Bran into it, easing his useless legs through the holes. He had a queer flutter in his belly. He knew what awaited them above, but that did not make it any less fearful. As they set off, he turned to give his father one last look, and it seemed to Bran that there was a sadness in Lord Eddard's eyes, as if he did not want them to go. We have to, he thought. It's time.

Osha carried her long oaken spear in one hand and the torch in the other. A naked sword hung down her back, one of the last to bear Mikken's mark. He had forged it for Lord Eddard's tomb, to keep his ghost at rest. But with Mikken slain and the ironmen guarding the armory, good steel had been hard to resist, even if it meant grave-robbing. Meera had claimed Lord Rickard's blade, though she complained that it was too heavy. Brandon took his namesake's, the sword made for the uncle he had never known. He knew he would not be much use in a fight, but even so the blade felt good in his hand.

But it was only a game, and Bran knew it.

Their footsteps echoed through the cavernous crypts. The shadows behind them swallowed his father as the shadows ahead retreated to unveil other statues; no mere lords, these, but the old Kings in the North. On their brows they wore stone crowns. Torrhen Stark, the King Who Knelt. Edwyn the Spring King. Theon Stark, the Hungry Wolf. Brandon the Burner and Brandon the Shipwright. Jorah and Jonos, Brandon the Bad, Walton the Moon King, Edderion the Bridegroom, Eyrion, Benjen the Sweet and Benjen the Bitter, King Edrick Snowbeard. Their faces were stern and strong, and some of them had done terrible things, but they were Starks every one, and Bran knew all their tales. He had never feared the crypts; they were part of his home and who he was, and he had always known that one day he would lie here too.

But now he was not so certain. If I go up, will I ever come back down? Where will I go when I die?

"Wait," Osha said when they reached the twisting stone stairs that led up to the surface, and down to the deeper levels where kings more ancient still sat their dark thrones. She handed Meera the torch. "I'll grope my way up." For a time they could hear the sound of her footfalls, but they grew softer and softer until they faded away entirely. "Hodor," said Hodor nervously.

Bran had told himself a hundred times how much he hated hiding down here in the dark, how much he wanted to see the sun again, to ride his horse through wind and rain. But now that the moment was upon him, he was afraid. He'd felt safe in the darkness; when you could not even find your own hand in front of your face, it was easy to believe that no enemies could ever find you either. And the stone lords had given him courage. Even when he could not see them, he had known they were there.

It seemed a long while before they heard anything again. Bran had begun to fear that something had happened to Osha. His brother was squirming restlessly. "I want to go home!" he said loudly. Hodor bobbed his head and said, "Hodor." Then they heard the footsteps again, growing louder, and after a few minutes Osha emerged into the light, looking grim. "Something is blocking the door. I can't move it."

"Hodor can move anything," said Bran.

Osha gave the huge stableboy an appraising look. "Might be he can. Come on, then."

The steps were narrow, so they had to climb in single file. Osha led. Behind came Hodor, with Bran crouched low on his back so his head wouldn't hit the ceiling. Meera followed with the torch, and Jojen brought up the rear, leading Rickon by the hand. Around and around they went, and up and up. Bran thought he could smell smoke now, but perhaps that was only the torch.

The door to the crypts was made of ironwood. It was old and heavy, and lay at a slant to the ground. Only one person could approach it at a time. Osha tried once more when she reached it, but Bran could see that it was not budging. "Let Hodor try."

They had to pull Bran from his basket first, so he would not get squished. Meera squatted beside him on the steps, one arm thrown protectively across his shoulders, as Osha and Hodor traded places. "Open the door, Hodor," Bran said.

The huge stableboy put both hands flat on the door, pushed, and grunted. "Hodor?" He slammed a fist against the wood, and it did not so much as jump. "Hodor."

"Use your back," urged Bran. "And your legs."

Turning, Hodor put his back to the wood and shoved. Again. Again. "Hodor!" He put one foot on a higher step so he was bent under the slant of the door and tried to rise. This time the wood groaned and creaked. "Hodor!" The other foot came up a step, and Hodor spread his legs apart, braced, and straightened. His face turned red, and Bran could see cords in his neck bulging as he strained against the weight above him. "Hodor hodor hodor hodor hodor HODOR!" From above came a dull rumble. Then suddenly the door jerked upward and a shaft of daylight fell across Bran's face, blinding him for a moment. Another shove brought the sound of shifting stone, and then the way was open. Osha poked her spear through and slid out after it, and Rickon squirmed through Meera's legs to follow. Hodor shoved the door open all the way and stepped to the surface. The Reeds had to carry Bran up the last few steps.

The sky was a pale grey, and smoke eddied all around them. They stood in the shadow of the First Keep, or what remained of it. One whole side of the building had torn loose and fallen away. Stone and shattered gargoyles lay strewn across the yard. They fell just where I did, Bran thought when he saw them. Some of the gargoyles had broken into so many pieces it made him wonder how he was alive at all. Nearby some crows were pecking at a body crushed beneath the tumbled stone, but he lay facedown and Bran could not say who he was.

The First Keep had not been used for many hundreds of years, but now it was more of a shell than ever. The floors had burned inside it, and all the beams. Where the wall had fallen away, they could see right into the rooms, even into the privy. Yet behind, the broken tower still stood, no more burned than before. Jojen Reed was coughing from the smoke. "Take me home!"

Rickon demanded. "I want to be home!" Hodor stomped in a circle. "Hodor," he whimpered in a small voice. They stood huddled together with ruin and death all around them.

"We made noise enough to wake a dragon," Osha said, "but there's no one come. The castle's dead and burned, just as Bran dreamed, but we had best-" She broke off suddenly at a noise behind them, and whirled with her spear at the ready.

Two lean dark shapes emerged from behind the broken tower, padding slowly through the rubble. Rickon gave a happy shout of "Shaggy!" and the black direwolf came bounding toward him. Summer advanced more slowly, rubbed his head up against Bran's arm, and licked his face.

"We should go," said Jojen. "So much death will bring other wolves besides Summer and Shaggydog, and not all on four feet."

"Aye, soon enough," Osha agreed, "but we need food, and there may be some survived this, Stay together. Meera, keep your shield up and guard our backs."

It took the rest of the morning to make a slow circuit of the castle. The great granite walls remained, blackened here and there by fire but otherwise untouched. But within, all was death and destruction. The doors of the Great Hall were charred and smoldering, and inside the rafters had given way and the whole roof had crashed down onto the floor. The green and yellow panes of the glass gardens were all in shards, the trees and fruits and flowers torn up or left exposed to die. Of the stables, made of wood and thatch, nothing remained but ashes, embers, and dead horses. Bran thought of his Dancer, and wanted to weep. There was a shallow steaming lake beneath the Library Tower, and hot water gushing from a crack in its side. The bridge between the Bell Tower and the rookery had collapsed into the yard below, and Maester Luwin's turret was gone. They saw a dull red glow shining up through the narrow cellar windows beneath the Great Keep, and a second fire still burning in one of the storehouses.

Osha called softly through the blowing smoke as they went, but no one answered. They saw one dog worrying at a corpse, but he ran when he caught the scents of the direwolves; the rest had been slain in the kennels. The maester's ravens were paying court to some of the corpses, while the crows from the broken tower attended others. Bran recognized Poxym Tym, even though someone had taken an axe to his face. One charred corpse, outside the ashen shell of Mother's sept, sat with his arms drawn up and his hands balled into hard black fists, as if to punch anyone who dared approach him. "If the gods are good," Osha said in a low angry voice, "the Others will take them that did this work."

"It was Theon," Bran said blackly.

"No. Look." She pointed across the yard with her spear. "That's one of his ironmen. And there. And that's Greyjoy's warhorse, see? The black one with the arrows in him." She moved among the dead, frowning. "And here's Black Lorren." He had been hacked and cut so badly that his beard looked a reddish-brown now. "Took a few with him, he did." Osha turned over one of the other corpses with her foot. "There's a badge. A little man, all red."

"The flayed man of the Dreadfort," said Bran.

Summer howled, and darted away.

“The godswood.” Meera Reed ran after the direwolf, her shield and frog spear to hand. The rest of them trailed after, threading their way through smoke and fallen stones. The air was sweeter under the trees. A few pines along the edge of the wood had been scorched, but deeper in the damp soil and green wood had defeated the flames. “There is a power in living wood,” said Jojen Reed, almost as if he knew what Bran was thinking, “a power strong as fire.”

On the edge of the black pool, beneath the shelter of the heart tree, Maester Luwin lay on his belly in the dirt. A trail of blood twisted back through damp leaves where he had crawled. Summer stood over him, and Bran thought he was dead at first, but when Meera touched his throat, the maester moaned. “Hodor?” Hodor said mournfully. “Hodor?”

Gently, they eased Luwin onto his back. He had grey eyes and grey hair, and once his robes had been grey as well, but they were darker now where the blood had soaked through. “Bran,” he said softly when he saw him sitting tall on Hodor’s back. “And Rickon too.” He smiled. “The gods are good. I knew...”

“Knew?” said Bran uncertainly.

“The legs, I could tell... the clothes fit, but the muscles in his legs... poor lad...” He coughed, and blood came up from inside him. “You vanished... in the woods... how, though?”

“We never went,” said Bran. “Well, only to the edge, and then doubled back. I sent the wolves on to make a trail, but we hid in Father’s tomb.”

“The crypts.” Luwin chuckled, a froth of blood on his lips. When the maester tried to move, he gave a sharp gasp of pain.

Tears filled Bran’s eyes. When a man was hurt you took him to the maester, but what could you do when your maester was hurt?

“We’ll need to make a litter to carry him,” said Osha.

“No use,” said Luwin. “I’m dying, woman.”

“You can’t,” said Rickon angrily. “No you can’t.” Beside him, Shaggydog bared his teeth and growled.

The maester smiled. “Hush now, child, I’m much older than you. I can... die as I please.”

“Hodor, down,” said Bran. Hodor went to his knees beside the maester.

“Listen,” Luwin said to Osha, “the princes... Robb’s heirs. Not... not together... do you hear?”

The wildling woman leaned on her spear. “Aye. Safer apart. But where to take them? I’d thought, might be these Cerwyns...”

Maester Luwin shook his head, though it was plain to see what the effort cost him. “Cerwyn boy’s dead. Ser Rodrik, Leobald Tallhart, Lady Hornwood... all slain. Deepwood fallen, Moat Cailin, soon Torrhen’s Square. Ironmen on the Stony Shore. And east, the Bastard of Bolton.”

“Then where?” asked Osha.

“White Harbor... the Umbers... I do not know... war everywhere... each man against his neighbor, and winter coming... such folly, such black mad folly...” Maester Luwin reached up and grasped Bran’s forearm, his fingers closing with a desperate strength. “You must be strong now. Strong.”

“I will be,” Bran said, though it was hard. Ser Rodrik killed and Maester Luwin, everyone, everyone...

“Good,” the maester said. “A good boy. Your... your father’s son, Bran. Now go.”

Osha gazed up at the weirwood, at the red face carved in the pale trunk. “And leave you for the gods?”

“I beg...” The maester swallowed a... a drink of water, and... another boon. If you would...”

“Aye.” She turned to Meera. “Take the boys.”

Jojen and Meera led Rickon out between them. Hodor followed. Low branches whipped at Bran’s face as they pushed between the trees, and the leaves brushed away his tears. Osha joined them in the yard a few moments later. She said no word of Maester Luwin. “Hodor must stay with Bran, to be his legs,” the wildling woman said briskly. “I will take Rickon with me.”

“We’ll go with Bran,” said Jojen Reed.

“Aye, I thought you might,” said Osha. “Believe I’ll try the East Gate, and follow the kingsroad a ways.”

“We’ll take the Hunter’s Gate,” said Meera.

“Hodor,” said Hodor.

They stopped at the kitchens first. Osha found some loaves of burned bread that were still edible, and even a cold roast fowl that she ripped in half. Meera unearthed a crock of honey and a big sack of apples. Outside, they made their farewells. Rickon sobbed and clung to Hodor’s leg until Osha gave him a smack with the butt end of her spear. Then he followed her quick enough. Shaggydog stalked after them. The last Bran saw of them was the direwolf’s tail as it vanished behind the broken tower.

The iron portcullis that closed the Hunter’s Gate had been warped so badly by heat it could not be raised more than a foot. They had to squeeze beneath its spikes, one by one.

“Will we go to your lord father?” Bran asked as they crossed the drawbridge between the walls. “To Greywater Watch?”

Meera looked to her brother for the answer. “Our road is north,” Jojen announced.

At the edge of the wolfswood, Bran turned in his basket for one last glimpse of the castle that had been his life. Wisps of smoke still rose into the grey sky, but no more than might have risen from Winterfell’s chimneys on a cold autumn afternoon. Soot stains marked some of the arrow loops, and here and there a crack or a missing merlon could be seen in the curtain wall, but it seemed little enough from this distance. Beyond, the tops of the keeps and towers still stood as they had for hundreds of years, and it was hard to tell that the castle had been sacked and burned at all. The stone is strong, Bran told himself, the roots of the trees go deep, and under the ground the Kings of Winter sit their thrones. So long as those remained, Winterfell remained. It was not dead, just broken. Like me, he thought. I’m not dead either.

APPENDIX

THE KINGS AND THEIR COURTS

THE KING ON THE IRON THRONE

JOFFREY BARATHEON, the First of His Name, a boy of thirteen years, the eldest son of King Robert I Baratheon and Queen Cersei of House Lannister,

-his mother, QUEEN CERSEI, Queen Regent and Protector of the Realm,

-his sister, PRINCESS MYRCELLA, a girl of nine,

-his brother, PRINCE TOMMEN, a boy of eight, heir to the Iron Throne,

-his uncles, on his father's side:

-STANNIS BARATHEON, Lord of Dragonstone, styling himself King Stannis the First,

-RENLY BARATHEON, Lord of Storm's End, styling himself King Renly the First,

-his uncles, on his mother's side:

-SER JAIME LANNISTER, the Kingslayer, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, a captive at Riverrun,

-TYRION LANNISTER, acting Hand of the King,

-Tyrion's squire, PODRICK PAYNE,

-Tyrion's guards and sworn swords:

-BRONN, a sellsword, black of hair and heart,

-SHAGGA SON OF DOLF, of the Stone Crows,

-TIMETT SON OF TIMETT, of the Burned Men,

-CHELLA DAUGHTER OF CHEYK, of the Black Ears,

-CRAWN SON OF CALOR, of the Moon Brothers,

-Tyrion's concubine, SHAE, a camp follower, eighteen,

-his small council:

-GRAND MAESTER PYCELLE,

-LORD PETYR BAELEISH, called LITTLEFINGER, master of coin,

-LORD JANOS SLYNT, Commander of the City Watch of King's Landing (the "gold cloaks"),

-VARYS, a eunuch, called the SPIDER, master of whisperers,

-his Kingsguard:

-SER JAIME LANNISTER, called the KINGSLAYER, Lord Commander, a captive at Riverrun,

-SANDOR CLEGANE, called the HOUND,

-SER BOROS BLOUNT,

-SER MERYN TRANT,

-SER ARYS OAKHEART,

-SER PRESTON GREENFIELD,

-SER MANDON MOORE,

-his court and retainers:

-SER ILYN PAYNE, the King's justice, a headsman,

-VYLARR, captain of the Lannister household guards at King's Landing (the "red cloaks"),

-SER LANCEL LANNISTER, formerly squire to King Robert, recently knighted,

-TYREK LANNISTER, formerly squire to King Robert,

-SER ARON SANTAGAR, master-at-arms,

-SER BALON SWANN, second son to Lord Gulian Swann of Stonehelm,

-LADY ERMESANDE HAYFORD, a babe at the breast,

-SER DONTOS HOLLARD, called the RED, a drunk,

-JALABHAR XHO, an exiled prince from the Summer Isles,

- MOON BOY, a jester and fool,
- LADY TANDA STOKEWORTH,
 - FALYSE, her elder daughter,
 - LOLLYS, her younger daughter, a maiden of thirty-three years,
- LORD GYLES ROSBY,
- SER HORAS REDWYNE and his twin SER HOBBER REDWYNE, sons of the Lord of the Arbor,
- the people of King's Landing:
 - the City Watch (the "gold cloaks"):
 - JANOS SLYNT, Lord of Harrenhal, Lord Commander,
 - MORROS, his eldest son and heir,
 - ALLAR DEEM, Slynt's chief sergeant,
 - SER JACELYN BYWATER, called IRONHAND, captain of the River Gate,
 - HALLYNE THE PYROMANCER, a Wisdom of the Guild of Alchemists,
 - CHATAYA, owner of an expensive brothel,
 - ALAYAYA, DANCY, MAREI, some of her girls,
 - TOBHO MOTT, a master armorer,
 - SALLOREON, a master armorer,
 - IRONBELLY, a blacksmith,
 - LOTHAR BRUNE, a freerider,
 - SER OSMUND KETTLEBLACK, a hedge knight of unsavory reputation,
 - OSFRYD and OSNEY KETTLEBLACK, his brothers,
 - SYMON SILVER TONGUE, a singer.

King Joffrey's banner shows the crowned stag of Baratheon, black on gold, and the lion of Lannister, gold on crimson, combatant.

THE KING IN THE NARROW SEA

STANNIS BARATHEON, the First of His Name, the older of King Robert's brothers, formerly Lord of Dragonstone, secondborn son of Lord Steffon Baratheon and Lady Cassana of House Estermont,

-his wife, LADY SELYSE of House Florent,

-SHIREEN, their only child, a girl of ten,

-his uncle and cousins:

-SER LOMAS ESTERMONT, an uncle,

-his son, SER ANDREW ESTERMONT, a cousin,

-his court and retainers:

-MAESTER CRESSEN, healer and tutor, an old man,

-MAESTER PYLOS, his young successor,

-SEPTON BARRE,

-SER AXELL FLORENT, castellan of Dragonstone, and uncle to Queen Selyse,

-PATCHFACE, a lackwit fool,

-LADY MELISANDRE OF ASSHAI, called the RED WOMAN, a priestess of R'hllor, the Heart of Fire,

-SER DAVOS SEAWORTH, called the ONION KNIGHT and sometimes SHORTHAND, once a smuggler, captain of Black Betha,

-his wife MARYA, a carpenter's daughter,

-their seven sons:

-DALE, captain of the Wraith,

-ALLARD, captain of the Lady Marya,

-MATTHOS, second of Black Betha,

-MARIC, oarmaster of Fury,

-DEVAN, squire to King Stannis,

-STANNIS, a boy of nine years,

-STEFFON, a boy of six years,

-BRYEN FARRING, squire to King Stannis,

-his lords bannermen and sworn swords,

-ARDRLA,N CELTIGAR, Lord of Claw Isle, an old man,

-MONFORD VELARYON, Lord of the Tides and Master of Driftmark,

-DURAM BAR EMMON, Lord of Sharp Point, a boy of fourteen years,

-GUNCER SUNGLASS, Lord of Sweetport Sound,

-SER HUBARD RAMBTON,

-SALLADHOR SAAN, of the Free City of Lys, styled Prince of the Narrow Sea,

-MOROSH THE MYRMAN, a sellsail admiral.

King Stannis has taken for his banner the fiery heart of the Lord of Light; a red heart surrounded by orange flames upon a bright yellow field. Within the heart is pictured the crowned stag of House Baratheon, in black.

THE KING IN HIGHGARDEN

RENLY BARATHEON, the First of His Name, the younger of King Robert's brothers, formerly Lord of Storm's End, thirdborn son of Lord Steffon Baratheon and Lady Cassana of House Estermont,

-his new bride, LADY MARGAERY of House Tyrell, a maid of fifteen years,

-his uncle and cousins:

-SER ELDON ESTERMONT, an uncle,

-Ser Eldon's son, SER AEMON ESTERMONT, a cousin,

-Ser Aemon's son, SER ALYN ESTERMONT,

-his lords bannermen:

-MACE TYRELL, Lord of Highgarden and Hand of the King,

-RANDYLL TARLY, Lord of Horn Hill,

-MATHIS ROWAN, Lord of Goldengrove,

-BRYCE CARON, Lord of the Marches,

-SHYRA ERROL, Lady of Haystack Hall,

-ARWYN OAKHEART, Lady of Old Oak,

-ALESTER FLORENT, Lord of Brightwater Keep,

-LORD SELWYN OF TARTH, called the EVENSTAR,

-LEYTON HIGHTOWER, Voice of Oldtown, Lord of the Port,

-LORD STEFFON VARNER,

-his Rainbow Guard:

-SER LORAS TYRELL, the Knight of Flowers, Lord Commander,

-LORD BRYCE CARON, the Orange,

-SER GUYARD MORRIGEN, the Green,

-SER PARMEN CRANE, the Purple,

-SER ROBAR ROYCE, the Red,

-SER EMMON CUY, the Yellow,

-BRIENNE OF TARTH, the Blue, also called BRIENNE THE BEAUTY, daughter to Lord Selwyn the Evenstar,

-his knights and sworn swords:

-SER CORTNAY PENROSE, castellan of Storm's End,

-Ser Cortnay's ward, EDRIC STORM, a bastard son of King Robert by Lady Delena of House Florent,

-SER DONNEL SWANN, heir to Stonehelm,

-SER JON FOSSOWAY, of the green-apple Fossoways,

-SER BRYAN FOSSOWAY, SER TANTON FOSSOWAY, and SER EDWYD FOSSOWAY, of the red-apple

Fossoways,

-SER COLEN OF GREENPOOLS,

-SER MARK MULLENDORE,

-RED RONNET, the Knight of Griffin's Roost,

-his household,

-MAESTER JURNE, counselor, healer, and tutor.

King Renly's banner is the crowned stag of House Baratheon of Storm's End, black upon a gold field, the same banner flown by his brother King Robert.

THE KING IN THE NORTH

ROBB STARK, Lord of Winterfell and King in the North, eldest son of Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell, and Lady Catelyn of House Tully, a boy of fifteen years,

-his direwolf, GREY WIND,

-his mother, LADY CATELYN, of House Tully,

-his siblings:

-PRINCESS SANSA, a maid of twelve,

-Sansa's direwolf, {LADY}, killed at Castle Darry,

-PRINCESS ARYA, a girl of ten,

-Arya's direwolf, NYMERIA, driven off a year past,

-PRINCE BRANDON, called Bran, heir to Winterfell and the North, a boy of eight,

-Bran's direwolf, SUMMER,

-PRINCE RICKON, a boy of four,

-Rickon's direwolf, SHAGGYDOG,

-his half brother, JON SNOW, a bastard of fifteen years, a man of the Night's Watch,

-Jon's direwolf, GHOST,

-his uncles and aunts:

-{BRANDON STARK}, Lord Eddard's elder brother, slain at the command of King Aerys II Targaryen,

-BENJEN STARK, Lord Eddard's younger brother, a man of the Night's Watch, lost beyond the Wall,

-LYSA ARRYN, Lady Catelyn's younger sister, widow of {Lord Jon Arryn}, Lady of the Eyrie,

-SER EDMURE TULLY, Lady Catelyn's younger brother, heir to Riverrun,

-SER BRYNDEN TULLY, called the BLACKFISH, Lady Catelyn's uncle,

-his sworn swords and battle companions:

-THEON GREYJOY, Lord Eddard's ward, heir to Pyke and the Iron islands,

-HALLIS MOLLEN, captain of guards for Winterfell,

-JACKS, QUENT, SHADD, guardsmen under Mollen's command,

-SER WENDEL MANDERLY, second son to the Lord of White Harbor,

-PATREK MALLISTER, heir to Seagard,

-DACEY MORMONT, eldest daughter of Lady Maege and heir to Bear Island,

-JON UMBER, called the SMALLJON,

-ROBIN FLINT, SER PERWYN FREY, LUCAS BLACKWOOD,

-his squire, OLYVAR FREY, eighteen,

-the household at Riverrun:

-MAESTER LUWIN, counselor, healer, and tutor,

-SER DESMOND GRELL, master-at-arms,

-SER ROBIN RYGER, captain of the guard,

-UTHERYDES WAYN, steward of Riverrun,

-RYMUND THE RHYMER, a singer,

-the household at Winterfell:

-MAESTER LUWIN, counselor, healer, and tutor,

-SER RODRIK CASSEL, master-at-arms,

-BETH, his young daughter,

-WALDER FREY, called BIG WALDER, a ward of Lady Catelyn, eight years of age,

-WALDER FREY, called LITTLE WALDER, a ward of Lady Catelyn, also eight,

-SEPTON CHAYLE, keeper of the castle sept and library,

-JOSETH, master of horse,

-BANDY and SHYRA, his twin daughters,

- FARLEN, kennelmaster,
 - PALLA, a kennel girl,
- OLD NAN, storyteller, once a wet nurse, now very aged,
 - HODOR, her great-grandson, a simpleminded stableboy,
- GAGE, the cook,
 - TURNIP, a pot girl and scullion,
- OSHA, a wildling woman taken captive in the wolfswood, serving as kitchen drudge,
- MIKKEN, smith and armorer,
- HAYHEAD, SKITTRICK, POXY TYM, ALEBELLY, guardsmen,
- CALON, TOM, children of guardsmen,
- his lords bannermen and commanders:
 - (with Robb at Riverrun)
 - JON UMBER, called the GREATJON,
 - RICKARD KARSTARK, Lord of Karhold,
 - GALBART GLOVER, of Deepwood Motte,
 - MAEGE MORMONT, Lady of Bear Island,
 - SER STEVRON FREY, eldest son of Lord Walder Frey and heir to the Twins,
 - Ser Stevron's eldest son, SER RYMAN FREY,
 - Ser Ryman's son, BLACK WALDER FREY,
 - MARTYN RIVERS, a bastard son of Lord Walder Frey,
 - (with Roose Bolton's host at the Twins),
 - ROOSE BOLTON, Lord of the Dreadfort, commanding the larger part of the northern host,
 - ROBETT GLOVER, of Deepwood Motte,
 - WALDER FREY, Lord of the Crossing,
 - SER HEIMAN TALLHART, of Torrhen's Square,
 - SER AENYS FREY,
 - (prisoners of Lord Tywin Lannister),
 - LORD MEDGER CERWYN,
 - HARRION KARSTARK, sole surviving son of Lord Rickard,
 - SER WYLIS MANDERLY, heir to White Harbor,
 - SER JARED FREY, SER HOSTEEN FREY, SER DANWELL FREY, and their bastard half brother, RONEL RIVERS,
 - (in the field or at their own castles),
 - LYMAN DARRY, a boy of eight,
 - SHELLA WHENT, Lady of Harrenhal, dispossessed of her castle by Lord Tywin Lannister,
 - JASON MALLISTER, Lord of Seagard,
 - JONOS BRACKEN, Lord of the Stone Hedge,
 - TYTOS BLACKWOOD, Lord of Raventree,
 - LORD KARYL VANCE,
 - SER MARQ PIPER,
 - SER HALMON PAEGE,
 - his lord bannermen and castellans in the north:
 - WYMAN MANDERLY, Lord of White Harbor,
 - HOWLAND REED of Greywater Watch, a crannogman,
 - Howland's daughter, MEERA, a maid of fifteen,
 - Howland's son, JOJEN, a boy of thirteen,
 - LADY DONELLA HORNWOOD, a widow and grieving mother,
 - CLEY CERWYN, Lord Medger's heir, a boy of fourteen,
 - LEOBALD TALLHART, younger brother to Ser Helman, castellan at Torrhen's Square,
 - Leobald's wife, BERENA of House Hornwood,

- Leobald's son, BRANDON, a boy of fourteen,
- Leobald's son, BEREN, a boy of ten,
- Ser Helman's son, BENFRED, heir to Torrhen's Square,
- Ser Helman's daughter, EDDARA, a maid of nine,
- LADY SYBELLE, wife to Robett Glover, holding Deepwood Motte in his absence,
 - Robett's son, GAWEN, three, heir to Deepwood,
 - Robett's daughter, ERENA, a babe of one,
 - LARENCE SNOW, a bastard son of Lord Hornwood, aged twelve, ward of Galbart Glover,
- MORS CROWFOOD and HOTHER WHORESBANE of House Umber, uncles to the Greatjon,
- LADY LYESSA FLINT, mother to Robin,
- ANDREW LOCKE, Lord of Oldcastle, an old man.

The banner of the King in the North remains as it has for thousands of years: the grey direwolf of the Starks of Winterfell, running across an ice-white field.

THE QUEEN ACROSS THE WATER

DAENERYS TARGARYEN, called Daenerys Stormborn, the Unburnt, Mother of Dragons, Khaleesi of the Dothraki, and First of Her Name, sole surviving child of King Aerys II Targaryen by his sister/wife, Queen Rhaella, a widow at fourteen years,

-her new-hatched dragons, DROGON, VISERION, RHAEGAL,

-her brothers:

-{RHAEGAR}, Prince of Dragonstone and heir to the Iron Throne, slain by King Robert on the Trident,

-{RHAENYS}, Rhaegar's daughter by Elia of Dorne, murdered during the Sack of King's Landing,

-{AEGON}, Rhaegar's son by Elia of Dorne, murdered during the Sack of King's Landing,

-{VISERYS}, styling himself King Viserys, the Third of His Name, called the Beggar King, slain in Vaes

Dothrak by the hand of Khal Drogo,

-her husband {DROGO}, a khal of the Dothraki, died of wounds gone bad,

-{RHAEGO}, stillborn son of Daenerys and Khal Drogo, slain in the womb by Mirri Maz Duur,

-her Queensguard:

-SER JORAH MORMONT, an exile knight, once Lord of Bear Island,

-JHOGO, ko and bloodrider, the whip,

-AGGO, ko and bloodrider, the bow,

-RAKHARO, ko and bloodrider, the arakh,

-her handmaids:

-IRRI, a Dothraki girl,

-JHIQUI, a Dothraki girl,

-DOREAH, a Lyseni slave, formerly a whore,

-the three seekers:

-XARO XHOAN DAXOS, a merchant prince of Qarth,

-PYAT PREE, a warlock of Qarth,

-QUAITHE, a masked shadowbinder of Asshai,

-ILLYRIO MOPATIS, a magister of the Free City of Pentos, who arranged to wed Daenerys to Khal Drogo and conspired to restore Viserys to the Iron Throne.

The banner of the Targaryens is the banner of Aegon the Conqueror, who conquered six of Seven Kingdoms, founded the dynasty, and made the Iron Throne from the swords of his conquered enemies: a three-headed dragon, red on black.

OTHER HOUSES GREAT AND SMALL

HOUSE ARRYN

House Arryn declared for none of the rival claimants at the outbreak of the war, and kept its strength back to protect the Eyrie and the Vale of Arryn. The Arryn sigil is the moon-and-falcon, white, upon a sky-blue field. Their Arryn words are As High As Honor.

ROBERT ARRYN, Lord of the Eyrie, Defender of the Vale, Warden of the East, a sickly boy of eight years,

-his mother, LADY LYSA, of House Tully, third wife and widow of {Lord Jon Arryn}, late Hand of the King, and sister to Catelyn Stark,

-his household:

-MAESTER COLEMON, counselor, healer, and tutor,

-SER MARWYN BELMORE, captain of guards,

-LORD NESTOR ROYCE, High Steward of the Vale,

-Lord Nestor's son, SER ALBAR,

-MYA STONE, a bastard girl in his service, natural daughter of King Robert,

-MORD, a brutal gaoler,

-MARILLION, a young singer,

-his lords bannermen, suitors, and retainers:

-LORD YOHN ROYCE, called BRONZE YOHN,

-Lord Yohn's eldest son, SER ANDAR,

-Lord Yohn's second son, SER ROBAR, in service to King Renly, Robar the Red of the Rainbow Guard,

-Lord Yohn's youngest son, {SER WAYMAR}, a man of the Night's Watch, lost beyond the Wall,

-LORD NESTOR ROYCE, brother of Lord Yohn, High Steward of the Vale,

-Lord Nestor's son and heir, SER ALBAR,

-Lord Nestor's daughter, MYRANDA,

-SER LYN CORBRAY, a suitor to Lady Lysa,

-MYCHEL REDFORT, his squire,

-LADY ANYA WAYNWOOD,

-Lady Anya's eldest son and heir, SER MORTON, a suitor to Lady Lysa,

-Lady Anya's second son, SER DONNEL, the Knight of the Gate,

-EON HUNTER, Lord of Longbow Hall, an old man, and a suitor to Lady Lysa.

HOUSEFLORENT

The Florents of Brightwater Keep are sworn bannermen to Highgarden, and followed the Tyrells in declaring for King Renly. They also kept a foot in the other camp, however, since Stannis's queen is a Florent, and her uncle the castellan of Dragonstone. The sigil of House Florent shows a fox head in a circle of flowers.

ALESTER FLORENT, Lord of Brightwater,

-his wife, LADY MELARA, of House Crane,

-their children:

-ALEKYNE, heir to Brightwater,

-MELESSA, wed to Lord Randyll Tarly,

-RHEA, wed to Lord Leyton Hightower,

-his siblings:

-SER AXELL, castellan of Dragonstone,

-{SER RYAM}, died in a fall from a horse,

- Ser Ryam's daughter, QUEEN SELYSE, wed to King Stannis,
- Ser Ryam's eldest son and heir, SER IMRY,
- Ser Ryam's second son, SER ERREN,
- SER COLIN,
 - Colin's daughter, DELENA, wed to SER HOSMAN NORCROSS,
 - Delena's son, EDRIC STORM, a bastard fathered by King Robert,
 - Delena's son, ALESTER NORCROSS,
 - Delena's son, RENLY NORCROSS,
 - Colin's son, MAESTER OMER, in service at Old Oak,
 - Colin's son, MERRELL, a squire on the Arbor,
- his sister, RYLENE, wed to Ser Rycherd Crane.

HOUSE FREY

Powerful, wealthy, and numerous, the Freys are bannermen to House Tully, their swords sworn to the service of Riverrun, but they have not always been diligent in performing their duty. When Robert Baratheon met Rhaegar Targaryen on the Trident, the Freys did not arrive until the battle was done, and thereafter Lord Hoster Tully always called Lord Walder "the Late Lord Frey." Lord Frey agreed to support the cause of the King in the North only after Robb Stark agreed to a betrothal, promising to marry one of his daughters or granddaughters after the war was done. Lord Walder has known ninety-one name days, but only recently took his eighth wife, a girl seventy years his junior. It is said of him that he is the only lord in the Seven Kingdoms who could field an army out of his breeches.

WALDER FREY, Lord of the Crossing,

-by his first wife, {LADY PERRA, of House Royce}:

- SER STEVRON, heir to the Twins,
 - m. {Coreenna Swann, died of a wasting illness},
 - Stevron's eldest son, SER RYMAN,
 - Ryman's son, EDWYN, wed to Janyce Hunter,
 - Edwyn's daughter, WALDA, a girl of eight,
 - Ryman's son, WALDER, called BLACK WALDER,
 - Ryman's son, PETYR, called PETYR PIMPLE,
 - m. Mylenda Caron,
 - Petyr's daughter, PERRA, a girl of five,
 - m. {Jeyne Lydden, died in a fall from a horse},
 - Stevron's son, AEGON, a halfwit called JINGLEBELL,
 - Stevron's daughter, {MAEGELLE, died in childbed},
 - m. Ser Dafyn Vance,
 - Maegelle's daughter, MARIANNE, a maiden,
 - Maegelle's son, WALDER VANCE, a squire,
 - Maegelle's son, PATREK VANCE,
 - m. {Marsella Waynwood, died in childbed},
 - Stevron's son, WALTON, w. Deana Hardyng,
 - Walton's son, STEFFON, called THE SWEET,
 - Walton's daughter, WALDA, called FAIR WALDA,
 - Walton's son, BRYAN, a squire,
- SER EMMON, m. Genna of House Lannister,
 - Emmon's son, SER CLEOS, m. Jeyne Darry,
 - Cleos's son, TYWIN, a squire of eleven,
 - Cleos's son, WILLEM, a page at Ashemark,
 - Emmon's son, SER LYONEL, m. Melesa Crakehall,

- Emmon's son, TION, a squire captive at Riverrun,
- Emmon's son, WALDER, called RED WALDER, a page at Casterly Rock,
- SER AENYS, m. {Tyana Wylde, died in childbed},
 - Aenys's son, AEGON BLOODBORN, an outlaw,
 - Aenys's son, RHAEGAR, m. Jeyne Beesbury,
 - Rhaegar's son, ROBERT, a boy of thirteen,
 - Rhaegar's daughter, WALDA, a girl of ten, called WHITE WALDA,
 - Rhaegar's son, JONOS, a boy of eight,
- PERRIANE, m. Ser Leslyn Haigh,
 - Perriane's son, SER HARYS HAIGH,
 - Harys's son, WALDER HAIGH, a boy of four,
 - Perriane's son, SER DONNEL HAIGH,
 - Perriane's son, ALYN HAIGH, a squire,
- by his second wife, {LADY CYRENNIA, of House Swann}:
 - SER JARED, their eldest son, m. {Alys Frey},
 - Jared's son, SER TYTOS, m. Zhoe Blanetree,
 - Tytos's daughter, ZIA, a maid of fourteen,
 - Tytos's son, ZACHERY, a boy of twelve, training at the Sept of Oldtown,
 - Jared's daughter, KYRA, m. Ser Garse Goodbrook,
 - Kyra's son, WALDER GOODBROOK, a boy of nine,
 - Kyra's daughter, JEYNE GOODBROOK, six,
 - SEPTON LUCEON, in service at the Great Sept of Baelor in King's Landing,
- by his third wife, {LADY AMAREI of House Crakeball}:
 - SER HOSTEEN, their eldest son, m. Bellena Hawick,
 - Hosteen's son, SER ARWOOD, m. Ryella Royce,
 - Arwood's daughter, RYELLA, a girl of five,
 - Arwood's twin sons, ANDROW and ALYN, three,
 - LADY LYTHENE, m. Lord Lucias Vypren,
 - Lythene's daughter, ELYANA, m. Ser Jon Wylde,
 - Elyana's son, RICKARD WYLDE, four,
 - Lythene's son, SER DAMON VYPREN,
 - SYMOND, m. Betharios of Braavos,
 - Symond's son, ALESANDER, a singer,
 - Symond's daughter, ALYX, a maid of seventeen,
 - Symond's son, BRADAMAR, a boy of ten, fostered on Braavos as a ward of Oro Tendyris, a merchant of that city,
 - SER DANWELL, m. Wynafrei Whent,
 - (many stillbirths and miscarriages),
 - MERRETT, m. Mariya Darry,
 - Merrett's daughter, AMEREI, called AMI, a widow of sixteen, m. {Ser Pate of the Blue Fork},
 - Merrett's daughter, WALDA, called FAT WALDA, a maid of fifteen years,
 - Merrett's daughter, MARISSA, a maid of thirteen,
 - Merrett's son, WALDER, called LITTLE WALDER, a boy of eight, fostered at Winterfell as a ward of Lady Catelyn Stark,
 - {SER GEREYMY, drowned}, m. Carolei Waynwood,
 - Geremy's son, SANDOR, a boy of twelve, a squire to Ser Donnel Waynwood,
 - Geremy's daughter, CYNTHIA, a girl of nine, a ward of Lady Anya Waynwood,

- SER RAYMUND, m. Beony Beesbury,
 - Raymund's son, ROBERT, sixteen, in training at the Citadel in Oldtown,
 - Raymund's son, MALVVYN, fifteen, apprenticed to an alchemist in Lys,
 - Raymund's twin daughters, SERRA and SARRA, maiden girls of fourteen,
 - Raymund's daughter, CERSEI, six, called LITTLE BEE,

- by his fourth wife, {LADY ALYSSA, of House Blackwood}:
 - LOTHAR, their eldest son, called LAME LOTHAR, m. Leonella Lefford,
 - Lothar's daughter, TYSANE, a girl of seven,
 - Lothar's daughter, WALDA, a girl of four,
 - Lothar's daughter, EMBERLEI, a girl of two,
 - SER JAMMOS, m. Sallei Paege,
 - Jamos's son, WALDER, called BIG WALDER, a boy of eight, fostered at Winterfell as a ward of Lady Catelyn Stark,
 - Jamos's twin sons, DICKON and MATHIS, five,
 - SER WHALEN, m. Sylwa Paege,
 - Whalen's son, HOSTER, a boy of twelve, a squire to Ser Damon Paege,
 - Whalen's daughter, MERIANNE, called MERRY, a girl of eleven,
 - LADY MORYA, m. Ser Flement Brax,
 - Morya's son, ROBERT BRAX, nine, fostered at Casterly Rock as a page,
 - Morya's son, WALDER BRAX, a boy of six,
 - Morya's son, JON BRAX, a babe of three,
 - TYTA, called T'YTA THE MAID, a maid of twenty-nine,

- by his fifth wife, {LADY SARYA of House Whent}:
 - no progeny,

- by his sixth wife, {LADY BETHANY of House Rosby}:
 - SER PERWYN, their eldest son,
 - SER BENFREY, m. Jyanna Frey, a cousin,
 - Benfrey's daughter, DELLA, called DEAF DELLA, a girl of three,
 - Benfrey's son, OSMUND, a boy of two,
 - MAESTER WILLAMEN, in service at Longbow Hall,
 - OLYVAR, a squire in the service of Robb Stark,
 - ROSLIN, a maid of sixteen,

- by his seventh wife, {LADY ANNARA of House Farring}:
 - ARWYN, a maid of fourteen,
 - WENDEL, their eldest son, a boy of thirteen, fostered at Seagard as a page,
 - COLMAR, promised to the Faith, eleven,
 - WALTYR, called TYR, a boy of ten,
 - ELMAR, betrothed to Arya Stark, a boy of nine,
 - SHIREI, a girl of six,

- his eighth wife, LADY JOYEUSE of House Erenford,
 - no progeny as yet,

- Lord Walder's natural children, by sundry mothers,
 - WALDER RIVERS, called BASTARD WALDER,

- Bastard Walder's son, SER AEMON RIVERS,
- Bastard Walder's daughter, WALDA RIVERS,
- MAESTER MELWYS, in service at Rosby,
- JEYNE RIVERS, MARTYN RIVERS, RYGER RIVERS, RONEL RIVERS, MELLARA RIVERS, others.

HOUSE GREYJOY

Balon Greyjoy, Lord of the Iron Islands, previously led a rebellion against the Iron Throne, put down by King Robert and Lord Eddard Stark. Though his son Theon, raised at Winterfell, was one of Robb Stark's supporters and closest companions, Lord Balon did not join the northmen when they marched south into the riverlands.

The Greyjoy sigil is a golden kraken upon a black field. Their words are We Do Not Sow

BALON GREYJOY, Lord of the Iron islands, King of Salt and Rock, Son of the Sea Wind, Lord Reaper of Pyke, captain of the Great Kraken,

- his wife, LADY ALANNYS, of House Harlaw,
 - their children:
 - {RODRIK}, slain at Seagard during Greyjoy's Rebellion,
 - {MARON}, slain at Pyke during Greyjoy's Rebellion,
 - ASHA, captain of the Black Wind,
 - THEON, a ward of Lord Eddard Stark at Winterfell,
- his brothers:
 - EURON, called CROW'S EYE, captain of the Silence, an outlaw, pirate, and raider,
 - VICTARION, Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet, master of the Iron Victory,
 - AERON, called DAMPHAIR, a priest of the Drowned God,
- his household on Pyke:
 - DAGMER called CLEFTJAW, master-at-arms, captain of the Foarndrinker,
 - MAESTER WENDAMYR, healer and counselor
 - HELYA, keeper of the castle,
- people of Lordsport:
 - SIGRIN, a shipwright,
- his lords bannermen,
 - LORD BOTLEY, of Lordsport,
 - LORD WYNCH, of Iron Holt,
 - LORD HARLAW, of Harlaw,
 - STONEHOUSE, of Old Wyk,
 - DRUMM, of Old Wyk,
 - GOODBROTHER, of Old Wyk,
 - GOODBROTHER, of Great Wyk,
 - LORD MERLYN, of Great Wyk,
 - SPARR, of Great Wyk,
 - LORD BLACKTYDE, of Blacktyde,
 - LORD SALTCLIFFE, of Saltcliffe,
 - LORD SUNDERLY, of Saltcliffe.

HOUSE LANNISTER

The Lannisters of Casterly Rock remain the principal support of King Joffrey's claim to the Iron Throne. Their sigil is a golden lion upon a crimson field. The Lannister words are Hear Me Roar!

TYWIN LANNISTER, Lord of Casterly Rock, Warden of the West, Shield of Lannisport, and Hand of the King, commanding the Lannister host at Harrenhal,

-his wife, {LADY JOANNA}, a cousin, died in childbed,

-their children:

-SER JAIME, called the Kingslayer, Warden of the East and Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, a twin to Queen Cersei,

-QUEEN CERSEI, widow of King Robert, twin to Jaime, Queen Regent and Protector of the Realm,

-TYRION, called the IMP, a dwarf,

-his siblings:

-SER KEVAN, his eldest brother,

-Ser Kevan's wife, DORNA, of House Swyft,

-Lady Dorna's father, SER HARYS SwYFT,

-their children:

-SER LANCEL, formerly a squire to King Robert, knighted after his death,

-WILLEM, twin to Martyn, a squire, taken captive at the Whispering Wood,

-MARTYN, twin to Willem, a squire,

-JANEI, a girl of two,

-GENNA, his sister, wed to Ser Emmon Frey,

-Genna's son, SER CLEOS FREY, taken captive at the Whispering Wood,

-Genna's son, TION FREY, a squire, taken captive at the Whispering Wood,

-{SER TYGETT}, his second brother, died of a pox,

-Tygett's widow, DARLESSA, of House Marbrand,

-Tygett's son, TYREK, squire to the king,

-{GERION}, his youngest brother, lost at sea,

-Gerion's bastard daughter, JOY, eleven,

-his cousin, SER STAFFORD LANNISTER, brother to the late Lady Joanna,

-Ser Stafford's daughters, CERENNA and MYRIELLE,

-Ser Stafford's son, SER DAVEN,

-his lord bannermen, captains, and commanders:

-SER ADDAM MARBRAND, heir to Ashemark, commander of Lord Tywin's outriders and scouts,

-SER GREGOR CLEGANE, the Mountain That Rides,

-POLLIVER, CHISWYCK, RAFF THE SWEETLING, DUNSEN, and THE TICKLER, soldiers in his service,

-LORD LEO LEFFORD,

-SER AMORY LORCH, a captain of foragers,

-LEWYS LYDDEN, Lord of the Deep Den,

-GAWEN WESTERLING, Lord of the Crag, taken captive in the Whispering Wood and held at Seagard,

-SER ROBERT BRAX, and his brother,

-SER FLEMENT BRAX,

-SER FORLEY PRESTER, of the Golden Tooth,

-VARGO HOAT, of the Free City of Qohor, captain of the sellsword company called the Brave Companions,

-MAESTER CREYLEN, his counselor.

HOUSE MARTELL

Dorne was the last of the Seven Kingdoms to swear fealty to the Iron Throne. Blood, custom, and history all set the Dornishmen apart from the other kingdoms. When the war of succession broke out, the Prince of Dorne kept his silence and took no part.

The Martell banner is a red sun pierced by a golden spear. Their words are

Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken.

DORAN NYMEROS MARTELL, Lord of Sunspear, Prince of Dorne,

-his wife, MELLARIO, of the Free City of Norvos,

-their children:

-PRINCESS ARIANNE, their eldest daughter, heir to Sunspear,

-PRINCE QUENTYN, their eldest son,

-PRINCE TRYSTANE, their younger son,

-his siblings:

-his sister, {PRINCESS ELIA}, wed to Prince Rhaegar Targaryen, slain during the Sack of King's Landing,

-Elia's daughter, {PRINCESS RHAENYS}, a young girl murdered during the Sack of King's Landing,

-Elia's son, {PRINCE AEGON}, a babe, murdered during the Sack of King's Landing,

-his brother, PRINCE OBERYN, the Red Viper,

-his household:

-AREO HOTAH, a Norvoshi sellsword, captain of guards,

-MAESTER CALEOTTE, counselor, healer, and tutor,

-his lords bannermen:

-EDRIC DAYNE, Lord of Starfall.

The principal houses sworn to Sunspear include Jordayne, Santagar, Allyrion, Toland, Yronwood, Wyl, Fowler, and Dayne.

HOUSE TYRELL

Lord Tyrell of Highgarden declared his support for King Renly after Renly's marriage to his daughter Margaery, and brought most of his principal bannermen to Renly's cause. The Tyrell sigil is a golden rose on a grass-green field. Their words are Growing Strong.

MACE TYRELL, Lord of Highgarden, Warden of the South, Defender of the Marches, High Marshal of the Reach, and Hand of the King,

-his wife, LADY ALERIE, of House Hightower of Oldtown,

-their children:

-WILLAS, their eldest son, heir to Highgarden,

-SER GARLAN, called the GALLANT, their second son,

-SER LORAS, the Knight of Flowers, their youngest son, Lord Commander of the Rainbow Guard,

-MARGAERY, their daughter, a maid of fifteen years, recently wed to Renly Baratheon,

-his widowed mother, LADY OLENNIA of House Redwyne, called the QUEEN OF THORNS,

-his sisters:

-MINA, wed to Paxter Redwyne, Lord of the Arbor,

-their children:

-SER HORAS REDWYNE, twin to Hobber, mocked as HORROR,

-SER HOBBER REDWYNE, twin to Horas, mocked as SLOBBER,

-DESMERA REDWYNE, a maid of sixteen,

-JANNA, wed to Ser Jon Fossoway,

-his uncles:

-GARTH, called the GROSS, Lord Seneschal of Highgarden,

-Garth's bastard sons, GARSE and GARRETT FLOWERS,

-SER MORYN, Lord Commander of the City Watch of Oldtown,

-MAESTER GORMON, a scholar of the Citadel,

-his household:

-MAESTER LOMYS, counselor, healer, and tutor,

-IGON VYRWEL, captain of the guard,

-SER VORTIMER CRANE, master-at-arms,

-BUTTERBUMPS, fool and jester, hugely fat.

THE MEN OF THE NIGHT'S WATCH

The Night's Watch protects the realm, and is sworn to take no part in civil wars and contests for the throne. Traditionally, in times of rebellion, they do honor to all kings and obey none.

At Castle Black

JEOR MORMONT, Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, called the OLD BEAR,

- his steward and squire, JON SNOW, the bastard of Winterfell, called LORD SNOW,

 - Jon's white direwolf, GHOST,

- MAESTER AEMON (TARGARYEN), counselor and healer,

 - SAMWELL TARLY and CLYDAS, his stewards,

- BENJEN STARK, First Ranger, lost beyond the Wall,

 - THOREN SMALLWOOD, a senior ranger,

 - JARMEN BUCKWELL, a senior ranger,

 - SER OTTYN WYTHERS, SER ALADALE WYNCH, GRENN, PYPAR, MATTHAR, ELRON, LARK called the

SISTERMAN, rangers,

- OTHELL YARWYCK, First Builder,

 - HALDER, ALBETT, builders,

- BOWEN MARSH, Lord Steward

 - CHETT, steward and dog handler,

 - EDDISON TOLLETT, called DOLOROUS EDD, a dour squire,

- SEPTON CELLADAR, a drunken devout,

- SER ENDREW TARTH, master-at-arms,

- brothers of Castle Black:

 - DONAL NOYE, armorer and smith, one-armed,

 - THREE-FINGER HOBBS, cook,

 - JEREN, RAST, CUGEN, recruits still in training,

 - CONWY, GUEREN, "wandering crows," recruiters who collect orphan boys and criminals for the Wall,

 - YOREN, the senior of the "wandering crows,"

 - PRAED, CUTJACK, WOTH, REYSEN, QYLE, recruits bound for the Wall,

 - KOSS, GERREN, DOBBER, KURZ, BITER, RORGE, JAQEN HIGGAR, criminals bound for the Wall,

 - LOMMY GREENHANDS, GENDRY, TARBER, HOT PIE, ARRY, orphan boys bound for the Wall.

At Eastwatch-by-the-Sea

COTTER PYKE, Commander, Eastwatch,

- SER ALLISER THORNE, master-at-arms,

- brothers of Eastwatch:

 - DAREON, steward and singer.

At the Shadow Tower

SER DENYS MALLISTER, Commander, Shadow Tower,

- QHORIN called HALFHAND, a senior ranger,

- DALBRIDGE, an elderly squire and senior ranger,

- EBBEN, STONESNAKE, rangers.